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A REVIEW OF FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE KWEKWE DISTRICT OF ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Many countries around the world have decentralized financial management decision-making to school leaders and their communities. Decentralization is believed to equip communities with better education compared to central authorities, since decentralization aligns schools with their local educational needs and preferences. The current study sought to evaluate the availability and efficacy of documents that guide school financial management in the Kwekwe district. The study used a mixed-method research design in which qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently. Qualitative data were examined thematically, while quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to find frequencies. The study revealed that several documents guide financial management in schools. There are generally different levels of appreciation among the stakeholders on the efficacy of the documents in ensuring finances are properly managed. Most of the respondents believe that the documents available for financial management are very useful in financial management in schools. Although most of the respondents agreed that training sessions should be held for the official in school financial management, a significant proportion indicated that training sessions were rarely held. The benefits of a decentralized financial management system can only be realized if policies are well adhered to. The study recommends continuously ensuring the availability of relevant guiding policy documents and financial management training sessions. The study also recommends adopting ICT-based financial management in schools to circumvent the problem of principals moving away with the documents when there are transferred.

Keywords: School financial management, mixed methods, policy documents, centralised, decentralised.

INTRODUCTION

Financial management professionals working in both developed and developing countries' public sectors are concerned with improving financial management and budgeting (Wakiriba, Ngahu, & Wagoki, 2014). Financial management consists of all the activities that are related to obtaining

money and using the money efficiently and effectively. Van Horne and Wachowicz (2008) assert that financial management involves keeping accurate records of all financial transactions, linking the budget to the organization's strategic and operational plans, and comparing an organization's progress with the budget to make future decisions (Chukwu, Ezepeue, Ogunji, Igba, & Ngozi, 2019). Schools have a role in financial management to ensure that school finances and other resources are effectively, efficiently, economically, and transparently utilized (Ndhlovu, Sibanda, & Mathwasa, 2020). Effective financial management practices take appropriate steps to prevent the under-collection of fees, unauthorized, irregular, fruitless, and wasteful expenditure (Ndhlovu et al., 2020). Financial management also requires internal controls or checks and balances to manage risks and protect the assets of an organization. Effective financial management practices are essential in enhancing transparency, efficiency, accuracy, accountability, and achieving an organization's objectives (Phylisters, Mulwa, & Kyalo, 2018). Proper financial management helps to establish an organization's financial priorities in line with the organization's goals and objectives (Radzi, Ghani, Siraj, & Afshari, 2013). Proper financial management also ensures that an organization's expenditures are planned and controlled according to established organizational priorities as expressed in the budget (Robina, Benard, & Jack, 2018).

Many countries around the world have decentralized financial management decision making to school leaders and their communities (Urbanovič & Patapas, 2012). Proponents of decentralization claim that local stakeholders are better equipped to provide education compared to central authorities. This is because decentralization aligns schools with their local educational needs and preferences (Luboya, 2018; Meemar, Poppink, & Palmer, 2018). Decentralization empowers local communities to hold their schools accountable for providing quality education (Barrera-Osorio, Fasih, Patrinos, & Santibañez, 2009; Leer, 2016). The World Bank (2003) sees decentralization in education as a mechanism of allowing greater participation in decision making by diverse groups of people, and thus reducing administrative bottlenecks in decision making, increasing efficiency of the government, increasing responsiveness to local needs, enhancing the accountability of public institutions, improving service delivery, and allowing greater political representation.

There is, however, considerable debate on the perceived benefits of decentralizing educational management. Some scholars argue that perceived benefits are not always realized in practice (Edwards, 2019; Leer, 2016). Miron and Nelson (2002) argue based on the United States' experience that decentralization of educational services works for the benefit of a few strong groups. The central government of Indonesia has since 2001 decentralized educational governance to districts to decrease government spending on public service delivery and increase responsibilities and duties at lower levels of government. Decentralization reforms neither created accountability, nor increased participation, nor lowered costs at lower levels. Instead, the education system was marred with corruption due to a lack of transparency (Kristiansen & Pratikno, 2006).

