Closing the School Attendance Gap in Rural Communities in Nigeria: School Leadership and Multi-actor Approach in Community Engagement

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that education is paramount to national transformation and to ending the decades long humanitarian crisis in Nigeria and other regions of Africa. Children without access to school education face a future without hope, where their potential will remain unfulfilled (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, for Nigeria to make progress the high number of children not engaging with education or leaving school before developing literacy skills in rural areas of Nigeria needs to be addressed. Although in recent times, the Nigerian government has attempted to explore the challenges associated with non-attendance, these efforts did not translate into higher numbers of children attending school. Whereas the government is often looked upon to address this issue, there has been limited focus on the important part that rural school leaders in Nigeria can play in addressing this challenge. Arguing for the importance of rural school leaders in building effective engagements with their communities, this paper proposes a multi-actor approach as a model they could use to both engage communities in tackling the challenges and diminish school attrition rates.

Keywords: School Leadership; Multi-actor Approach; Rurality; School Attendance; Attendance Gap; Community Engagement.

1. Introduction

Education is perceived as an instrument for national transformation (Anazia, 2019) and therefore, the level of progress made by a country (be it economic, social, or even political) is highly dependent on the importance it places on its education. Through investing in education complex inequalities such as poverty, conflicts, health problems, underdevelopment, over/under population size (mortality rates) and sustainability can be addressed (Haruna & Liman, 2015). As a basic human right (Damon, Glewwe & Wisniewski et al., 2016) education empowers people by developing their ability to make informed decisions about the structures that shape their lives resulting in an added sense of belonging and purpose. Education also deepens people’s critical thinking abilities contributing to enhanced reflection regarding their cultural beliefs systems, values, attitudes and leads to skill development and access to more opportunities to changing own and others’ lives for the better (Fazilah, Zaharah & Azizah et al., 2012). These reasons provide a solid rationale for the importance of establishing national policies on education aimed at ensuring that every citizen can maximise their potential through education provided at its highest level of quality.

Indeed, countries all over the world have recognised the importance of education in promoting sustainable growth and development with governments making conscious and continuous efforts to place education at the heart of national...
development plans and social policy. Even though the benefits of education are undeniable, the degree to which these benefits materialise depends on the successful implementation of a well-structured national framework on education which considers not only learners’ engagement in learning, progression and attainment, but also avails of robust evaluation procedures of both teachers and their students. In contrast to developed countries, such as the United Kingdom, developing countries have not had the same level of success regarding the establishment and implementation of robust education policies aimed at ensuring access to quality and compulsory education. This was mostly due to national difficulties caused by ongoing conflicts, lack of political will and issues of corruption thereby culminating in stilled progress in almost every sphere of national life. The global mandate to achieve goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pertaining to ensuring access to equitable and inclusive education by 2030 for all developing countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, demands that governments demonstrate commitment towards improving the quality of their education and providing opportunities for all their citizens to acquire at least basic education.

Nigeria, as a Sub-Saharan Africa country, has not fully harnessed the full range of advantages associated with education. Although there has been a quantitative increase in the number of schools since gaining independence in 1960, attrition rates remain high and many children continue to leave school with limited or non-existent literacy skills. For example, Nigeria currently has the highest number of dropouts and out-of-school children. According to UNICEF (2013), there are 10.5 million children without formal education and one in every five of the world’s uneducated children reside in Nigeria. The majority of these children live in rural areas. In comparison to children, a study conducted by the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics [NBC] (2010) found adult literacy rates in rural areas were 49.5 percent compared to urban centres of 73.6 percent. This educational disparity is associated with the high rate of rural poverty, increase in social vices (e.g. armed conflict, drugs and alcohol) and other socio-economic challenges facing the country today (e.g. unemployment, population explosion and food insecurity). The findings (ibid.) also revealed that among children aged between 6-14 years, rural areas had 82.1 percent drop-out rate compared to urban centres with only 17.9 percent drop-out rate which is attributed partly to the high level of poverty, different perceptions on the importance of education and cultural beliefs. Unfortunately, the high rate of school dropout in rural communities leads to children not reaching their full potential regarding their performance on key academic areas. This diminishes their ability to lift themselves out of poverty and hinders their contribution as citizens to the development of the country (Haruna et al., 2015; Nworgu & Nworgu, 2013).

