

The Malawian view on Community Participation in School Development: a qualitative program evaluation in the south of Malawi

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Summary

In this research, the Basic Education Support Program (BESP) is evaluated and an outline is provided of community participation in school development in the south of Malawi. The accent of the BESP lies on increasing community participation in creating learner friendly schools. Since the community and its members are the ‘instrument’ and starting point in the BESP to create learner friendly schools, their attitudes towards the project were evaluated. The research was conducted in five communities in the south of Malawi that joined the BESP. All of these communities consist of five groups, knowing the chiefs, the School Management Committee together with the Parent Teacher Association, the teachers, the parents, and the pupils. With each group of each community, a focus group was held where discussions about multiple subjects took place. The discussions yielded information on what Malawians understand by the term community participation, which elements in the program the community itself experiences as important for community participation in school improvement, and on challenges that were faced when invoking community participation in school improvement.

Samenvatting (Dutch)

In dit onderzoek is het Basic Education Support Program (BESP) geëvalueerd en wordt er een schets gegeven van gemeenschapsparticipatie in het verbeteren van scholen in het zuiden van Malawi. Het accent van het BESP ligt op het verhogen van gemeenschapsparticipatie in het creëren van leerling vriendelijke scholen. Gezien de gemeenschap en de leden daarvan het ‘instrument’ en het beginpunt in het BESP zijn om leerling vriendelijk scholen te creëren, zijn hun houdingen tegenover het project geëvalueerd. Het onderzoek is gedaan onder vijf gemeenschappen in het zuiden van Malawi, die mee hebben gedaan met het BESP. Al deze gemeenschappen bestaan uit vijf groepen, namelijk de dorpschoufden, het School Management Comité samen met de Ouder Leraar Vereniging, the leraren, de ouders en de leerlingen. Met elke groep van elke gemeenschap is een focus groep gehouden waarin discussies over meerdere onderwerpen plaatsvonden. De discussies hebben informatie opgeleverd over wat Malawianen verstaan onder de term gemeenschapsparticipatie, welke elementen in het programma de gemeenschap zelf als belangrijk heeft ervaren voor gemeenschapsparticipatie in het verbeteren van scholen en over uitdagingen waarmee de gemeenschap geconfronteerd is toen er een beroep werd gedaan op gemeenschapsparticipatie.

Abbreviations

ACEM	Association of Christian Educators Malawi
BESP	Basic Education Support Program
EFA	Education for All
LFSIP	Learner Friendly School Improvement Plan
SMC	School Management Committee
SIP	School Improvement Plan
PTA	Parent Teacher Association

1. Introduction

This study focuses on community participation in school improvement in the south of Malawi. The Association of Christian Educators Malawi (ACEM) and Edukans (a Dutch development organization for education) have developed a program called the Basic Education Support Program (BESP). The goal of this program is to promote access and equity through community participation. The main research question of this thesis follows this objective: ‘*What is the Malawian perspective on the use of community participation in the establishment of learner friendly schools?*’. The following three sub questions were derived from the main research question:

- What do Malawians understand by the term ‘community participation’?
- Which elements in the program does the community itself experience as important for community participation in school improvement?
- Are there any challenges that are faced when invoking community participation in school improvement?

To answer these questions, this thesis is structured as follows. First, a program description will be provided, clarifying the goal of the program and the way this is realized. A logic model will be included to schematic depict the program components, together with goals of these components, the targets or actors per component, and the short- and long term effects. Secondly, in the theoretical framework scientific literature will be explicated on community participation in school improvement. This is to provide a background on the rationale of the program and, together with an interpretation of the literature, it will form a base for the field research. The methods section after that will describe how a qualitative research follows from this base and why focus groups were used in this research. The opinions of the community members will be described in the findings section and they will be put in context in the concluding section. In the conclusion, the answers on the sub- and main questions of this study will be formulated and feedback will be provided on the logic model. Also, a discussion and recommendations will be part of this section to put the study conducted in perspective.

2. Program Theory

2.1 Program description

The BEBP has different project names in the three regions of Malawi. This study focuses on the Southern region. The program in the South will from hereon be referred to as ‘the program’, unless otherwise indicated. The long term impact that is set for the program by ACEM is increased pupil retention, decreased dropout rates especially for girls, increased completion rates, increased access to quality education and increased national literacy levels.

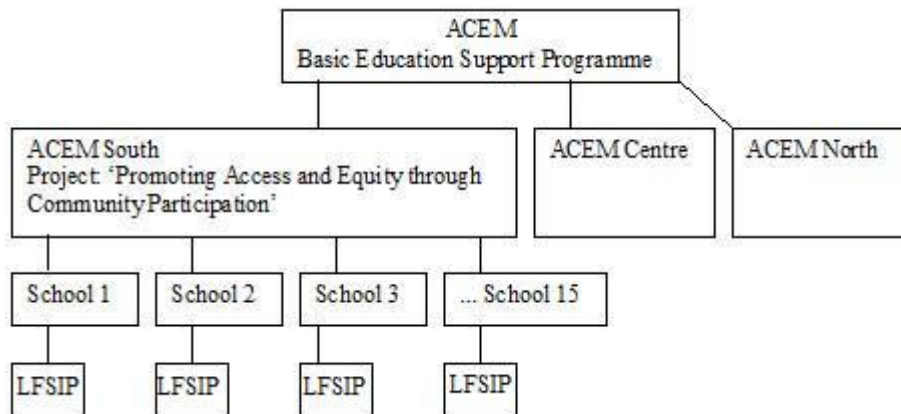
The program has four specific objectives to reach this impact (ACEM, 2007):

1. Increase community participation in creating learner friendly schools.
2. Strengthen collaboration and networking among different stakeholders in the creation of learner friendly schools.
3. Strengthen lobby and advocacy mechanisms in the creation of learner friendly schools.
4. Strengthen monitoring of program progress and impact.

The accent of the program lies on the first objective, as does the accent of this study. Community participation is seen as the starting point for all other objectives. The rationale for this is that promotion of access to quality education in Malawi is not only the responsibility of the government but of all stakeholders. Empowering the local communities to take the responsibility of providing a learner friendly school environment will ensure that schools are always attractive to learners thereby contributing towards reducing dropout rate and raising retention and completion rates (ACEM, 2007). What ‘learner friendly’ implies exactly, is not included in the program description.

The program uses Learner Friendly School Improvement Plans (LFSIPs) to meet its objective. ACEM facilitates the process of developing the LFSIPs in the 15 programme schools with the purpose of mobilizing the school communities to be proactive in the creation of learner friendly schools. The

LFSIP assists the schools in having a starting point and vision in the creation of learner friendly schools. It also provides a guideline in terms of strategies for creating learner friendly schools. In the following scheme a structured view of the program and its different components is depicted.



The LFSIPs are school-based (strategic) plans that have to direct the school development. They are locally made by community members in each school. For the school community to come up with the plans, ACEM brings together the five groups of the community. These groups are the same in all the communities: the chiefs, the School Management Committee (SMC) together with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the parents, the teachers and the pupils. In all communities, the program follows the same structure. This structure is schematic depicted in Table 1. The program activities are described in order of execution. The goals of these activities, the actors per component and the short- and long term effects are also provided for a complete overview.