Malaysia adopted decentralization in financial management at the public school level in early 2000 (Radzi, Ghani, Siraj, & Afshari 2013). The decentralization of financial management to schools in Malaysia has faced challenges. Most schools did not follow regulations on the documentation of

school expenses, cash savings, salary remuneration, bill payments, physical inspection of assets, and monitoring of financial records. School principals lacked the knowledge and necessary skills in school financial management. As a result, they delegated their school financial administration duties to clerks (Radzi et al., 2013).

The South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 devolved management of state-agreed funds to School Governing Bodies (SGBs) (Beyers & Mohlana, 2015). School principals and school governance bodies (SGB) in South Africa are often unaware of their responsibilities and liabilities when it comes to financial management and accountability (Ndou & de Heer Menlah, 2015; Van Rooyen, 2013). This happens despite the existence of guidelines on financial management policies and practices.

Gibton and Goldring (2001) argue that decentralization in an educational system requires a legal framework that clearly secures the interests of weak groups and also clearly defines people's authority and responsibility. They note that the decentralization process in Israel was chaotic, rough, and stormy due to a lack of proper legislation. Kristiansen and Pratikno (2006) also claim that decentralization of authority without a clear assignment of separate responsibilities reduces the quality and efficiency of public services.

Background to School Financial Management

The Education Amendment Act 2006 in Zimbabwe delegates financial management in schools to School Development Committees. Ngwenya and Maushe (2017) studies on accounting procedures within a decentralised Zimbabwean financial management school system reveal that most schools do not employ correct accounting procedures in banking registers, payment vouchers, procurement minute book, bank reconciliation statements, and end-of-year returns. This is happening despite the existence of the Zimbabwean legislation and documents to guide financial management policies and practices.

Financial management in Zimbabwean schools is highly influenced by global trends on the decentralization of financial management to schools (Masuku, 2010). Section 36 of the Education Amendment Act 2006 in Zimbabwe devolved school financial management to School Development Committees. Financial management of the public sector in Zimbabwe is bound by several regulations, namely the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No 20) Act 2013, Public Finance Management Act (Chapter 22:19), Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Act [Chapter 22:23], Education Act (Chapter 25:04), Education (School Development Committees) (Non- Government Schools) Regulations of 1992 (the Statutory Instrument 87 of 1992), Administration and finance circular minute No 6 of 1994, Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets (General) Regulations, 2018 (the Statutory Instrument 5 of 2018), Public Finance Management (Treasury Instructions), 2019 (the Statutory Instrument 144 of 2019), Public Finance Management (General) Regulations, 2019 (the Statutory Instrument 135 of 2019), and Accounting

Officers' Instructions (P70). The Financial management training manual for the non-finance education managers, the School Development Committee Handbook and School Services Fund

accounting procedures manual are also used in schools to guide financial management policies and practices.

Given the above, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What documents are available to guide financial management?
- How helpful are these documents?
- What assistance is provided to schools to understand these documents?

METHODOLOGY

A concurrent triangulation design (Creswell & Plano, 2018) was used to collect data. In the design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and were merged in the interpretation. The purpose of adopting this design was to corroborate quantitative with qualitative to enhance the validity of the findings.

Thirty clusters comprised of 56 secondary schools in rural and urban areas of the Kwekwe district constituted the population of the study. Four (13.3%) groups made up of two groups in urban areas, and two groups in rural areas were randomly selected from the intended samples of the urban and rural secondary school groups. Eight school heads, eight school deputy heads, eight senior school teachers, eight heads of departments, eight school development committee chairpersons, eight vice-chairperson and eight school treasures, one Kwekwe District schools inspector, one Kwekwe District accountant, two Midlands province internal auditors and one provincial accounting assistant were the key respondents in the study. These were targeted because of their hands-on experience in financial management policies and practices in secondary schools.