The education outlook in rural communities calls for urgent attention in order to meet the United Nations’ mandate for all children to be given basic education by 2030. While the government has a major role to play in achieving this mandate, those who lead schools also have contributory responsibility. Plessis (2017) asserts that the practices of leaders in rural schools have received little interest from the academic community which creates a significant knowledge gap. This paper, therefore, seeks to contribute to making a case for school leaders in public rural schools to intensify engagements with their communities in improving school attendance rates.

2. School Attendance and Attendance Gap

Regular school attendance is linked to higher educational attainment and it ensures that learning outcomes are maximised from the period of engagement in compulsory education (Watters, 2012). Even so, absenteeism remains a global issue (Wang & Shoji, 2019) and is defined as a chronic problem for cases where learners “miss 10 percent or more of the school year” (Attendance Works, 2015, p. 5). Demonstrating the widespread scale of this issue across developed countries, Malcolm, Wilson and Davidson, et al (2003, p. 1) note that “the issue of school attendance is currently the focus of intense activity in schools and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in England”. Similarly, Childs and Grooms (2018, p. 1) report figures from the United States of America Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights [OCR] (2017) which puts the number of children “chronically absent during the 2013 - 2014 school year as 6.7 million”.

Globally, chronic absenteeism is predominantly associated with low-income households (Anderson, 2016) and the majority of these families are residing in rural areas, similar to the Nigerian families featured in this paper. Rurality, as a stand-alone challenge, can pose a multiplicity of barriers to accessing education, such as distance from school, low socio-economic status of parents, cultural and religious practices in favour of boys, parental level of education and inadequate learning facilities (Kazeem, Jensen & Stokes, 2010; Nwogu, 2015; Irvin, Byun & Meece et al., 2012; Bolaji, Campbell-Evans & Gray, 2019). A brief overview of specific barriers and educational challenges in the Nigerian rural context is provided later (see the section entitled Challenges facing rural education in Nigeria). As regular school attendance is linked to higher educational attainment, identifying and addressing barriers to accessing education seems to be the logical steps to prevent the short and long-term consequences of absenteeism (Kearney et al., 2019).

3. The Concept of Rurality and Rurality in Nigeria

Rurality, as a concept, is difficult to define. This difficulty is made even more complex when adding the stereotypical views of rurality that people tend to have based on their experiences of geographical spaces (Hart, Larson & Lishner, 2005). Chigbu (2013, p. 815) defines rurality “as a condition of place-based homeliness shared by people with a common
ancestry or heritage and who inhabit traditionally, culturally defined areas or places statutorily recognised to be rural”. This definition emphasises the importance of considering specific statutory requirements for recognising a place as rural and accepting that such requirements may be different across contexts. Indeed, it is the need for considering the specificity of each context, that makes rurality a complex term to define.

Specifically, in Nigeria, in a 21st-century world driven by technological innovations, knowledge explosion and rapid development, not much has changed with regards to development since gaining independence in 1960, and even more worrisome is the state of rural areas, as compared with urban contexts. Considering that Nigeria is predominantly rural (Madu, 2010), as about 70 percent of its population live in rural areas (NBC, 2010), the general picture of the country is one of underdevelopment (Ekong & Onye, 2016). Balfour, Mitchell, and Moletsane (2008, p. 98) assert that while it cannot be argued that urban contexts are free of the challenges found in rural environments, the defining characteristics of rurality is “its intensity”.

Rural life in the country is characterised by increased poverty, gross infrastructural deficits, unemployment, high rate of illiteracy (Awujobi, 2014; Ukpere & Otto, 2014) and a growing rural-urban drift whereby people seek to relocate to areas offering better living conditions (Ajaero & Onokala, 2013). The nature of rural life is such that it is made up of a large number of people without sustainable means of livelihoods. People in rural areas depend heavily on primary production (such as farming and craft) and trading as means of material subsistence. Although most people are farmers, their productivity is very low. Adding to their lack of ability to create sustainable livelihoods is an absence of basic literacy skills, which prevents them from accessing modern farming techniques that would reduce the time spent on agricultural activities and consequently improve productivity.