Table 1

Logic Model of Program Activities including Goals, Targets and Short- and Long Term Effects

Programme part	Activities	Goal of activity	Actors	Short term effect	Long term effect
Developing Learner Friendly Schools Improvement Plans (LFSIPs)	A two-day school based meeting with two activities: - An explanation of the program. - All community groups develop a LFSIP. The specific groups share their plans. These plans are merged into a school improvement plan.	A sentized community on the importance of creating learner friendly schools and establishing their responsibility in the creation of learner friendly schools Development of plans of action for translating the schools into learner friendly schools	All community members All community members (chiefs, SMC/PTA, teachers, parents, pupils)	Awareness of all community members of the importance of learner friendly schools Plan with guidelines to develop a learner friendly school	Community involvement in school improvement A learner friendly school
Conducting orientations on School Management and resource	Orientations on School Management and Resource Mobilization	Increase the knowledge & skills of the members of the SMC and PTA in order to enhance the implementation of the LFSIP	SMC/PTA	Increased knowledge & skills in the area of school management	Effective implementation of the LFSIP

mobilisation				and resource mobilisation	
A zonal gathering on Community Initiatives in creation of Learner friendly schools	One gathering of all interested community members in the same geographical zone to show what they did with their money	Communities will be encouraged to embark on initiatives that create learner friendly schools. Community members have to get more motivated for proceeding with the execution of the LFSIP once they see what can be accomplished	All community members (chiefs, SMC/PTA, teachers, parents, pupils)	Motivation to tackle constraints to learner friendly schools that can arise during implementations of LFSIP's	An ongoing motivation of the community members to make and keep the school learner friendly
Organizing exchange visits	Visits to other school communities and enrol in discussions	Meet other target groups from different schools who are not doing well. Through group discussions, the two groups will share achievements and how they have managed to overcome certain constraints in the implementation of their plans	- SMC/PTA - Chiefs	Gain insights and skills in how to overcome problems	An effective execution of developing learner friendly schools and keeping them learner friendly
Organizing open days	One zonal open day after the official ending of the program	Schools can see from each other what they did to make their schools learner friendly	All community members (chiefs, SMC/PTA, teachers, parents, pupils)	Gain insights in good practices of other schools	A cooperation between the schools to help each other to keep their schools learner friendly

2.2 Theoretical framework

The idea to use community participation in order to increase access and equity to quality basic education through creation of learner friendly schools is not new. Other scientific research on this subject has been executed in sub-Saharan Africa. This research will be explicated in order to learn more about the program rationale in scientific terms. This will also be done to clarify what constraints there can be in these sorts of programs. In the following section, a conceptualization of community participation will be provided to concretize an ambiguous term. After that, different views on the general use of community participation in Sub-Saharan Africa will be elaborated on. In the third section of the theoretical framework, there will be zoomed in from views on the general use of community participation to views on the use of community participation in school development in Sub-Saharan Africa. The last section of this theoretical framework consists of an overview of findings from actual research experience in the field of community participation in school development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Community participation as a concept

Community participation has received increased attention in international and national policy in recent years (Rose, 2003a). The contemporary thinking about community participation is influenced by the participatory paradigm, which rests on devolution of decision-making power. This devolution also became apparent in the context of school development, as will be described further on. The shift towards

community approaches is also facilitated by the failure of externally driven projects, the lack of project sustainability and resource constraints (Jimu, 2008).

To conceptualize 'community participation', a definition of community and of participation is necessary. Participation can be defined in amounts. These amounts can differ, just as the nature of participation can. Community participation can therefore be seen on a scale, with an extreme at both ends (Bray, 2000). Two extremes of participation are on the one hand 'genuine' participation, implying the ability to take part in real decision-making and governance. All members have equal power to determine the outcome of decisions and share in a joint activity. This form of participation is voluntary and spontaneous. On the other hand, 'pseudo-participation' is, at best, a consultative process whereby citizens are merely kept informed of developments at the school level, and are expected to accept decisions that have already been made. Pseudo-participation is extractive, often limited to contributing resources for school construction and maintenance. To be truly participatory, community members should themselves choose their roles, and would need the appropriate skills to carry out their functions effectively (Rose, 2003b). A similar classification of community participation can be made with the distinction planner-centred and people-centred. In this classification planner-centred stands for the type of participation that focuses on administrative and financial efficiency. This type of participation facilitates local acceptance of new policies and technologies promoted by outsiders (Mfum-Mensah, 2004). Therefore it can be compared with the concept pseudo-participation described above. In a people-centred approach, participation becomes a means to meet locally felt needs and redistribute scarce resources. It also possesses the inherent value as a process empowering the poor through enhancing local management capacity, increasing confidence in indigenous potentialities and raising collective consciousness (Mfum-Mensah, 2004). Many similar formats for conceptualizing community participation have been made over the years. The concept 'community' is also widely discussed in scientific literature (Dill, 2009; Prew, 2009 & Rose, 2003b). However, a clear definition can not be made, given the diverse nature of communities over the world. Most literature on development policy uses the term community without much qualification to denote a culturally and politically homogeneous social system or one that at least implicitly is internally cohesive and more or less harmonious (Manusri & Rao, 2004). To avoid problems resulting from not qualifying the term community, in this paper the term community will refer to the actors in a community that are defined by the organization active in the region of the research conducted. The Association of Christian Educators Malawi (ACEM) leads the Basic Education Support Programme (BESP) in Malawi. The community that is defined by ACEM, as can be seen in the logic model further on, focuses on the school community and consists of the School management Committee (SMC) together with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the Chiefs, the teachers, the parents and the pupils (ACEM, 2007).

Participation allows community members as principal stakeholders to influence their own development. Community development is supposed to reflect people's actions and attributes of self-consciousness.

Hence, commitment to community development should recognize interconnectedness between individuals and the societies to which they belong. (Jimu, 2008). The concept community implies a network of shared interests and concerns. In this case, the actors' interests in the community is supposed to be education. The actors are however not necessarily a homogenous group of people with a common voice and a shared set of views (Ansell, 2005; Rose, 2003b).

Comments on the use of community participation

The increased attention for community participation mentioned above, consists of positive as well as negative attention. Studies on agency have demonstrated the interconnectedness of individuals and the societies or communities to which they belong, hereby showing that the 'good' of the community is intrinsically linked with community-wide social, economic, political and environmental good (Jimu, 2008). Also, local committees are believed to have the interests of their own people at heart, and good knowledge of the needs and the resources of their area's (Ansell, 2005). Some see community participation as an important end in itself (as a democratic right), and means to the achievement of sustainable development and poverty alleviation (Rose, 2003a). The negative attention connected to this view is based on the fact that there is little empirical evidence to suggest that even large-scale commitments to participation have been more efficient, equitable or sustainable than the top-down projects they seek to replace (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). This shows that there is a difference between community participation as an end in itself and as a means to accomplish something else. When community participation is used as an instrument instead of a top-down approach, Mansuri and Rao (2004) argue that this is not necessarily a better approach. This is because community participation as an instrument doesn't always target the poor and it doesn't always improve project quality and performance. The program under evaluation has set the purpose to empower primary school communities with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. These are used as instruments to enable the community members to make their schools learner-friendly. Other critiques on the participatory approaches to development is that they simply shift the costs of service delivery to potential beneficiaries and coerce the poor into making contributions that are often more substantial than those made by the rich (Dill, 2009). The participatory approach has further been criticized for the idealized a decontextualized view of 'community'. Urban and rural 'communities' are implicitly characterized as internally cohesive and, for the most part, harmonious entities, while this might not be the case (Ansell, 2005; Dill, 2009; Rose, 2003b). What is also very important for this research, is the critique not on the participatory approach itself, but on the inadequate execution of it. According to this critique, local people have not been accorded their rightful recognition and respect by most intervention agencies, hence the failure of some projects (Kafewo, 2009). It also stresses that communities have only been allowed to 'participate' within restrictions already set by state and international actors (Mosse, 1994).

This illustrates the scale of participation introduced by Bray (2000), and is evidence of the ‘pseudo-participation’ on one end of that scale, introduced by Rose (2003b).

Community participation in school improvement as a concept

The program under evaluation uses community participation as an instrument to improve the school. In the Dakar Framework for Action, a document that reaffirms the goal of ‘Education for All’, governments pledge to develop responsive, participatory and accountable systems of educational governance and management. The devolution of authority to schools and local communities is seen by many as a means to this end. Moves towards greater school autonomy are often accompanied by the creation of formal structures, such as school committees, village education committees and parent-teacher associations, to facilitate parental and community involvement in school management (EFA, 2008).

