



Government Teachers in Community Schools: Two Zambian Success Stories

When Josephine Simango* arrived at Kenneth Kaunda Community School as the new government teacher, it was the start of the rainy season. She was not only looking forward to her next professional challenge—she was looking to come in out of the rain. Instead, she found the doors locked and a truculent headmaster, one of the school’s founders, who refused to give her the office and classroom keys. A battle of wills ensued: Mrs. Simango did her best to teach under a tree outside, slowly winning the hearts and minds of her learners and their parents, while Mr. Mudenda kept his distance and worried he was losing “his” school to the government.

After several months and a visit from a Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MESTVEE) district officer, Mr. Mudenda stepped down. Slowly, the community began to accept Mrs. Simango, especially as they saw the results of her work. Today she is an essential member of the school, but the transition took years and was a painful one, both for her and for many community members.

This story is not unique in Zambia. As the government seeks to bring more of its “community schools” into the formal education system, more teachers earning government salaries are being assigned to these schools. But most community schools begin as grassroots efforts, led by dedicated parents and staffed by volunteer teachers who earn next to nothing. Like Mr. Mudenda, school founders are often fearful of losing control of the schools they helped build from the ground up, even when the new teachers come at the community’s request.

This case study features two schools that have weathered this transition remarkably well. A look at how and why they succeeded may offer lessons to help the Zambian government and its partners ease the process of transition for other schools that receive government teachers.

**The names of individuals and schools have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants in the study.*

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ZAMBIA'S COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

In Zambia, the primary education system operates as a kind of hybrid. On one hand, there are fully government-sponsored schools with salaried teachers, relatively better infrastructure, and regular contact with education officials and evaluators. On the other hand, there are community schools, which are started by communities to cater to children who are not able to access education in public school. The current community school model developed in the 1980s as a response to the scarcity of government-funded schools and high school fees, which placed primary education beyond the reach of many vulnerable children. Today, community schools represent an over 20 percent of primary school enrollment (MESVTEE, 2013).

Most community schools are volunteer efforts, run by committees of parents and other community members from the surrounding area. Despite their numerous challenges, there is growing evidence to suggest that many community schools produce better outcomes (Examinations Council of Zambia, 2012; Gardsbane et al. 2013; Rhodwell, 2013), particularly when the surrounding community and the governing body—the Parent Community School Committee (PCSC)—are highly committed and engaged.

As education authorities look to improve overall achievement in early grade levels, particularly in literacy and numeracy, they have been seeking ways to bring community schools into the fold. Therefore, it is no surprise that these schools are an increasingly important part of the Zambian government's actions to improve learning outcomes at the primary school level.

Zambia's community schools have the potential to receive a wide range of support from the

MESVTEE, from building materials to the seconding of government teachers. And because parents often struggle to pay volunteer teachers even the meager allowance they agree to, having a teacher with a government salary can be one of the most important forms of support. Yet the introduction of government teachers can be a source of excitement and antagonism, as the cases below illustrate.

To learn what might support a welcoming and exciting environment, as opposed to an antagonistic one, this study examines the characteristics that enable government teachers to build successful working relationships in the community school context. In particular, the study focuses on working relationships within two community schools with exemplary community-teacher relationships, seeking to answer the following question:

What are the characteristics that create positive working relationships between government teachers and the extended school communities where they work?

The cases presented here were selected because they share a number of features that make it possible to compare aspects of the government teachers' relationships with their new communities. Both are located in the same province and share a language (and by extension, cultural heritage). The schools are similar in age, infrastructure, access to teaching and learning materials, and experience of the head teachers. The high level of PCSC activity in each community is also comparable. Most importantly, both schools were identified as having a particularly strong relationship between the government teacher and the broader school community. Finally, because significant differences exist

between rural and urban community schools in Zambia, the school setting could lead to different challenges and success factors. For that reason, the research team selected one school in each setting.

Through examining some of the factors that led these two community schools to (ultimately) welcome the presence of government teachers, this study offers real situational examples and specific recommendations that could help education policymakers and program implementers ease the process in the future.