Given this picture, it is difficult to believe that Nigeria is one of the richest countries in Africa, but it is, due to its large mineral deposits. The challenges mentioned above are a result of long-term widespread government neglect of rural areas (Rotimi, 2016) as demonstrated by the various rural development programmes, which have been abandoned over the years (Ekong & Onye, 2016). While the government is reliant on the rural economy for wealth, delivering such wealth requires addressing educational and other developmental issues in rural communities. It is only by doing so that rapid growth and development of the country can be materialised.

4. Challenges Facing Rural Education in Nigeria

Although education in Nigeria is generally characterised by many challenges, rural areas are more affected than urban areas (Isa, Bashayi & Umar et al., 2019). Some of the challenges faced by rural communities in Nigeria are further expanded upon below.

4.1. Funding

Budgetary allocation to the education sector by the central government has been very poor over the years. The total federal allocation to education is below 10 percent of the total annual budget (Ubogu & Money, 2018). One would expect a country desirous of economic development would be keen to allocate more funds towards the provision of educational programmes aligned with gold standard practices modelled from other countries around the globe. Government officials and politicians keep making strong statements about the importance of education to national transformation and yet, continue to pay lip-service to the sector. The insufficient allocation of funds to schools has been proven to have a significant impact on the performance of students (Nwite, 2016). Abamba (2008) states those who can afford it, such as Nigerian Government officials, send their children to schools abroad as the current implementation of educational programmes are wholly lacking and ineffectively managed by the central government in Nigeria. This perpetuates a situation where those in power, although aware of the scale of the problem, maybe less likely of understanding its true impact at a human and personal level, and therefore, solving the situation may not be an immediate priority for them in terms of ensuring adequate funding of education.

4.2. Cultural Attitude Towards Education and Economic Priority

The provision of literacy programmes in rural areas are additionally affected by intergenerational economic priority and the fact that formal education requires a long-time commitment with no immediate payoff. Indeed, being educated without the worry of how the family will feed themselves is a privilege and in such eventuality, parents may have no choice rather than being seen to tolerate absences as children are put to work to support the family. Additionally, some families or children themselves would rather prefer to learn a trade than attend school-based education, due to a mindset that those who are school educated might not necessarily be able to achieve a better life than them (Abamba, 2008). Given the complexity involved in regards to family survival and contextual cultural attitudes towards education and status, parents may be inclined to tolerate their children being absent from school without authorisation and instead, have them work so that they can make financial contributions to the family (Ewa, 2015), by contrast to wealthier families. The economic pursuit at the expense of education is very common in the South-Eastern part of the country where young boys/men are placing the pursuit of money/wealth above the acquisition of education. Some of them are enticed by their peers in cities and abroad to travel to the villages to flaunt their wealth. In the core northern part of the country, some parents are reluctant to
send their daughters to school due to cultural and religious reasons (Nwogu, 2015). This cultural practice is also seen in some homes in Southern Nigeria as people still hold on to the old traditional values that women’s roles are limited to child bearing and doing domestic chores for their future husbands (Nwogu, 2015) and such practice is prevalent in rural communities (Kazeem et al., 2010).

4.3. A Paucity of Learning Facilities

Many learning facilities and schools in rural areas are not conducive of appropriate teaching and learning. Most are very old, poorly built, and in many instances have damaged roofs and walls; libraries are inexistnet and frequently, resources such as chairs and tables are insufficient to accommodate all learners (Rotimi, 2016). In some schools, students sit on the floor and some receive classes in the open space under a tree. The pitiable state of school buildings in rural areas is one that calls for urgent measures if pupils are to be encouraged to go to school. Contributing to difficult maintenance of the facilities is the fact that many of these schools are not secured, and some serve as hideouts for those partaking in criminal activity particularly during the holidays. This situation is in stark contrast with urban schools, several of which even have “surplus facilities”, and this is itself evidence of the failure of appropriate and fit-for-purpose educational planning in the country (Bolaji, Campbell-Evans & Gray, 2019, p. 13).