Quantitative were collected through the closed ended questions on the questionnaire, while open ended questions and face-to-face interviews collected qualitative data. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (version 27), while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. For qualitative data, we went through the interview transcripts and created an initial list of codes. After this, we conducted a qualitative content analysis and underlined the emerging themes such as availability of documents, usefulness of the documents etc. This procedure was repeated across the participants to identify shared themes and patterns. Through this step by step analysis, we were able to highlight the ways the study participants conceptualised the school financial management. Data collection and analysis are shown schematically in figure 1.

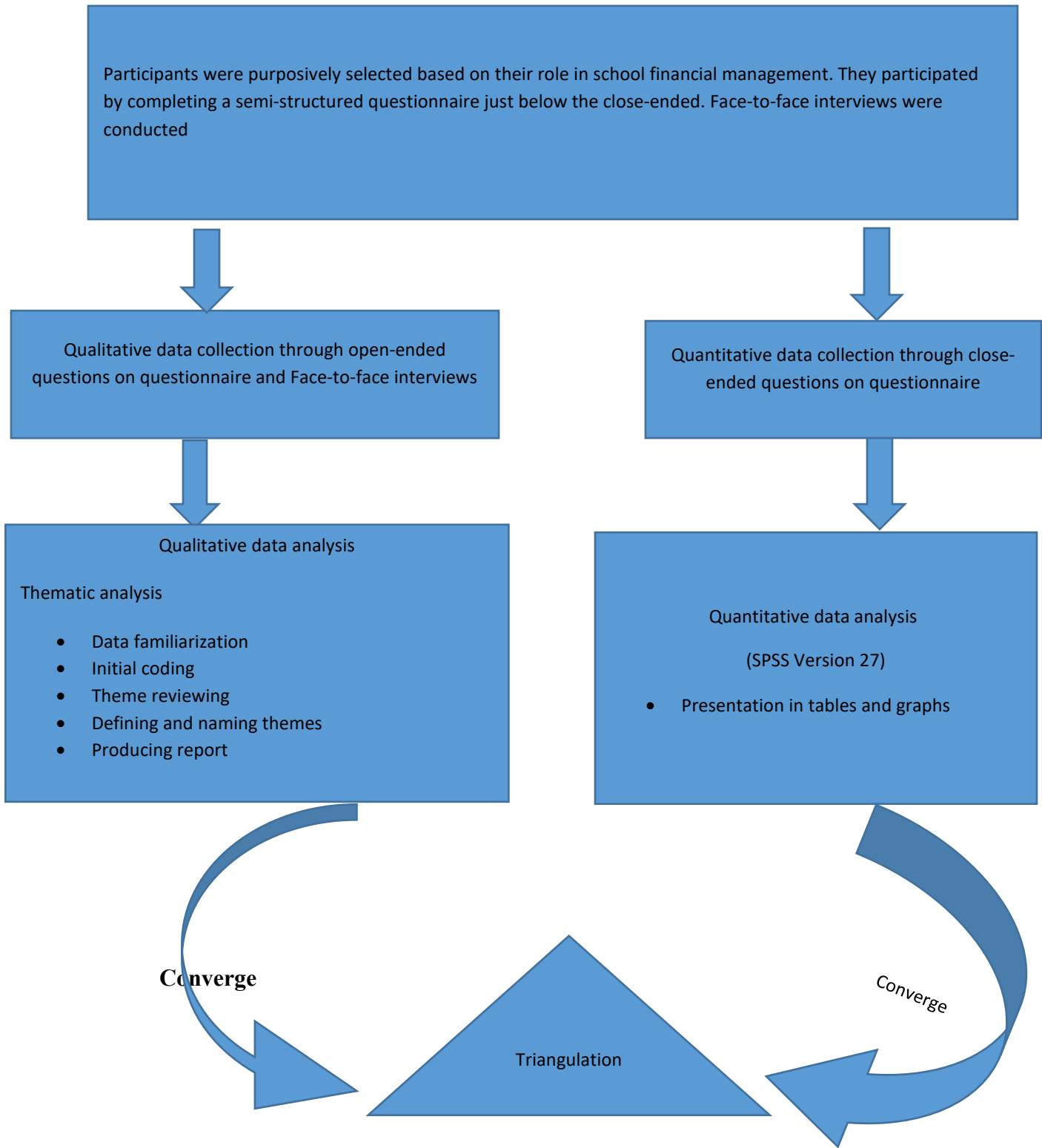


Figure 1: Data collection and analysis procedures: Concurrent triangulation design (diagram adapted from Penders, Zadelhoff, Rossi, Peeters, Alphen, and Metsemakers (2018)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study. This section first discusses the profiles of the respondents and the second part, the efficacy of the documents to ensure that they provide adequate direction in the management of school resources.