KENNETH KAUNDA COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Kenneth Kaunda Community School is situated in an urban area not far from one of Zambia's national parks. The community was founded relatively recently, in the late 1980s. Most of its members are subsistence farmers without steady income to pay for things like school fees or uniforms, both of which Zambia's government schools required until 2002. Therefore, most of the community's children could not attend school. In the mid-1990s, as the community school movement was gaining ground as a way to extend basic education to poor and remote children, families in the area began to seriously consider founding a school of their own.

Perhaps because of its location near a tourist destination, this community has seen a good deal of attention from international organizations over the years. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and CARE International were both present in the area, working on children's literacy and providing support to orphans and other vulnerable children. Thanks in part to these programs, the first classes were held in 1997—first under a tree and then in a mud-thatch structure built for that purpose. Donor support

for school infrastructure has continued through the years. Today there are two classroom “blocks” with two rooms each, a latrine, and a kitchen, which a USAID project helped construct to support the school's feeding program.

Even with extra help from donors, community resources went only so far. Kaunda Community School's first two teachers, Mr. Mudenda and Mrs. Katulo, were essentially volunteers and it did not take long before Mrs. Katulo left. Over the years, other teachers came and went, in flux with the community's ability to pay them, but Mr. Mudenda stayed on, filling the role of head teacher.

The MESTVEE took a fairly active role early on, urging the creation of a PCSC to manage the school and sending a representative to assist with the first committee elections in 2003. From the start, the PCSC was an active governing body—taking firm ownership of the school's operations, guiding building projects, monitoring learner and teacher attendance and learner performance, forging strong relationships with community members and teachers, and mediating conflicts when they arose. Everyone seemed to be working in harmony for the school's success.

Things changed when the MESTVEE deployed two salaried government teachers to the school in 2005—a decision which was poorly communicated to the community. The fact that one of the new teachers, Josephine Simango, would become the new head teacher, taking up the role Mr. Mudenda had been filling on his own for nearly a decade, added to the complexity. Fearing for his livelihood and his status in the community, Mr. Mudenda staged his one-man revolt, refusing her access to the school buildings for three long months. Mrs. Simango, who was committed to staying in her

new position, had to teach outside, often in the rain, under the same tree where the school had held its first classes in 1997. Through all this, she tried to be patient, understanding that as an outsider she needed to build trust. However, the MESTVEE eventually had to send a district official to force Mr. Mudenda to turn over the keys.

Although the community in general did not share Mr. Mudenda's extreme reaction, families were worried that Mrs. Simango's arrival was a sign that the government was taking their school from them. After so many years of hard-won gains for their children's education, the idea that an "outsider" was taking control was hard for many to swallow. PCSC members were also skeptical at first.

Gradually, things changed for the better. The PCSC already had a respected role as a guiding hand and moderator in the community. With some support from the MESVTEE district office, committee members began working hand-in-hand with Mrs. Simango in her role. Seeing the PCSC work with Mrs. Simango impelled other community members to give her a chance. Initially, the PCSC also continued to support the volunteer teachers at the school. Mrs. Simango's patience and her effectiveness as a teacher, even under difficult conditions, went a long way. She, too, cared for the volunteer teachers and seemed to want to cultivate their talents. But parents began to resist the volunteers' work, seeing the difference in their children's learning after Mrs. Simango's arrival. As one parent put it:

"When we saw how our children's performance improved, we realized that it was good to have government-trained teachers ... [students who took Grade 7 exams] did very well and they were taken on by established secondary schools. This made us happy."

This was big progress for Kaunda Community School's children and a happy turn of events for their parents, but it had a negative effect on community relations with the volunteer teachers. Mrs. Simango's charisma and her effectiveness as a teacher had convinced the community of her value—a value that came **without** the burden of paying her salary.

Meanwhile, the volunteer teachers still depended on community contributions for their livelihoods and saw the government teachers' arrival as a threat to their jobs. And parents began to see the volunteer teachers' payments as more of a financial burden. Volunteer teachers' absenteeism increased as payments decreased. The volunteers' disengagement also made it difficult for Mrs. Simango to continue supporting them as she did in the beginning. As the PCSC found the volunteers more difficult to manage, the committee also stopped advocating for their value. Over time, many of the volunteers left, either as a result of this cycle or for personal reasons, though some also obtained support to receive formal training.