While schools may officially have formal structures designed to facilitate community and parental involvement, there is often a large gap between intent and outcome. Even when parents nominally participate in school management, they may have a limited say. In some contexts ‘participation’ is confined to raising money, with limited influence over how it is used. Participation is viewed by many as a goal in its own right, but for most parents the ultimate aim of any involvement in school management is to improve children’s education (EFA, 2008). Formal participation and consultative arrangements may not facilitate achievement of this goal. Participants may have limited knowledge about issues under discussion, such as school performance and teaching practices. Parents may lack the expertise or confidence to appraise approaches to pedagogy or curriculum effectively. Poor, illiterate parents with limited school experience are at a particular disadvantage. The idea that the devolution of authority to parents, schools and communities is inherently pro-poor, is not well grounded. One of the defining characteristics of poverty and marginalization in many contexts is precisely that those affected lack an effective voice (EFA, 2008). Decentralisation often involves a shift of responsibility onto local communities these communities are then expected to provide resources and pay for teachers. It can thereby exacerbate inequalities in education systems, rather than improving the situations of remote and marginalised communities (Ansell, 2005).

Experiences with community participation in school development

When one focuses on sub-Saharan Africa, formal schooling is a relatively new concept, let alone school development (Prew, 2009). These concepts are associated with the historical legacy of colonial rule. For this reason, potential for a mismatch between the community’s traditional beliefs and customs exists. Western concepts of school development, which have generally been set within a capitalist, consumerist, individual frame of reference, cannot be lifted wholesale and planted in the developing world (Prew, 2009). This can have an adverse effect on school effectiveness (Fertig, 2000). Not only the way of thinking about schooling can differ in developing countries, the role of the community in the school can

also differ. The apparent involvement and inclusivity of a wide range of stakeholders in the process of drawing up the plan and its implementation, implies greater and deeper community involvement in sub-Saharan Africa in the school and its development process (Prew, 2009). In addition to the experiences with community participation in school development in sub-Saharan Africa as a concept, there are also experiences with the same subject in a project and research setting. These are experiences within projects, that show us what elements are important for a project to succeed.

Jimu (2008) evaluated community involvement in various projects, including education projects, in rural Malawi in the last 40 years. According to him, the results do not signify a breakthrough in the problem of rural development. The problem with community participation is the matching of the external support offered by development agents with the internal characteristics of the rural systems. The solution to this problem, Jimu argues, is to employ a bottom-up approach instead of top-down, thereby facilitating the development of local initiatives that improve community welfare. Not only the development agents are important players in the field of community involvement in development, the state also plays a significant role. Pryor (2005) researched community participation for improvement of rural schooling in Ghana. He started from a reversed idea than most of the other research presented in this paper. Pryor concluded that if community participation is desirable in itself, school development is an important factor to create a community around the school. For this concept to work, the state should be active in trying to create community participation, rather than looking to the community to develop the school. In other words so he argues: *'if you want to build a community round the school, start with the school, not with the community'* (Pryor, 2005, p201)

Mfum-Mensah (2004) studied community involvement in school management in Ghana. During his research it became apparent that for a program to work, meetings of the PTA and SMC have to be held regularly. Problems arose because of the existence of two local management bodies (PTA and SMC) instead of a single body. Other problems arose due to dysfunctional communication among stakeholders. Such communication had resulted in lack of information on specific projects. Other research found that representation is an important component of participation (Naidoo, 2005). Having a voice on a school management committee implies either a direct presence or the delegation of authority through a democratic process. If participation is to enhance equity, the poor, marginalized and disadvantaged need to be not just adequately represented, but actively engaged. They have to be able to articulate their concerns and to influence decisions (Naidoo, 2005; EFA, 2008). Another major factor influencing the successful outcome of a project with community participation, is the existence of a culture of governance that includes all role players from central policy-makers and officials to learners, educators, parents and other members of the community. All actors need to acknowledge that there is a power imbalance between educators and families. Particularly when teachers represent one culture and class background and families have lower incomes and are from different cultures. If parents and family members perceive school as judgemental or condescending, they may feel unheard or intimidated

(Naidoo, 2005). Prew (2009) posited a paradigm for school development in the context of a developing country. Within this paradigm, the norm of a school-parent engagement over pedagogical issues as in the West is replaced by imperatives based on full community involvement in the school on the local communities own terms. The key elements in this paradigm are that the community should be involved in determining the development priorities in the school, supplying voluntary and paid services to the school, helping the school raise and manage funds, and sitting on and running some school committees. Also, it involves linking the school, community and the local economy in a creative, productive relationship (Prew, 2009).

Kendall (2007) found in her research that the quality of community involvement has affected the quality of schools in a number of ways. These include: providing an oversight of school budgeting and teacher attendance and performance; managing student attendance and homework; providing resources (labour, money, etc.) for school building, teacher hiring and other school infrastructure and services; and advocating at local and national levels for changes that may improve educational access, retention, and completion. As already mentioned, many of the programmes and policies designed to increase community participation have focused on creating formal structures (such as School Committees or Parent-Teacher Associations) through which parents can play a regularized and active role in the school. Kendall (2007) argues that decentralization policies may be implemented to transfer power over school personnel, school budgets, and school planning to parents or local governments. Infrastructure construction support may be predicated on the community providing some percent of the cost of construction, often in labour, before the state or international funds are released. These policies and programmes are often large-scale (national or multi-district) and relatively top-down in their design and implementation. School quality has improved as a result of these programmes and policies. Less programmes have used the technique to empower parents. The programmes that have, tried to create local definitions of quality and then implement locally-planned efforts to improve quality. These programmes were effective in improving educational quality, which was measured by the individual communities involved in the programming.

These working elements show us that community participation can be useful in school development projects in Africa. As Djité (1993, p150) states befitting: *'the actors of change remain the people themselves'*.

2.3 Program theory and research focus

The program description of the BESP implicitly states that community participation will contribute to the increase of pupil retention, dropout rates (especially for girls), completion rates, access to quality education and national literacy levels. In the theoretical framework it has become clear that community participation can be an adequate instrument to accomplish these targets. Prew (2009) showed that western concepts for development do not work in an African context. Moreover, it works

counterproductive. Jimu (2008) advocates a bottom-up approach for school improvement in developing countries. This together with the fact that Prew (2009) found that community members in Africa have a strong bond with each other, makes community participation a plausible alternative for western directed developing concepts. However, contradictory theories seem to be in place about the effectiveness of community participation with an inadequate execution being the recurrent theme.

To form a grounded opinion about the effectiveness of community participation in the BESP, an evaluation on the execution is necessary. Since the community and its members are the ‘instrument’ and starting point in the BESP to create learner friendly schools, their attitudes towards the project are important. In other words, the effective execution of the program depends on the community members. So to produce a grounded evaluation, the opinions and actions of the community members are the ones that matter and that is exactly what this study aims to ascertain.

The logic model showed the schematic building and rationale of the program under evaluation. Together with the literature, this evoked several questions. Those questions formed the base for the field research. Below in Table 2, the program parts, that are also depicted in the logic model, are complemented with the questions. Also the questions about the program in general are depicted in this table.

Table 2
Questions per Program Parts and on the Program in General

Program part	Question
Program in general	- What does the community think of community participation? - What has changed in the school since the introduction of the BESP?
Developing Learner Friendly Schools Improvement Plans (LFSIPs)	- What does the community understand by the term learner friendly schools? - What does the community think about the development of the SIP?
Conducting orientations on School Management and resource mobilisation	- What do the SMC and PTA think of the orientation meeting?
A zonal gathering on Community Initiatives in creation of Learner friendly schools	- What do the community members think of the zonal gathering?
Organizing exchange visits	- What do the SMC/PTA and chiefs think of the exchange visit?
Organizing open days	- What do the community members think of the open day?