4.4. Scarcity of Teachers

Teachers are a major contributing factor for learners to achieve a high standard of education (Owusu-Acheampong & Williams, 2015). However, there is a scarcity of teachers in rural areas in Nigeria where some schools do not have teachers for some subjects in the curriculum. The dearth of teachers and their reluctance to teach in rural schools is partly motivated by the poor living conditions of the rural areas, causing many of those placed into teaching in rural schools to seek transfer to urban schools. Unavailability of basic amenities such as: electricity, potable water, good road networks, and appropriate healthcare services takes a heavy toll on rural education leaving most teachers unwilling to teach in rural communities. Quality education cannot thrive in an environment where basic social amenities are lacking. Regarding the state of rural roads, Haruna and Liman (2015) note that the unavailability of good road networks in villages has cut them off from urban and semi-urban centres which negate educational, economic and social development of these communities. Rotimi (2016) notes that the shortage of teachers in rural schools gives rise to a situation where a teacher is saddled to teach two or more subjects, even outside their area of specialisation, adding even more pressure to an already highly complex life situation.

4.5. A High Rate of Rural Poverty

The poverty outlook of Nigeria has made it overtake India as the country with the highest number of extremely poor people according to the 2018 projection of the Brookings Institute (Kharas, Hamel & Hofer, 2018) and thus, many parents are unable to adequately cater for the education of their children (Ikebude, Modebelu & Okafor, 2013). The World Bank Report (1996) reveals that 72 percent of the depth of poverty in the country is accounted for by rural areas (Olagunju, Ololade & Ayinde et al., 2012) and this figure has not changed since. The high rate of poverty in rural communities is partly responsible for the high number of absentee children. Most parents cannot afford to buy books, school uniform, and other school materials for their children even when basic education is free. The level of poverty is such that often leaves families with no option rather than enrolling children in paid work. Therefore, many children are seen during school hours hawking, farming, doing an apprenticeship, acting as bus conductors in commercial vehicles or in search of recyclable materials to sell (Abamba, 2008).

4.6. Parental Educational Background

The academic background of parents has been shown to affect the education of their children and in the case of rural communities, it has been appointed as one of the factors responsible for students’ school dropout (Abotsi, Yaganumah & Obeng, 2018). Parents with little or no formal education may struggle to meet the demands of the education system including reinforcing classroom learning at home in the evenings and given that the level of education can be a determinant of economic power, parents may not be able to support their children to attend school, even if they wish to do so.

5. Rural School Leaders as Agents of Change

Leading schools in rural communities has its challenges and requires a different leadership approach compared to urban schools (Plessis, 2017). Preston and Barnes (2017, p. 10) argue that one of the attributes of a successful rural school leader is “the ability to lead change” and they define an agent of change as “a person who, intentionally or unintentionally, supports and accelerates educational, social, cultural, and/or behaviour change in an organization”. A change agent understands the process of change and does not commit to their own ideas alone but also seeks the commitment of others who may be opposed to their ideas (Fullan, 2002).

As a change agent, a rural school leader has a clear understanding of the peculiarity of their school and the community and so, they develop deep commitment towards the transformation of the school by building a strong system within the school and in their communities. As an agent for change, the school leader shows genuine concern for the success of their students and the educational needs of the community. This is because school leaders are recognised
globally to be instruments for the transformation of the lives of individuals and increasing societal prospects (Miller, Gaynor & Powell et al., 2019). Fullan (2002) sees change leaders as leaders who are committed to cultural change and thus, they lead with a moral purpose. In doing so, they show concern towards closing achievement gaps between students and between schools (Fullan, 2002). With the rapid technological and economic advancements of the 21st century, a change leader sees the educational needs of children in the community so that they can fit into the changing scheme of things and pursue their dreams in a wider knowledge society. The purpose of schools is to drive change and change can only be effective when parental input and that of the wider community are sought (Miller et al., 2019).