Figure 1 shows the profile of respondents in relation to the position they hold in the school.

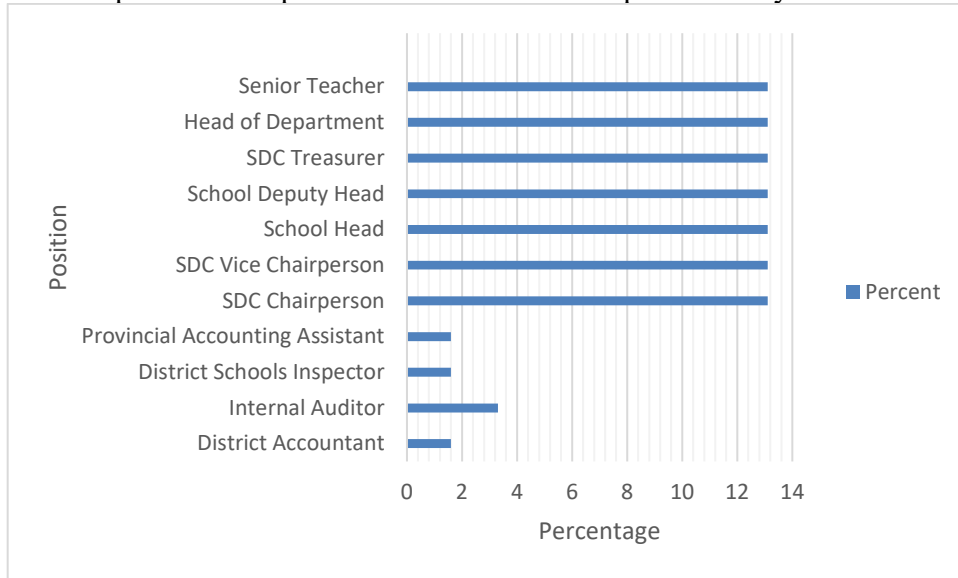


Fig.1 Respondents' positions in relation to schools

Figure 1 shows that the study's respondents held various positions and roles in school financial management. They held both executive and nonexecutive portfolios in the school management, which is vital for good school governance. The responses of the two groups provide a clear picture of what transpires in the schools. Auditors and district inspectors ensure compliance by the schools of the good tenets of financial management.