Because the focus of the program lies on increasing community participation in creating learner friendly schools, it is important to know what the term ‘learner friendly school’ entails. This is not described in the program, hence the question what the term means to the community members. When this is explicit, it is also clear what the goal is for the community members in using community participation. As can be seen in the theoretical framework, a lot of literature with different views is extant on community participation. For this research, it is important to know how the communities themselves interpret community participation. The other questions focus on the evaluation of the specific program components and on the change the program has made to the school. These questions form the base for answering the main- and sub research questions. How the questions in Table 2 have shaped the field

research and how they contribute to the main- and sub questions of this research, is described in the following chapters.

3. Research Method

This study was conducted in the southern region of Malawi. The choice for this specific region was made by Edukans, the funding organisation of the project in question. Not much research has been done in this region, while it is necessary for a sustainable project development. The topic of interest and the focus of the southern BESP variant for this study is community participation in school development.

3.1 Design

A qualitative approach is chosen for this research. This choice is made because of the explorative and evaluative nature of the topic. This study aims to ascertain opinions, attitudes and actions of community members regarding their collaboration in participating in school development. An ideal instrument to gain this information is through the use of focus groups. The purpose of conducting a focus group is to listen and gather information. It is a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product or service. Focus groups are used to gather opinions (Krueger, 2009). The group discussions performed in focus groups are conducted several times with similar types of participants, in order to identify trends and patterns in perceptions. A focus group study is a carefully planned series of relaxed discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest, in this case community participation in school development, in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. Each group is conducted with five to ten people, led by a skilled interviewer. These focus groups work when participants feel comfortable, respected and free to give their opinion without being judged (Krueger, 2009).

The focus groups in this research were formed using the existing groups within the community that the program had already set. These are the chiefs, the SMC/PTA, the teachers, the parents and the pupils. The motive for this and the way the group members were selected, will be explained in the participant section of this chapter.

3.2 Instruments

A questioning route formed the base for the focus groups. The questioning route was developed according to the format Krueger (2009) designed for focus groups. A questioning route ideally exists of short, clear, open-ended and one-dimensional questions in different categories. These categories are the following. The opening question is designed to get everyone to talk, it is usually to let everyone introduce themselves. The introductory questions are to introduce the topic of discussion and to get people to start thinking about their connection with the topic. The transition questions move the conversation into the key questions that drive the study. They serve as logical links between the

introductory questions and the key questions and ask of the participants to go into more depth than the introductory question(s). The key questions drive the study and require the most attention. The ending questions bring closure to the discussion, enable participants to reflect back on previous comments, and are critical to analysis.

The questions for the questioning route were derived from the logic model, presented at the end of chapter two. The logic model shows the steps in the program, as well as the targets for those steps. The questions in the questioning route are the same for every focus group, with the exception of a few questions that only apply to a specific focus group. What follows in Table 3 is a schematic overview of the questions presented in the research focus and the questions for the questioning route derived from those, including the question category and the targetgroups.

Table 3

Questioning Route for Focusgroups including the Targetgroup and Question Category

Question Logic Model	Targetgroup	Category	Questioning route
-	All groups	Opening question	What is your name and when did you get involved in the BESP?
-	All groups	Introductory question	What has changed in the school since the introduction of the LFSIP?
What does the community understand by the term learner friendly schools?	All groups	Transition question	What have you learned about learner friendly schools?
What does the community think of community participation?	All groups	Key question	What does Community Participation mean to you?
	All groups	Key question	Do you like the idea of community participation or would you rather let things in the hands of others?
	All groups	Key question	What is your interest in community participation?
What does the community think about the development of the SIP?	All groups	Key question	What issues were helpful in the development of the LFSIP?
	All groups	Key question	Where there difficulties in developing the LFSIP?
What do the SMC and PTA think of the orientation meeting?	SMC/PTA	Key question	What was in your opinion the use of the orientation on school management and resource mobilisation?
	SMC/PTA	Key question	How is the cooperation between the PTA and the SMC?
What do the community members think of the zonal gathering?	All groups	Key question	What was in your opinion the use of the zonal gathering?
What do the SMC/PTA and chiefs think of the exchange visit?	SMC/PTA and chiefs	Key question	What was in your opinion the use of the ex-change visit?
What do the community members think of the open day?	All groups	Key question	What was in your opinion the use of the open day?
-	All groups	Ending question	If you had a chance to give advice to the director of this program, what advice would you give?
-	All groups	Ending question	I want you to help me evaluate this program. I want to know how to improve it and what difference it makes for the school. Is there anything I missed? Is there anything that you came wanting to say that you didn't get a chance to say?

3.3 Participants

Context

Malawi is in the sub-Saharan Africa. It is bordered by Tanzania to the north and north-east, Mozambique to the east, south and south-west and Zambia to the west and north-west. It is a landlocked country with a land area of 94,080 square kilometres. The country is divided into three regions: north, centre and south. The regions are sub-divided into districts with the north having six districts, the centre having nine and south having fourteen districts. In terms of land area, the south has 31,735 square kilometres. The population of Malawi is currently just over 14 million people, with a median age of 16.8 years (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). The country's literacy levels are at 62% (women) and 79% (men). Out of the total country population, 2,693,009 is primary school age population with the south having 1,388,365. The south has the lowest literacy levels of 59.1% (women) and 79.1% (men) (ACEM, 2007). The education system is operating based on the Education Act, last reviewed in 1962. The introduction of Free Primary Education Policy in 1994 was meant to expedite access to all school-aged children as a way of fulfilling the 1990 Jomtien requirement for Basic Education for All (EFA). The Jomtien World Conference on EFA inspired the Malawi second Republic Constitution of 1994 which provides free and compulsory education for all. Since then the basic education sub-sector has made a significant progress in terms of enrolment of school-aged children with an increase of 60%, from 1.9 to 3.2 million in 2004 (Edukans, 2007). The education system in Malawi is divided into three levels, where learners spend eight years in primary school, four in secondary and another four on average in tertiary institutions including University Colleges. The average school life expectancy is nine years (CIA, 2010). The enrolment, retention and completion figures for girls are consistently lower than for boys. Pupils in rural areas tend to have the least well-equipped and maintained facilities, and fewer qualified teachers. Learners with special needs are least likely of all to receive an adequate education. The extent of special educational need is currently masked and not openly addressed (Edukans, 2007). The country's primary school enrolment is 2,693,009 (1,332,943: male and 1,360,066; female) out of which 1,409,341 (710,661: male and 698,680: female) is for the south. Education in Malawi is hit by several problems, which include high dropout rate, repetition, pupil classroom ratio and high pupil teacher ratio. The national dropouts' rate is at 15.6%. Schools in the southern region suffer from heavy pupil dropout. Another problem faced by Malawi education standard is repetition rate. The national repetition rate is at 16.9%. The classroom-pupil ratio at national level is at 107:1 (ACEM, 2007).



The participants of this research live in the southern region, in the Blantyre rural district. In this district, several villages joined the BESP. These villages all have the same characteristics. They consist of multiple households, whereof the amount is too variously to give a useful number. These households live on their own compound with one or several huts on it. These compounds are usually located alongside a dirt road with cultivated land or forests between them. Families often sell food of their compound and walk up and down the dirt road from their land to their home and back. The schools are also situated at a dirt road, on a place that is central from several dirt roads in the village. To give a more vivid view of a village and a school, the three pictures in this section, made during the research, illustrate from the top to the bottom a household compound, the school compound and a newly build school building with the pupils.



Selection

The selection for the villages in the Southern region was made on base of their location. For the comparability, the schools had to be in the same district. The district where the largest amount of schools was incorporated in the BESP, is the Blantyre rural district. Five schools were incorporated in the BESP here and all five schools were selected for this research. The headmasters of these schools were approached to arrange the gathering of the people that were involved in the development of the LFSIPs. The different groups (chiefs, SMC/PTA, teachers, parents and pupils) were asked to come on a specific date and time.