Through all of this upheaval, the strength of Mrs. Simango's personality was fundamentally important: her patience, effectiveness as a teacher, and diligent efforts to engage with parents and other community members earned her their trust. She now considers herself a full member of the community and is hugely invested in the school. In turn, the community now welcomes the arrival of new government teachers—a situation they see as not only benefiting their children's learning, but also continuing to relieve them of the financial burden of paying volunteers.

Over time, Kaunda Community School has transitioned to a teaching staff of all government-seconded teachers.

JUNZA COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Junza Community School is in a more rural part of the same province, situated amid rolling grasslands near what once was a sprawling farm. The current residents have formed a community of small-scale farming families who are significantly better educated—and certainly more education-focused—than many farming villages in Zambia.

As community members began to arrive to Junza, there were no schools nearby. Community members founded a preschool, engaged three volunteer teachers in exchange for plots of land, and appropriated the farmhouse as a school building. Over the next 2 years, at the urging of the MESTVEE district officials, the community formed a PCSC to manage the school, began offering Grade 1 classes, and initiated a requirement that all teachers should have completed Grade 12. Formalizing the school structure and protocols paved the way for growth: the school added more grade levels, appropriated more of the farm buildings for classrooms, and expanded its staff to six volunteer teachers, all supported by the community.

As this process unfolded, the PCSC came to see its mission as transforming Junza Community School into a government school. Committee members continually advocated to the MESVTEE, requesting trained teachers who could carry the learners through Grade 7 examinations that would enable them to enter secondary school. But the government was unable to provide a teacher for many years. As an interim measure, the PCSC began sourcing “un-deployed” trained (qualified) teachers—individuals who had completed their teacher training but not yet been hired into the government teaching service. Unfortunately, those teachers always left Junza

Community School as soon as they received their official assignments.

As the community’s frustration with the lack of long-term, trained teachers grew, the PCSC continued petitioning the MESVTEE for a government-seconded teacher, all the while working diligently to maintain the quality of education for children in the community. Committed to the highest possible performance levels, the committee dismissed at least one volunteer teacher whose learners had fallen behind, and managed the process of recruiting, interviewing, and hiring new volunteers whenever they were needed.

The community was ecstatic when they finally received a government teacher in 2009, welcoming him with open arms. One PCSC member remembered the day Paul Kunda arrived:

“We actually left worship on that Sabbath to come and welcome the government teacher. This was a relief because we knew we won’t have to be paying him and we felt we were part of the education system.”

But Mr. Kunda’s performance proved surprisingly disappointing. Just 2 years away from retirement, it quickly became clear that he was not the dedicated, energetic teacher they had hoped would arrive to guide their children to academic success. Not only that, but some parents, fellow teachers, and PCSC members felt his behavior to be far from acceptable: he drank, was frequently absent, and was even rumored to have inappropriate relations with some of the female learners. After so many years of anticipating a government teacher as a beacon of hope, the community was devastated. Was he

sent to their school as a punishment? And why would that be?

The PCSC called the MESVTEE to mediate the situation, and Mr. Kunda was publicly reprimanded. After that, his behavior somewhat improved. Although he wasn't the teacher they had hoped for, the parents at Junza Community School once more looked to the future, this time toward Mr. Kunda's impending retirement. Unfortunately, when that day came, his replacement offered more of the same: often absent, surrounded by rumors of misconduct. Some parents were despondent: how could the government send them such sub-par teachers? Many also feared that if they did not accept these first government teachers, the MESVTEE would stop sending them altogether. Their dream of transforming their school into a government school would die.

It was that very dream—the cohesive vision of a bright, government-funded future for the school—that kept them going much longer than other communities would have persevered. Their patience was ultimately rewarded when the MESVTEE deployed two top-notch female teachers, one of whom took the position of head teacher. Today, the school has six teachers: five government teachers and one volunteer teacher. The school's parents finally feel that they are getting the kinds of teachers they need, and the government remains engaged in the school's operation and management. Many speak of Junza as a model community school.

All is not perfect, however. A senior teacher at the school was (and still is) resentful that he was passed over for the positions of head teacher and deputy head (he was reported to be frequently absent from his duties). And as is the case in many such transitions, tensions between volunteer teachers and community members

came to a head as government teachers arrived. Most of the volunteer teachers lost their positions as the community became quicker to criticize their work and slower to pay them. Even so, the prevailing feeling among former volunteers today is one of acceptance, perhaps because of how unified the community is in pushing toward its goal of having a government school.