6. Community Engagement

The primary purpose of a school is to cater for the educational needs of its immediate environment, a purpose which can only be achieved through collaborative community engagement. Community engagement is essential within educational leadership (Gelsthorpe, 2003) and has become a potent tool for addressing various issues facing society, including challenges in education. McAlister (2013) asserts that research evidence has shown that engaging parents and the community leads to improvement of schools in terms of reform policies. She laments that despite this evidence, many schools still find it difficult to build and sustain broad engagement with the community to achieve common goals. The school is an integral part of the community where it is situated and cannot be seen or considered as separated from the community or communities it serves (Nakpodia, 2013).

By working together, school and communities can identify problems and collectively tackle them for the benefit of the school, students, community, and the wider society. Childs and Grooms (2018) argue that improvement of educational outcomes can be achieved through establishing collaborative work between the school and community stakeholders and this was shown to be an effective strategy in reducing student absenteeism. Working with local communities provides the community with a sense of ownership and responsibility, whereby they see themselves as partners and critical stakeholders of the school and therefore share and help co-create the vision, mission, and goals of the school. Through community-based activities, teachers learn more about the people of the community, their values, culture, needs, history, resources, and various interest groups (Ejie, 2005). This knowledge helps to tailor teaching to the learning community of the child, and in turn, this makes learning more meaningful, consequently raising the chances of improved school performance (Ejie, 2005).

Sharma, Burnette and Bhattacharya et al. (2016) outlined the benefits of community engagement or participation as follows:

- It helps in identifying local education issues and developing strategies for solving problems such as access, retention, and educational quality.
- It ensures the relevance of the school curriculum.
- It serves as a mechanism for monitoring the process and outcomes of education at different levels.
- It serves as an avenue for advocating and mobilising resources in resource-constrained schools.

Considering the scarcity of learning facilities in rural schools, establishing good working relationships with the communities can help to compensate for the negligence of the government in the provision of learning facilities through the mobilisation of resources. Examples are provided in Ejie (2005) reports which demonstrate how communities have been actively involved in raising funding for new school buildings and provision of learning facilities in Nigeria. A popular proverb in Nigeria states that raising a child takes a village (Nakpodia, 2013) and this has continued to resonate in the minds of proponents of school-community relationships or engagement. Ejie (2005, p. 47) regrets that schools have become isolated from their communities as children “prefer to do their work quietly with minimal interference from parents and other community members”, but notes that parents, community, individuals and interest groups are interested in getting more actively involved in the activities of schools. A school cannot do the job of educating its pupils successfully without receiving input from these key stakeholders.

The relationship existing between schools and communities is described as a social capital involving the building of networks, trust, communication, engagements, and interconnections (West-Burnham, 2003). According to Bourdieu (1986), who developed the concept of ‘Social Capital’, the relationships formed through social capital “may exist only in practical state, in material and/or symbolic exchanges which help to maintain them” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). Through social capital, societal problems can be resolved including challenges facing education (West-Burnham, 2003). Neil (2011) found that a school which promoted social capital in the neighbourhood had a clear aspirational vision and saw community empowerment as a way of promoting the success of pupils and families. “They encouraged community leadership and decision-making, often through informal learning approaches, and truly became ‘hubs of the community’, facilitating community development and promoting community cohesion” (Neil, 2011, p. 3). By investing in social capital, a school fosters interconnectedness among members of the community as they can put their heads together in resolving issues affecting the education of their children. For instance, the Parents Teachers’ Association (PTA), which is a mechanism for promoting social capital, provides parents with an opportunity to collectively make decisions and reach agreements on education programmes and policies which
they see as appropriate for the educational development of their communities. These gatherings build trust, foster relationships, raise expectations and improve bonds existing between community members and the school.

It is argued by Johns, Kilpatrick and Falk et al. (2000) that a decline in social capital between rural schools and their communities encourages an increased number of student dropout. Although Bauch (2001) notes that there has been a long debate about the relationship between social capital and schools, she believes that where there is no economic and human capital, poor rural schools can thrive by establishing strong ties with their communities. In a study conducted by Watson, Wright and Allen et al. (2017, p. 142) in rural areas of Tasmania, Australia, they concluded that the community, social and business leaders can play key roles in building social capital, advocate for their local schools and serve as rich sources of information and advice to schools. Through collective advocacy, these stakeholders can influence and lobby the government to increase support and funding of their local schools.