Participants

The participants of this research are the community members from five villages in Blantyre rural, a district in the southern region of Malawi. Each community has its own primary school. Every community consists of five groups, knowing the chiefs, the SMC/PTA, the teachers, the parents and the

pupils. This means that this research entails 25 focus groups. To clarify this and to provide the number of participants, a schematic overview follows in Table 4.

Table 4

Overview of focusgroups per school and community group

	Chipande primary school	Makalanga primary school	Mlambell primary school	Nanjere primary school	Ndalapa primary school	Total
Chiefs	5	1	5	1	3	15
SMC/PTA	9	10	9	7	6	41
Teachers	6	6	9	3	4	28
Parents	5	11	10	8	9	43
Pupils	10	10	13	10	10	53
Total	35	38	46	29	32	180

The chiefs are the villadge heads. Some villages have one chief, some villages have multiple. The job of the chiefs is to coordinate everything that happens in the village and to serve as a role model to his people. He is best to be compared with the mayor in the western world, but only of little towns. The School Management Committee (SMC), which includes the school director, forms together with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) the governing body of the school. The PTA is best compared with the dutch ‘medezeggenschapsraad’ (MR).

3.4 Procedure

The focus groups took two days per school. On every first day, the focus group with the chiefs, the focus group with the SMC/PTA and the focusgroup with the teachers took place. On every second day, the focus group with the parents and the focus group with the pupils took place. The focus group took place at the school that was researched at that moment, either in a free building or under a tree. They always took place in the privacy of one group of participants, the researcher and the translator. The participants were gathered by the head teacher and were waiting nearby the school for their turn. At the beginning of each focus group, the participants were sensitized on the fact that the information they were going to provide, would not be told to other participant groups and that it would be anonymously included in this research. Also, the participants were informed about the type of research and about the expectancies of them as a group to the research. They were told that discussions during the focus groups were of special importance and everyone could have a say and react on each other. After this sentisizing, the questioning route began and the sessions were closed by thanking the participants for their time and trouble. Each focus group took between one and two hours.

3.5 Position as researcher

The relation between the researcher and the participants was only in existence during the focus group. Outside the focus group there was no form of contact between the two parties, hence there was no personal involvement from the researcher with the participants. The contact during the focus groups was

through a translator, except for the focus groups with the teachers that were held in English. The translator is an employee of ACEM, the organisation that facilitated the program. The translator was present at the schools during several activities of the program and therefore had a history with the participants. Because of this, he was able to help some participants remember some activities where they had forgotten about them. The words of the translator were used for the analysis of the results. In conclusion, there was no influence in the research from personal involvement of the researcher, but there could be some influence from the interpretation of the translator. Therefore, the presence of the translator could have a negative effect on the reliability of this research.

3.6 Analyses

The focus groups were recorded on tape and during the focus groups, notes were made from the comments of the participants. These notes were worked out later on into text documents. These documents were processed in the text analysis program MAXQDA. With this program, the qualitative data could be systematically evaluated and interpreted. Connections were made between comments of different (groups of) people and common views were detected. A code tree was made and the common views were clustered into categories.

4. Findings

The first findings that will be displayed, are the findings on what a learner friendly school should be according to the participants. It is important to have a view on this, in order to have an image about the circumstances in which the respondents find themselves. The comments that will be displayed after these elements of a learner friendly school, can thus be valued accordingly.

4.1 Elements of a learner friendly school

The participants discussed about the question what they have learned about learner friendly schools. They all came up with several aspects of what a school should have or be like according to them. There was not much difference between the types of focus groups, so this outline will not be divided into the types of participants. Several materialistic requirements for a school were raised. A school should have adequate classroom blocks and they have to be in good shape. There have to be teacher's houses, so the teachers are not residing far away and therefore come late to school or leave early. A school should have an office, a library, a blackboard, desks and adequate teaching and learning materials. There should be a borehole, adequate toilets and sporting facilities like balls and a playground for physical education. The school should be clean, attractive, well accessible, also in the rainy season, and the school should be up to standard eight. A school should provide porridge and hand out school uniforms for those who can not afford them. Also, a school should accommodate learners with different needs. Furthermore, several comments were made on the atmosphere in the school and how the people of the community and within

the school should interact with each other. The teachers of the MlambeII argued that *“Learners should be free, they have to enjoy to go to school and meet with friends. It should be a place to find comfort and where the teachers are in assistance, a place to share ideas with friends.”* Friendly contact and a good relation between teachers and learners are important in a school. Learners should be comfortable to explain problems to teachers, the teachers should act as parents. Also the teacher-community relation has to be good. To encourage children to go to school, entertainment activities such as choirs and sporting activities are good in a school. To encourage children to work hard, gifts or awards to reward them for their performance are desirable. Some other comments were made on behaviour and presence of teachers. There should be enough teachers and they should be qualified teachers. They should be fair to the pupils and not abuse the pupils. Teachers should not use corporal punishments, but give the pupils counselling. The teachers should be committed to the pupils and show love, teach well and if pupils are not fully motivated, teachers should help. When teachers give assignments to the pupils, they should look at the assignments. Teachers should not be absent, come in time, don't drink beer or smoke weed during classes and they shouldn't have affairs with the learners.

4.2 Views on community participation

All the groups were asked several questions on what community participation means to them and how they see their own participation. This section shows returning elements in the discussions on what community participation means to the participants. Often, community participation is literally called the key to development by the participants. To them it means activities on community level, but also taking part in the decision making process. To the participants it also means showing interest in the development of the school and of the community. Discussing about the question ‘Do you like the idea of community participation or would you rather let things in the hands of others?’, a lot of the same opinions surfaced. The common opinion is that the community should take part, because when organisations would do the work for the community, the participants can not fully develop their own community. However, there has to be a combination between the community and the organisations, because the community doesn't have the resources on its own. In this combination, *‘the community should be in the forefront and others should just assist’* (Chipande parents). In two groups, there were a few people with different opinions. A reaction to the previous comment of the Chipande parents was that *‘organisations should do the work, it's heavy work for the community’*. Two pupils of Ndalapa were also happy to let the organisations do the work for them. Discussing about other questions of meaning of community participation, the following elements arose.

Materialistic responsibility

Community participation was by many respondents seen as, among other things but often above all, a materialistic responsibility. It is the communities' responsibility to provide teachers with good learning

materials, to mold bricks, collect sand, water and stones and assist in the construction of school blocks and teachers houses. Community members might also donate something else like money and make the school more beautiful.

Roles

The materialistic responsibility particularly became apparent when the community members discussed about their own position in community participation. The roles of several groups within the community can be distinguished. There is a distinctive pattern that is seen between and less within the types of focus groups. The parents and the pupils see themselves mainly useful in constructional work, molding bricks, collecting sand, stones and water. To serve as an example was also a role in which the parents saw themselves. The parents of MlambeII said: *'we also want to be role models for other communities and show we take part in the development of the school'*. The parents of Nanjere stated in this respect: *'We will always help, because we are the parents and we can show the community to work together'*. The SMC/PTA places itself in a central role as communicators. *'If we work together, the less work there is. That's why we make sure each and everyone is involved and present. We have to communicate to everyone'* (SMC/PTA Chipande). The teachers like to be the actors in the forefront. What is important to them is *'The creation of a conducive environment for the learner. We are the guides and drivers of development'* (Nanjere teachers). The chiefs have the most pronounced opinion about their roles in community participation. They feel like they should be in the forefront and that is their responsibility to be role models for the entire community. As chiefs, they feel like they are guiding the community members and encouraging them to develop the school. *'We are the leaders, if we don't take part, our followers won't listen to us'* (Ndalapa chiefs). The chiefs feel that if there would be no chiefs available, the community would not be there. The chief of Nanjere stated: *'as chief, I'm in the forefront of the community participation. Donors like to see me push things and not let organisations push. My presence shows to others what they should do, they can copy'*.