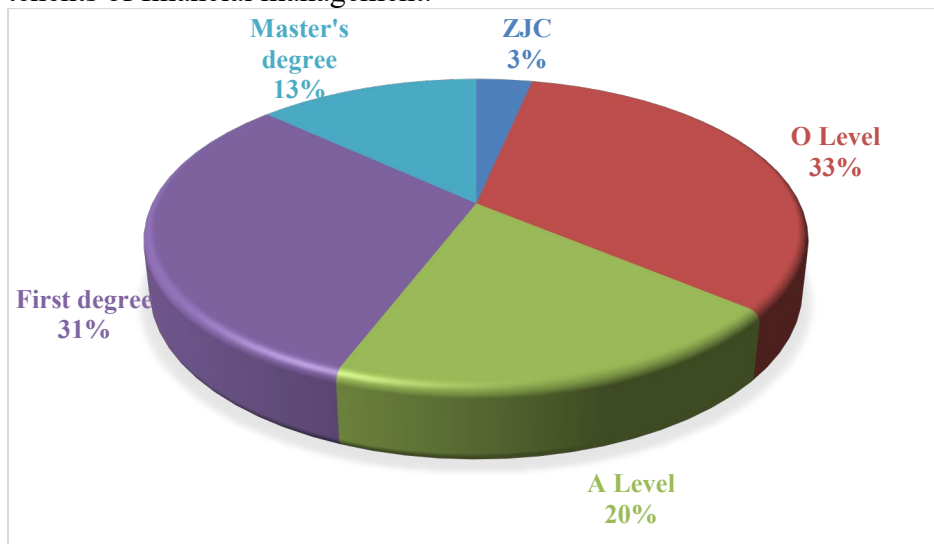


Figure 2: The highest academic qualifications of the respondents

Most of the respondents had attained at least 'O' level, which ensured that they could understand the various policy documents that guide financial management. Of concern are the ZJC holders, since they cannot easily comprehend the various manuals that are used in the management of school finances. The challenge is that people with the least qualifications can be in danger of being easily manipulated by school leaders and development associations.

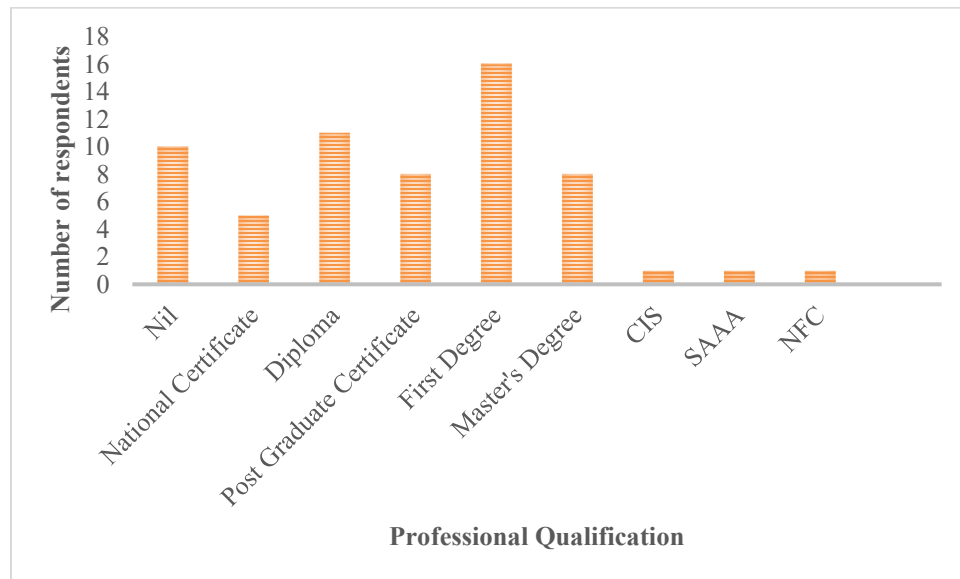


Figure 3. Highest Professional Qualifications of Respondents

Most of the participants, 83.6%, had professional qualifications. A professional qualification in finance-related courses enhances someone's ability to comprehend the financial manuals and policies. It is assumed that these respondents had a fairly well-represented practice in financing within secondary school clusters in the Kwekwe district of Zimbabwe. Of the respondents, 62.3% had adequate experience in school financial management, since they had five or more years of guidance in school financial management. These respondents had the reasonable experience to give accurate information on financing in selected secondary school clusters in the Kwekwe district.

Respondents were asked to indicate the availability of relevant documents that guide financial management in schools. Their responses are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1. Availability of documentation

	Available and adequate (%)	Available but not adequate (%)	Not Sure (%)	Not available (%)
Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Act (No.20) 2013	62.3	16.4	19.7	1.6
Public finance management Act 22.19	50.8	11.5	31.1	6.6
Public procurement and disposal of public assets Act 22.23	42.8	18.0	29.5	9.8
Education Act 25:04	63.9	16.4	16.4	3.3
Statutory instrument 87 of 1992	60.7	16.4	21.3	1.6
Administration and Finance Circular Minute No. 6 of 1994	55.7	19.7	19.7	4.9
Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets (General) Regulations, 2018 (Statutory Instrument 5 of 2018)	36.1	16.4	31.1	16.4
Statutory Instrument 144 of 2019 [Public Finance Management (Treasury Instructions), 2019].	34.4	14.8	29.5	21.3
Statutory Instrument 135 of 2019 (Public Finance Management (General Regulations)	24.6	19.7	36.1	19.7
Financial management training manual for the non-finance education managers	49.2	19.7	21.3	9.8
Accounting officers' instructions (P 70)	32.8	19.7	32.8	14.8
School Development Committees Handbook	65.6	26.2	4.9	3.3