For community engagement initiatives to have a far-reaching impact, the use of multi-actor approach is hereby proposed. In this article the term multi-actors refers to parents, students, traditional rulers, opinion leaders, group leaders, local groups and businesses, and others. Channels of engagement should be developed such as Parents’ Teachers Association (PTA), village/palace meetings, visits, and others. Decisions reached during these consultations and meetings should be factored into the school’s activities for reforms and improvements.

7. Multi-actor Stakeholders

These stakeholders are represented diagrammatically in Figure 1 and are discussed further below.

![Figure 1: Multi-actor approach towards community engagement](image)

7.1. Parents and Guardians

The role of parents and guardians to the success of schools has long been recognised by research (see Lara & Saracostti, 2019). By being engaged in the activities of the school, parents and guardians understand more about the challenges encountered by students and the problems faced by their schools. Some children do not disclose issues to parents at home, so a close tie with the school bridges the communication gaps. Parents can be involved in the school through attending school functions, visiting the child’s classroom, sharing expertise or experience with the class through guest speaking, taking on leadership roles in the school and participating in decision-making processes (LaRocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011). Bhengu and Svosve (2019) report how parents partnered with rural school leaders in Zimbabwe to solicit support from the government for the schools.

7.2. Students and Students’ Representatives

The active involvement of students and their representatives in school activities is crucial. This is particularly important in the decision-making of the school, helping to promote students’ rights and influencing issues that affect students in the school. Neil (2011, p. 20) asserts that good schools consider the student voice, which creates a sense of responsibility “that it is their school and their community”. Students are in a good position to identify “what is working” and “what is not working” in the school. Some of the activities of the school could contribute to students’ poor attitude towards schools and schooling. For instance, the rate of psychological and physical abuse of students leads to a large reduction in school attendance (Ewa, 2015). Also, corporal punishment and poor attitude of teachers have been reported as factors responsible for students’ dropout (Abotsi, Yaganumah & Obeng, 2018). Through the voice of these pupils, schools can reflect on their practices. By engaging students, they become the voice of the school in the wider community and can collectively work towards influencing other actors to support in transforming their schools and encouraging their peers who are not dedicated to schooling to change their attitude.

7.3. Local Groups and Businesses

Local groups in rural communities comprise of groups and associations formed by men, women, market traders, farmers, youths, artisans, among others. Rural schools have much to gain by synergising with these groups and local businesses as this can potentially lead to both human and material resources being mobilised for school projects. Also, by working with these local groups, schools can have a greater influence on parents since most parents and guardians are either leaders or members of one or more of these groups. These groups can act as influencers on other actors and can lobby the government regarding issues of education in their communities.
7.4. Traditional Rulers and Opinion Leaders

A defining feature of Nigerian society is the respect granted by its people to traditional institutions. Traditional rulers should be key stakeholders in matters of education in their communities by virtue of their position. Their position has been awarded through government recognition. Therefore, they are in proximity to politicians and government officials. Rural school leaders should leverage this by engaging traditional rulers more actively in educational policy development and in influencing government policies in favour of their schools. Traditional rulers and opinion leaders can have a significant influence on parents and others in the communities in addressing issues pertaining to schools/education in their communities. Bhengu and Svosve (2019, p. 26) report how rural schools in Zimbabwe strategically engaged traditional leaders in soliciting support from parents. This evidenced how such leaders, also known locally as ‘chiefs’ have significant power and influence on their people.

8. Steps in Community Engagement

The suggested multi-actor approach towards community engagement is based on four main steps: planning, engagement, action and evaluation (for a concise summary of each step see Table 1).