Working together

For many, community participation is also a means to accomplish a goal faster. The pupils of Chipande stated that *'it is good to divide the work. Parents, pupils and teachers can do their part to develop the work. It makes the work less, so it is not a burden to them and it goes faster'*. If the people of the community work together, the less work there is. Community members make sure everyone is involved and present. Together there is more strength to do tasks like molding bricks and assist in the construction of teacher's houses faster.

The following elements of community participation are less an exposition of how community participation can help to accomplish a goal than the previous elements, but more of an exposition of what community participation means for community life.

Ownership

One of the most common elements of community participation throughout the opinions of all of the participants is ownership. The community wants to take part in its own development, because *'that gives us security, we can solve the problems on our own'* (Makalanga SMC/PTA). If the community is making the improvements, the members feel like they are able to do it and so they can own it. Community participation helps to give the community the power to point out the problems and to deal with those problems. The chiefs of MlambeII pointed out: *'We are interested in taking part, we have to be aware what is happening, so we can be responsible for what is happening'*. The school is the property of the community, so the community should take care of the school. The community is responsible for what is happening, also if organisations come to assist. *'If any development has to take place, we should be involved because it is our own development'* (Chipande chiefs).

Communication and unity

Another returning element in the discussions about what community participation means to the participants is communication and unity. Communication in the form of coördination turned out to be an important aspect in community participation. As a member of the SMC/PTA of Chipande stated: *'Developmental work has different parts in terms of organisation in the community. We all have our own roles to play, but we work together'*. To develop the community together also means giving each other strength do to the work.

Communication between the different groups in the community turned out to be an important result of community participation. The teachers of Makalanga have the opinion that the improvement needs to be a combination between teachers and the community. Teachers should be friendly to pupils so the pupils are not afraid to go to school. They convince pupils to go to school, because it is helpful to the pupils. Thanks to community participation, parents also know that. The communication with parents is very important, so they can tell children about absenteeism and coming late. Community participation is also important for family problems and domestic issues. A cooperation between the community and the teachers is important in that respect.

Community participation also creates unity. It is helpful that the community sits together and identifies what it is that needs to be improved. Different groups within the community also have different problems, so the groups learn about problems within the entire community. The involvement of the community in the programs of the school also creates unity. The SMC/PTA of Chipande found that *'if a community shows unity, development is not only an individual thing'*.

Citizenship

Community participation was not only seen as a means to develop the school. The participants also see it as a way to develop the entire community and even a way to take part in developing the country.

Community participation to the participants is developing the country and working together. If they develop the country, they are giving more power to the people. They feel like they are development partners of the government. According to the participants, this also works the other way around. If the community helps developing the school, the government will be interested too in helping to develop the community. The chiefs of MlambeII stated: *'we want to demonstrate to people that we are development oriented and committed and attract supporters in the development activities'*. Next to that, community participation also means understanding each other and developing the culture. The participants feel like they share beliefs by working together. Another goal that was put forward by the parents of Nanjere was that if their pupils have a good learning experience, they will be good citizens of the community.

In pupils' interest

Another returning element in what community participation means to the participants, is to improve the conditions for the pupils. As the SMC/PTA of Ndalapa stated: *together we are making the base for pupils to enjoy their learning experience'*. The community wants to be part of the improvement for the pupils. They want to give hope of a future to the young kids. If the school is developed, pupils will be learning in a very friendly and conducive environment. This encourages the learning process and it will make other pupils who were at home come to school. *'Pupils that are learning in good environments can become future leaders'*, stated the Ndalapa parents. The community wants to ensure the pupils have adequate lessons and to see the pupils learning in a nearby school. The members take part in encouraging the children to go to school. The Ndalapa teachers indicated: *'sometimes our culture makes pupils leave school, with community participation we can sensitize them on the importance of education'*.

4.3 Effects of community participation in school development

According to the participants, community participation changed their school in multiple ways. This became apparent through the question 'What has changed in the school since the introduction of the LFSIP?' and other questions related to community participation in general. The following section will describe what has changed on different levels.

Changes on a materialistic level

All the schools build a classroom block during the program. Some also build a teachers office, teacher's houses or a library. The Chipande teachers indicated: *'we see there's development and there's less drop-out. That is due to the construction. We're proud of the office and of the block. The building materials are more secure'*. The schools received textbooks, notebooks, writing materials and desks. The sanitation has also improved with boreholes and safe drinking water. Sporting facilities have changed with footballs for the boys and netballs for the girls. Schools are also made more beautiful with flowers

and trees. The environment is now nice. *'We have frequent visitors so we can show our school is developing'* (MlambeII SMC/PTA). The new classroom blocks help schools to arrange activities and according to the community members, the enrolment has improved because of it.

Changes on community level

As became clear in the former section, community participation means, among others, involvement and communication. The communication that became in existence within the community because of community participation works in different ways, but it always has the same goal: it is in the pupil's interest. The chiefs of Nanjere point out that *'there is now coordination between all the community members, before, that didn't happen'*. The teachers of MlambeII also indicate that there is an improved communication between the teachers and the community. Parents now supervise the performance of pupils and how teachers do their job. Parents come to check the progress of their children and there is control in the community on the children, so pupils can not play during classes. Also, community participation works as a mechanism for monitoring absenteeism and punctuality. From many participants comes the sound that parents and teachers now work hand in hand to make sure the pupils are learning. *'There is no more conflict between learners, teachers and parents. The teachers and parents have a closer relationship. Before, they were enemies, now there is understanding'* (Makalanga teachers). There is now communication about the absence of children. Parents communicate about why the pupil was absent, there is a check-up. Teachers themselves sometimes visit parents of pupils that were absent and parents and teachers have meetings together. Parents and teachers work together now to resolve the pupils' behaviour. *'If pupils are rude to the teachers, the community members can help to check the behaviour. They can call the parents or other community members and have meetings. That can also happen when teachers are beating up pupils. Parents can discuss the corporal punishment with the teachers'* (Nanjere pupils). The SMC/PTA of Ndalapa also spoke of this: *'Community participation is also for checking behaviour through meetings with teachers. In those meetings we discuss where the teachers need corrections'*.

Other changes on community level have a lot of coherence with ownership, described in the former section about the views on community participation. Because the community members build things like a new classroomblock or new teachers houses, they have a sense of ownership. They will protect it. People know the school is theirs and so they are able to control it and handle things like safety. The entire community makes sure the school is protected.

Changes on a behavioural level

The behaviour of the teachers in all the communities has improved. They are not drunk anymore and the absenteeism is reduced. *'Teachers are managing their time now quite well'* (Chipande SMC/PTA). They come in on time, are well prepared because of the new textbooks and teach adequately. Teachers are more interested in assisting the pupils in their learning activities, now mark pupil's assignments, have

extra classes to improve the performance of the pupils and are taking part in the development of the school. *'Before, the teachers were not interested in the development of the school, because they said that they were not going to be here forever'* (MlambeII Parents). The teachers' conduct has also improved. There are no more teacher-pupil relationships and teachers that were harsh on, or abusing pupils, have changed their behaviour. The pupils of Makalanga pointed out: *'before the program, we did have corporal punishment, but not anymore'*. People in the community now know what is going on in the school and can discuss this with the PTA. Teachers with bad behaviour can either change their behaviour or be fired.

The pupils' behaviour had also changed. They don't come late anymore and there is less absenteeism and drop-out. Pupils that dropped out are coming back to school. They are interested in reading now, because they have textbooks on their own. The textbooks they received, encouraged the learners to read more books. They find good exercises in the books. That has also changed the performances of the pupils, the community member see some pupils higher educated. Also, pupils are now more cooperative. If they have to help in construction, they will. *'Teachers are not beating pupils up anymore, we now respect teachers. We now do the tasks teachers tell us to do. We know why we do those things: we are keeping our school clean'* (Nanjere pupils).