The responses in Table 1 show that several documents guide the financial management of schools in Zimbabwe. The responses show that most respondents felt that the Constitution of Zimbabwe, Education act 25:04, Statutory instrument 87 of 1992, School Development Committees Handbook, and the Administration and finance circular minute No 6 of 1994 are adequately available in schools. The government has implemented mechanisms for financial management control and has made documentation readily available to users. The result further reveals that there is ignorance among some of the officials who are tasked with financial management in schools. This is reflected with the minority who argue that they are not sure whether the documents are available. It brings to the core the question of how these respondents actually manage the public finances when they are not aware of the required procedures.

To buttress the above point, one of the participants had this to say about availability of financial management documents:

These are quite accessible only that users are ignorant to acquaint themselves with contents (school head 1).

To support the issue of ignorance, another participant had this to share:

Most Heads of schools are not aware of Acts, Statutory Instruments and operational manuals that are supposed to be used in schools due to lack of training and induction in financial management matters when they are being promoted. Circulars pertaining to new procurement procedures are not yet in schools (school head 3).

On the contrary, one participant indicated that the documents are mostly available in government schools. The participant had this to share:

Most of the documents indicated as not available are available in Government schools where there are government Bursars and school clerks who are well versed in financial management (school head 2).

The unavailability of financial management documents was supported by another participant who shared the information:

Most of our Rural Day schools lack these documents. One other problem is that when school Heads move from one school to the other, they often take with them these documents (district inspector).

These responses reflect that the documents are available, but some of the officials do not take these documents seriously. The results concur with the observations in the study in South Africa, where school principals and school governing bodies (SGB's) were often unaware of their responsibilities and liabilities in financial management and accountability (Ndou & de-Heer Menlah, 2015; Van Rooyen, 2013). The study results concur with Ngwenya and Maushe's (2017) observation in Zimbabwean schools, where most schools were not employing the correct accounting procedures on banking registers, payment vouchers, procurement minute book, bank reconciliation statements and end of year returns. This calls for the need to constantly ensure the availability of the relevant guiding policy documents and training sessions on financial management. The Ministry of Education should consider employing external auditors to avoid constant corruption by regularly checking school accounts. Furthermore, it is strongly recommended that these accounting policy circulars and statutes should be part of the handover documents when Heads transfer from one school to the other.

Table 2 shows the responses to the usefulness of the different documents in guiding financial management in schools. Respondents were also asked to comment on the close-ended questionnaires.

Table 2. Usefulness of various documents

	Very helpful.	Helpful	Not sure	Somewhat Helpful
Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Act (No.20) 2013	44.3	31.1	13.1	9.8
Public finance management Act 22.19	60.7	19.7	14.8	4.9
Public procurement and disposal of public assets Act 22.23	54.1	16.4	23.0	6.6
Education Act 25:04	52.5	27.9	14.8	4.9
Statutory instrument 87 of 1992	52.5	23.0	19.7	4.9
Administration and Finance Circular Minute No. 6 of 1994	60.7	19.7	16.4	3.3
Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets (General) Regulations, 2018 (Statutory Instrument 5 of 2018)	47.5	16.4	29.5	6.6
Statutory Instrument 135 of 2019 (Public Finance Management (General) Regulations)	42.6	23.0	31.1	3.3
Financial management training manual for the non-finance education Managers	59.0	19.7	16.4	4.9
Accounting officers' instructions (P 70)	52.5	13.1	29.5	4.9
School Development Committees Handbook	70.5	19.7	9.8	