Like at Kaunda Community School, attitude seems to be a defining feature of positive working relationships among government teachers, community members, and volunteers at Junza Community School. The female government teachers are noted for being respectful of the community and careful to proceed slowly with changes that could be controversial. They also value the volunteer teacher, relying on her a great deal for help with community relations and administrative tasks, and supporting her growth as a teacher.

This attention to interpersonal aspects of their working relationships has generated a noticeable improvement in the government teachers' relationships with parents and with their colleagues inside the school. In addition, the PCSC remains highly engaged in the school, primarily in upgrading the building and other infrastructure, but also in monitoring attendance and educational outcomes. The parents do not feel as confident in supervising government teachers, however, and many seem to think it is beyond their authority:

“We worked well [in supervising] the volunteer teachers, but with the government teachers we are scared because we don't know what the education policy says and ... we don't want to lose them.”

Despite these remaining challenges, community members see the school's transition as nearly complete. The strong vision and collective will to create a government school to educate their children—embodied in the PCSC's willingness to engage with the MESVTEE repeatedly over the years and address conflicts along the way—seems to be the prime factor in the school's current success.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As these two cases demonstrate, the introduction of government teachers into a community school is likely to disrupt intra-community dynamics and cause tension across the school community. But the communities' ability to recover from initial tensions is striking, with characteristics that seem to be shared across community borders. The engagement of the PCSC and MESVTEE officials, as well as the attitudes of the government teacher assigned to a school, seem to be essential components.

PCSC and MESVTEE Roles

As the case of Junza Community School illustrates particularly well, a strong PCSC is poised to help the community construct a positive vision for the future that enables the wider community to see its “growing pains” as more worthwhile.

The PCSC, as the employer of the school's volunteer teachers, helps mitigate conflict and mollify those teachers—apparently, even as they are losing their jobs to government-seconded counterparts.

Meanwhile, the MESVTEE helps hold the government teachers personally and publicly accountable. Public demonstrations of authority, such as taking Mr. Kunda to task for his

inappropriate behavior, encourage the community to work in partnership with government. As the case of Kaunda Community School indicates, it is likely that the MESVTEE involvement is more effective when officials are visible and active in the work of the school from an early stage.

The Force of Character

Because the community is likely to be suspicious of the first government teacher, the strength of that person's attitude and character is crucial. A new teacher who demonstrates respect for the community, patience in initiating larger changes in the school environment, empathy for volunteer teachers, and humility in outward shows of wealth and education all make a large difference in early success. Care should be taken in selecting teachers who will be willing to work hard to integrate into their communities and not push too hard for too many changes too soon.

The Value of Volunteers

Once a government teacher arrives, volunteer teachers are often quickly dismissed and their contributions are devalued, even when the volunteers have served a founding role in the school and worked for little or no pay in difficult conditions.

If the PCSC, MESVTEE, and government teachers can proactively find ways to honor and certify these teachers' contributions and identify new roles for them in the community or spots in teacher training colleges, it could ease the transition by minimizing chances that volunteer teachers become a source of conflict. This is especially important in situations when it is necessary to remove them as teachers.

Government teachers should recognize that volunteer teachers can be important allies in

helping them get to know the community and forge relationships with parents.

Continuing Parent/PCSC Engagement

Parent engagement via PCSCs is often described as a unique strength of the community school model. Unfortunately, the introduction of government teachers may weaken PCSC engagement in school management, encouraging them to retreat to infrastructure projects and leave accountability for educational outcomes to the “experts”, i.e., government teachers.

As the MESVTEE prepares to deploy more government teachers to community schools in the coming years, the MESVTEE and civil society should look for ways to avoid undermining this core strength of community schools. A communication policy on the rights and responsibilities of PCSCs and government teachers, which is supportive of robust PCSCs, could be a positive first step. Similarly, government outreach to communities where it will be sending government teachers can help the PCSC and other community members to understand their ongoing role in overseeing the school. Additionally, orientation on the Operational Guidelines for Community Schools as part of the pre-service training curriculum in the teacher training colleges (where most government teachers are certified) could also offer future government teachers the opportunity to reflect on unique aspects of community schools and the value of community partnership in education.

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* Ministry of Education changed its name to Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MESVTEE) in 2013.

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