4.4 The view of the participants on the program activities

All the participants were asked about the use, in their opinion, of the several program activities.

SIP development

Most participants remember facilitators of ACEM that came to sensitize people to become eager to develop the school and explaining what was going to happen during the program. The parents of MlambeII stated: *'They taught us how to do things on our own and what we could ask for. There was a good coordination between the parents, chiefs, facilitators and teachers'*. The community members sat down in groups and thought of problems that needed to be dealt with. *We had to sit together. There were no teachers, so we were free to say what should be improved. Some teachers had relationships with girls, those teachers were transferred. In that meeting, it was the first time the boys heard about it* (Chipande pupils). Groups discussed together how they could solve the problems and who should play what part. There were some problems in the SIP development. For example, the Makalanga parents indicated: *'not all parents were adequately educated, therefore, they had problems to understand some things. They were not told by the facilitators how to make a plan.* Also, in MlambeII there were some difficulties. According to the SMC/PTA, not all people have the same mind in a group setup, they have different views. They had to set priorities, but according to them, that was not a problem. Problems according to them, were some issues that had to do with behaviour of teachers. Some teachers were irritated that those issues were exposed. According to the teachers, some village heads (chiefs) did not

want to take part in the development, but after sensitizing, they did. The pupils indicated that some people were not respecting the ideas of the others. Some were laughing at the ideas of others. The chiefs experienced no difficulties. There were discussions before about what needed to be done according to them. In Makalanga, there were also some problems. *‘There were so many people with different ideas about what should be done. Everyone looked at it from his own view. We had to set priorities. There was a shortage of teachers, because there were no houses, but if we built another classroom block, we had room for more pupils. There were some arguments, but finally we had an agreement on the classroom block. Also, some parents could not come to the development of the plan, because of the distance they live from the school’* (Makalanga teachers).

Orientation on school management and resource mobilisation

All the SMC’s/PTA’s joined an orientation on school management and resource mobilisation where, as described in the logic model, the knowledge and skills of the members were increased in order to enhance the implementation of the LFSIP. All the members of this group of all the schools agree on the fact that they benefited a lot of this orientation. They learned how to manage the resources they receive, how to take full accountability for the funds and how to come up with things on their own. They also learned that it is the responsibility of the SMC to see how the school is running, to look around during class time and see how teachers are teaching. The PTA is the first group with their eyes on the school. The PTA must report the problems to the SMC and together they decide how to manage. They learned how to make changes to the school, how to work together with chiefs, teachers and the community and how to supervise the work from the development. To the participants, it was an encouragement because they improved the way they work together and how often they should have meetings. *‘After the orientation, we both know our boundaries. If there are problems, we now see how we can work together. We have our meetings together, nothing is kept a secret and everything is transparent. We meet two to three times a month. Then we discuss what we want to be done and how to do it’* (Makalanga SMC/PTA). According to the participants, the cooperation was strengthened after the meeting.

Zonal gathering

The zonal gathering was intended for all community groups, however, only half of the participants joined the zonal gathering. From Ndalapa, only the teachers and the SMC/PTA attended, from MlambeII also those groups plus the chiefs. The parents of Nanjere never heard of the zonal gathering and no one from Chipande attended the zonal gathering. Some did not hear about it, some did not go because the distance was too big. According to the participants that did go to the gathering, it was important because ideas should be shared with and adopted from different schools. It was a learning experience, because problems were also shared, including the solutions to those problems. Some schools learned when it was best to put the chief in front and when to put the head teacher in front. Schools could see their own

weaknesses, because of the successes of others. Relationships were build with other schools. There were also discussions about keeping promises and do what people promised to do for the school.

Ex-change visit

The ex-change visit was intended only for the SMC/PTA and the chiefs. Half of the participants joined the ex-change visit, at some schools the visit did not happen at all. The ex-visit was a learning experience for the participants. They could see how projects in other schools were implemented and vice versa. They learned from other school what they still wanted to do and what the strenghts and weaknesses of others were.

Open day

The open day was intended for all community members. The parents of Ndalapa and Chipande did not attend the open day because they did not hear about it. Also the chiefs of Chipande stated that they were not present because they were not properly informed. To most participants, the open day was an exciting day. Pupils were reciting poems, doing drama performances and dances and at Nanjere there was a parents choir. At MlambeII there was a ceremony to decide who should get the new teachers house. *'We were proud that we managed the resources for the house well'* (Nanjere SMC/PTA). Some participants point out that this was the first time they learned and could see what had happened at the school. *'Parents decided after this day to send their children back to school, because they saw what was happening'* (Chipande SMC/PTA). *'It was a rare opportunity for the community members to express what was happening. The district commissioners and other officials were there as well. The official told us that if we were transparent, we could continue getting assistance'* (Makalanga SMC/PTA). The chief of Nanjere stated: *'it was helpful. Visitors from various organisation and the government officials came to see the development. They noticed that not all schools in Blantyre have the same structure as the one in town. Now, they can do something about it'*.

4.5 Problems within the program

According to the participants, there are several aspects of the program that did not go well or that need improvement. First of all, as already pointed out, there were several problems when developing the SIP's. Not all people have the same view on problems or priorities, some teachers were irritated their bad behaviour was exposed and some parents were not adequately educated to understand the program. Another problem that already came forward implicitly, was a consistent lack of communication. A lot of community members were often not informed properly about certain activities or did not join for another reason. The Makalanga parents stated: *'a lot of parents were not informed. They didn't know what was happening and so they didn't know how to be responsible for the improvements'*. The teachers of Chipande pointed out that they were not aware of some meetings. *'When having the meetings, not only*

the head teacher should be there, but more teachers. We didn't know about for example the zonal gathering. More people should hear about that'. The chiefs of Chipande also pointed out this problem and came up with a solution: *'groups didn't know what the other groups were doing. The director should bring everyone together before an activity. If there's no coordination, the other groups don't know what's happening and they may feel they don't take part. Each group should also know what is expected of them'*. Also, the SMC/PTA of Makalanga pointed out that some parents did not come to the first meeting because they live too far away. The consequence of this was that those parents were also not informed about the other meetings.

When the participants were asked about what more they had to say about the program, a lot of materialistic wishes for the development of the school emerged. Next to that, request were made for the continuation of the program and for a higher amount of activities. For example the Nanjere teachers found that open days should be held once a term and the Ndalapa parents were happy with this research because it reminded them of some problems they had forgotten.

Other problems within the program had to do with the management of materials and building. At Ndalapa, MlambeII, Makalanga, the participants talked of funding shortages, what delayed the building. The participants complained about the impossible time constraints that were imposed for the building and that that did not happen in concert. Also, the participants of Chipande asked for more consultation when talking about the buying of learning- and other materials. The people of ACEM bought it all themselves and at once. Chipande could not store these materials and were worried about security. Also, the SMC/PTA of Chipande pointed out that they could get all those materials cheaper if they could have bought them themselves and that when the plans for buying materials would have been made in concert, there would be no problems.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In this research, the Basic Education Support Program (BESP) is evaluated and an outline is provided of community participation in the south of Malawi. The accent of the BESP lies on increasing community participation in creating learner friendly schools. Since the community and its members are the 'instrument' and starting point in the BESP to create learner friendly schools, their attitudes towards the project were evaluated. The program description with the logic model, together with the theoretical framework formed the base for the research focus and the research questions. The main research question is *'What is the Malawian perspective on the use of community participation in the establishment of learner friendly schools?'*. The three sub questions are:

- What do Malawians understand by the term 'community participation'?
- Which elements in the program does the community itself experience as important for community participation in school improvement?

- Are there any challenges that are faced when invoking community participation in school improvement?