Most of the respondents believe that the documents listed in Table 3 are very useful in financial management in schools. The School Development Committees Handbook, the public finance management act and Administration, and finance circular minute No. 6 of 1994 were identified as the most valuable documents in the financial management of the schools. The Constitution sets the guidelines and basis of operations in the country together with the Education Act, Instruments 6 of 194,87 of 1992, and the School Development Handbook are rated among the popularly referred to, and are read by SDC members, DSI, and inspectors, who view and sing to it as to the national anthem. Documents on financial management are crucial, since they offer guidance on what to do. They also plug loopholes on possible abuse of public funds. One of the committee members asserted that:

The documents written above help a lot because we come to know about how the rules of the country say in keeping and using the money of the school. The Public Finance Management Act 22:19 I don't have knowledge about it, but I think that it is also a document that is important in the sense that the people in charge of financial management should have. All the documents that are about keeping and using money of the school should be there all the time so that the school money will be used appropriately (school development committee chairperson).

The participants who indicated that the documents were not useful in the quantitative data were supported by one of the participants who had this to say:

Although school authorities may be having all these documents they are of very little use to them because they are not aware of the importance of these documents. They don't read the relevant sections which apply to financial management. In most cases procedures are not being followed on making decisions when carrying out financial operations (Internal auditor).

This then calls forth for continuous training among officials. Although the decentralized financial management ensures that stakeholders are better equipped than the centralized system, the schools in this study do not seem to enjoy the benefits of such a system (Urbanovič & Patapas, 2012). According to Luboya (2018) and Meer et al. (2018), decentralization aligns schools with their local educational needs and preferences. Furthermore, decentralization among the schools in the study does not seem to provide the benefits of empowering local communities and holding their schools accountable for providing quality education, as highlighted in the studies by Barrera-Osorio et al. (2009) and Leer (2016). This agrees with observations by Edwards (2019), (2016), and Kristiansen and Pratikno (2006), who observed that the perceived benefits of a decentralised financial management system are not always realised in practice. According to Kristiansen and Pratikno (2006), a decentralised financial system can promote corruption due to a lack of transparency. The benefits can only be realized if policies are well adhered to.

One of the fundamental aspects of financial management in schools is the need for the officials' capacity development to be able to understand and effectively implement the policies. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent stakeholders are helping them understand financial management policies and practices in their schools. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The frequency (percentage) of responses on availability of assistance in understanding Financial Management Policies

	Frequency (%) of responses			
	Often,	Not sure	Rarely	Never
District Schools Inspector	49.2	14.8	29.5	6.6
District Accountant	62.3	8.2	21.3	8.2
Internal Auditors	45.9	16.4	27.9	9.8
Schools Cluster	13.1	26.2	34.4	26.2
Non- governmental organisations	16.4	18.0	19.7	45.9

The table shows that there is some level of training in the schools on financial management policies. These training sessions are being conducted by district school inspectors, district accountants, internal auditors, schools, and non-governmental organisations. Of the respondents, training sessions are often trained by district accountants, internal auditors and the district schools inspector. Gathering from the respondents, there is inconsistent thinking among the respondents. Some argue that training sessions are often done, while others report that the training sessions are never done. The following arguments from the participants' interviews show that there is generally no uniformity on the issue of financial management training.

One participant indicated that training was done and shared his view:

Upon being elected the DSI conducts an induction of the new SDC members in his district. He spends quite some time on financial management. However the education level of the SDC members impacts on the success of the induction (District inspector).

In support of the above participant, another participant shared this:

Induction meeting is held once a year just after AGMs are held in school. SDC (incoming) are helped to understand how they will operate. NGOs do follow up visits to school to check that their donations are accounted for (Deputy head 5).

In addition to that, one participant indicated that training support is given by NGOs. The participant had this to share:

The SDC were inducted on financial management when they were elected into the committee. Non-governmental organisations such as Dreams and Camfed always assist schools in financial management whenever they come for monitoring. After paying school fees these organisations move around assisting on financial management. For example here they assist the accounts clerk as well as the Head (school head 5).