8.1. Planning

The articulation of activities and issues that will characterise the type of multi-actor engagement is the first step to help in clearly setting out the aims to be achieved, side-by-side to considering needed resources (e.g. time, energy, venue and materials). It is through efficient planning that the school can acquire clarity on who to engage, how to engage and what should be done at every engagement. Johns, Kilpatrick and Falk et al. (2000) assert that effective partnership between schools and communities do not happen haphazardly as it requires careful planning and strong commitments from all those involved (i.e. participants and leaders of the initiative). Therefore, developing a plan that will facilitate effective lines of communication and dealing with differences that may arise is necessary (Sanders, 2003).

8.2. Engagement

Engagement could involve different approaches. These approaches include consultations, meetings, visits, invitations to school activities, participation in community activities such as cultural and farming events, community services such as counselling, sports, and enlightenment campaigns, access to the use of some of the school’s facilities by the community (e.g. halls for meetings, football pitch for sports), youth empowerment such as agricultural initiatives and using the community as curriculum centres (Johns, Kilpatrick & Falk et al., 2000). Regarding the use of the community as curriculum centres, Bauch (2001) notes the communities where rural schools are located serve as laboratories where learning can take place. “Historical sites, local oral history, geographical formations, wilderness and wildlife experiences, land cultivation and development, forestry, and numerous community activities and events provide authentic learning experiences for students and motivate them to become interested in their communities” (Bauch 2001, p. 216).

Learning should actively engage students with their communities as this will enrich their learning experiences. Furthermore, Bhengu and Svosve (2019) demonstrate how the partnership between rural schools and their communities are helping in improving curriculum delivery.

8.3. Action

The resolutions, or decisions reached during meetings and consultations with stakeholders need implementation. Action could necessitate the need for reforms or improvements in some areas of the school’s activities. One area of reform could be curriculum development by orienting learning to the peculiarities of the locality.

8.4. Evaluation

Evaluating the impact of the engagement processes with all involved in the process is crucial for further decision-making and for providing valuable feedback to stakeholders. Evaluation enables schools to know what has worked, what has not worked and areas needing improvement. Sanders (2003) asserts that collaboration between schools and their communities is not an event but rather, a process and thus, it is important that there should be time to evaluate and reflect on the quality of their engagements and the implementation of activities they have agreed upon.

| Table 1: Steps to multi-actor engagement |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Planning                | Outline the challenges, e.g. truancy, dropout, learning facilities, Set out aims you wish to achieve and common aims |
|                            | Workout time schedules and activities |
| 2. Engagement              | Consultations Meetings Visits Invitation and participation in school activities Community services e.g. counselling, enlightenment campaigns |
| 3. Action                  | Reflection on practices Implementation of decisions reached in meetings, consultations, Reforms Improvements |
| 4. Evaluation              | What has worked What has not worked Feedbacks to community |

It should be noted that there is no one-size-fits-all model or approach to community engagement. School leaders should
tailor engagement practices or approaches to suit the peculiarity of their schools and communities.

**Conclusion**

This paper has provided a brief overview of specific challenges facing rural education in Nigeria, specifically the problem of absenteeism. Throughout this paper it has been argued that rural school leaders have an important role in actively promoting community engagement. They can help tackle various of the challenges that rural education currently faces in this geographical context. A multi-actor approach was proposed while considering research evidence on the widespread benefits of establishing working partnerships between schools and various actors in the school community-based context by engaging with parents, students, traditional rulers, opinion leaders, group leaders, local groups, businesses, and others.

Moreover, four essential steps towards community engagement (i.e., planning, engagement, action, and evaluation) have been proposed with a view of supporting rural school leaders through the processes of devising, materialising and evaluating engagement and the impact of their initiatives. School leaders should have a clear understanding that the success of every education system lies partly with them and therefore, seeking the collective efforts of parents and other community members is an important step towards achieving own purpose as an educator and contributing at an even deeper level to the development of own country at various fronts. By working together with their team of school personnel in engaging the community, rural school leaders place themselves as agents of change in turning around low attendance and achievement rates and providing a valuable contribution towards accessibility of education for each pupil and delivery of high-quality learning experiences with potentially strong repercussions for teachers and students alike, at personal, professional, national and even at global levels.

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