The research was conducted in five communities in the south of Malawi that joined the BESP. All of these communities consist of five groups, knowing the chiefs, the School Management Committee (SMC) together with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the teachers, the parents, and the pupils. With each group of each community, a focus group was held where discussions about the questioning route took place. These discussions were recorded, worked out and analysed in the qualitative analysis program MAXQDA. The findings are succinctly displayed below in Table 5, which is a new logic model where the program activities are displayed in combination with the questions in research, the opinions of the participants and the effects on the program.

Table 5
New Logic Model with the Views of the Participants

Programme Part	Questions	Views
Introductory question	- What has changed in the school since the introduction of the LFSIP?	- There were changes on materialistic level, such as school blocks, teacher's houses, borehole and learning materials. Other changes were on community level, those were changes such as more communication within the community and a sense of ownership for the development. The third kind of changes were on behavioural level. The teachers as well as the pupils show improved behaviour.
Developing Learner Friendly Schools Improvement Plans (LFSIPs)	- What does the community understand by the term learner friendly schools? - What does the community think of community participation? - What does the community think about the development of the SIP?	- A school should have adequate materialistic things such as a school block, teacher's houses and learning materials. Also, the atmosphere in the school should be good and the teachers' and pupils' conduct should be good. - Community participation is necessary to take full responsibility for the own development. It is first of all a responsibility of a materialistic contribution where everyone has his or her own role and works together. Other important elements are that all development is in the pupils' interest, ownership is important, communication and unity and citizenship. - Facilitators of ACEM came to sensitize people to become eager to develop the school and explaining what was going to happen during the program. The members sat together to point out problems and come up with solutions. Not everyone always had the same mind and not everyone could join because the distance to the school was too big.
Conducting orientations on School Management and resource mobilisation	- What do the SMC and PTA think of the orientation meeting?	- To all participants, this was very usefull. They learned how to manage resources, how to take full accountability for the funds, what their responsibilities are, to check how the school is running, how to manage the school, how to make changes to the school, how to work together with chiefs, teachers and the community and how to supervise the work from the development. To the participants, it was an encouragement because they improved the way they work together.
A zonal gathering on Community Initiatives in creation of Learner friendly schools	- What do the community members think of the zonal gathering?	A lot of people who were supposed to attend, did not attend. Some because they never heard of the gathering and some for other reasons. For the participants that did attend, it was a learning experience. Problems were shared, including the solutions to those problems. Relationships were build with other schools. There were also discussions about keeping promises and do what people promised to do for the school.
Organizing exchange visits	- What do the SMC/PTA and chiefs think of the exchange visit?	Only half of the people who were supposed to be at the visit attended. The ex-visit was a learning experience for the participants. They could see how projects in other schools were implemented and vice versa. They learned from other school what they still wanted to do and what the strenghts and weaknesses of others were.
Organizing open days	- What do the community members think of the	Some people who were supposed to be there, were not there because they never heard about the open day. To the participants it was an exciting day,

open day?

because they could share the development that was happening. Pupils gave all sorts of performances and officials were present to see the development. For some, it was a ceremony to hand over the new teacher's house. A request was made to have more open days.

The new logic model illustrates in short the view of the participants on all the activities in the program, the view on community participation in creating learner friendly schools, and the aspects of the program that require improvement.

The sub questions of this research will now be discussed and the reciprocation of the main research question will follow. The first sub question in this research is 'what do Malawians understand by the term 'community participation?'. In the theoretical framework a lot of literature on community participation is discussed. Pros and cons on the use of community participation were provided and emphasis was put on the importance of how community participation was implemented in a program. For the participants, community participation means to take responsibility for the development of the school, but also for the development of the entire community and the country. Materialistic contributions are a big part of community participation. Notable is that for a big group of people, it is the only use of community participation. This group mainly consists of parents and pupils. Especially the chiefs, the SMC/PTA, and the teachers also see community participation as a form of communicating within the community, creating unity and a sense of ownership and citizenship. Especially these last elements are evidence for community participation being bigger than only a means to create learner friendly schools. The second sub question is 'which elements in the program does the community itself experience as important for community participation in school improvement?'. A few elements or prerequisites for effective community participation already became evident in the theoretical framework. The participants pointed out what elements in the program were important to them and why they were. The sensitization from ACEM about the use of community participation was a learning experience to the participants. They learned what they could expect from the program and how they could work together to accomplish their goals. The SMC/PTA benefited a lot from the orientation on school management and resource mobilisation. As most important benefits they pointed out the way they learned to work together and how to manage the school adequately. The zonal gathering and the open day had the same use for the participants. Both activities were seen as an opportunity to share problems with other schools and to learn from the project implementation of other schools. The open day was an exciting day for the participants for different reasons, because each school gave their own meaning to the open day. It functioned as an opening ceremony for some of the new buildings, as a performance day for the pupils or as a day to show officials the development of the school. The only comment the participants had on the elements included in the program was that some activities, such as an open day, could be held more often to remind them of the problems that still need attention and to celebrate the development in the community.

The third sub question is ‘are there any challenges that are faced when invoking community participation in school improvement?’. Several problems were pointed out by the participants about community participation in general or within the program. Not every participant saw community participation as a good way to establish learner friendly schools. By a few participants it was seen as a heavy burden on top of their difficult lives. They would rather see organisations do the work for them, just as some researchers have argued in the theoretical framework. However, these participants were only a few parents and one or two pupils. As already mentioned, a lot of these participants only saw community participation as a materialistic contribution. This, while other participants also saw community participation as a means for better communication within the community or as a path to a bigger sense of ownership. Another problem that was found during this research, is that a lot of participants did not show up at certain activities. Apart from some people not showing up because of the distance or another obligation, the main reason for this was that they did not know about the activity. Participants that were not present at the first meeting, did not know the agenda for the rest of the program. Some people never heard about the program or the development until the open day.

Through these sub questions, the main research question can be answered, which is ‘what is the Malawian perspective on the use of community participation in the establishment of learner friendly schools?’. The participants in this research almost all agree on community participation being a good, if not the only, way to develop the school, the community and some argue even the county. The schools of the participants have improved in numerous ways, from working with adequate learning materials to the disappearance of teacher-pupil relationships. As good as community participation is as a base for creating learner friendly schools, the program can use some adjustments.

Recommendations

During the research, issues emerged that require further attention. First, two recommendations are made for further program development. Secondly, recommendations are made for further research in the field of community participation.

The third sub question paid attention to problematic issues within the program that serve directly as recommendations for further program development. The communication to the community members in the south of Malawi is via the chiefs or the headmaster. When implementing a program in a community, these are the people that can bring the community together. A recommendation is to map the structures of a community before implementing a program and sensitize the chiefs and the headmaster on the importance and on the course of the program. In this way, the program facilitators as well as the chiefs and headmaster can make sure the target groups are present with every activity.

Because the program is not only meant for the target groups, but for the entire community, it is important to have an adequate way for communicating the program activities to the rest of the community and not have community members notice the development at the end of the program at the

open day. A recommendation is to organise more open days during the program, but also one at the beginning of the program. When the LFSIP is made by the target group, an attractive day can make sure a lot of community member come to school to see the start of the development.

An explorative research on the manners of communication and the making of appointments within communities in sub-Saharan Africa could contribute a great deal to the effective implementation of community participation in school development. Also, a trial study on communication and gatherings could serve this goal.

Restrictions

Several issues have worked in detriment of this research. The first of these is that a translator was necessary in all focus groups, except those of the teachers. An intermediary means more room for interpretation than direct contact between the researcher and the participants does. The second of these is the social desirability that could have played a role in the discussions of the participants. Being in a group of peers and talking in front of a member of the funding organisation of the program, can yield other remarks than one really has in mind. This effect is reduced as much as possible by comforting the participants before the focus groups started. The third issue has to do with the variation of the participants within the focus groups. Because of the sometimes semi-organised ways in Malawi, it has occurred that there were some people in the focus group that did not attend the program or only several parts of it. Notwithstanding that these people sometimes certainly made useful contributions to the research, it does affect the reliability of this research.

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