Furthermore, the quantitative data was confirmed by the qualitative data where one participant indicated that district accountants and and internal auditors are involved in training. The participant had this to say:

I have never seen the District School Inspector coming to induct us on school finances. However the District Accountant often invite the SDC for some inductions. Internal Auditors are invited once every year to look at school finance books. I have never seen school Cluster and Non-Governments Organisations inducting officials on school financial management. I feel there is need (school head 1).

The quantitative data which indicated lack of training on financial management was supported by qualitative data from interviews. One of the participants highlighted lack of funding as one of the reasons for lack of training. The participant had this to share:

This exercise of inducting School Development Committees ended long back and I believe this is due to lack of funding. Gone are the days when rigorous training and induction of new SDC members was carried out. The Head is key and central in the induction of the school development committee and it is done shortly after the election of the team (School head 3).

While another in support of the view said:

The school development committee rarely gets induction on school financial management hence its failure to properly implement good financial practices (school head 4).

This view was further shared by one deputy head:

The School Development Committee works hard in making sure that school finances are done properly. Induction used to be carried out regularly but it has since stopped maybe because of Covid (deputy head 2).

In view of lack of induction, one participant made the following recommendations:

The workshops on financial management should be held on a regular basis to suit the needs. There is great need for schools inspectors and the District Accountant to visit school regularly to assist Head, Bursar, clerks and School Development Committees in the aspect of financial management. There is also need for uniformity in the requirements and procedures by Government Auditors and those from the Responsible authorities e.g. Urban and Rural Development council (School head 4).

In support of the need for induction, one deputy principal indicated the need to have the required documents in place to enhance the induction process. The participant had the following sentiments:

The induction of the school development committee on finance management has no proper protocols in place as there is inadequate financial management documents in place to guide them. The school development committee therefore cannot, without proper statutes in place be fully inducted on management as the prerequisites are unavailable for them to grasp and understand. It is therefore recommended to have all necessary documents in place and knowledge from proper authorities (deputy head 7).

Another participant shared the view that the government should be involved in financial management induction. The participant shared this:

There is need from the government to undertake workshops and staff develop Heads and deputy heads on financial matters instead of auditing to find out faults. Staff developing Head, Deputy Head and the SDC Committee can reduce financial management errors and incompetence's (deputy head 1).

The above response speaks to the calibre of school officials and how they perceive financial development in schools. They underline the importance of training rather than coming in to identify faults, and the importance of providing the necessary financial management

documentation. The idea behind this is to have well-grounded officials who have been trained to carry out their mandate. This is a good sign for efficient and effective financial management.

The study established that the school development association were, to a certain extent, inducted mostly by district accountants, internal auditors and district school inspectors. In certain rare circumstances, non-governmental organisations chip in with some induction training.

According to Ndhlovu et al. (2020) and Phylisters et al. (2018), schools have to ensure that school finances and other resources are used effectively, efficiently, economically and transparently if the goals of the organization are to be realized. This requires in-service training. Training will ensure that there is adequate financial management to establish an organization's financial priorities in line with the organization's goals and objectives (Radzi et al., 2013).

Given that non-governmental organizations as well as the government are involved in the induction process, there is a need for the two to jointly carry out this training. This would reduce the rate of duplication of efforts, which leads to waste of resources.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that financial management in schools is guided by many documents that are not available in some schools. School officials reflected different levels of appreciation for the efficacy of documents in ensuring that finances are appropriately managed. Most of the respondents believed that the documents available for financial management are very useful in financial management in schools. Although most of the respondents agreed that training sessions were held for the official in school financial management, a significant proportion from the quantitative data, indicated that training sessions were rarely held. The lack of training and financial management documents was supported by both qualitative and quantitative data. The study recommends continuously ensuring the availability of relevant guiding policy documents and financial management training sessions. The Ministry of Education should consider employing external auditors for checking school accounts in order to consistently prevent corruption. The study also recommends adopting ICT-based financial management in schools to circumvent the problem of principals moving away with the documents when there are transferred.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The data from questionnaire were corroborated with interview data, enhancing the validity of the findings. The data were collected from one district, hence, it is difficult to generalize the findings to experiences in all the districts in the country as a whole.

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