

## An analysis of the high performance of community school pupils in the Grade seven national examinations in Zambia

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### Abstract

*The study sought to investigate the high performance of community school pupils in the Grade 7 national examinations on the Copperbelt province of Zambia. The study employed a descriptive survey design and employed purposive sampling technique and a simple random sampling procedure. Data were collected through questionnaires, interview guides, focused group discussions, observations, and document analysis of literature and institution records. The sample consisted of 195 respondents comprising 100 volunteer teachers; 45 head teachers/deputy head teachers, 45 parents/guardians who were members of the Parents Community School Committees, three officials from the umbrella organisations, namely ZOCS, USAID (TIME to LEARN) and VVOB plus two District Education Board Secretaries, one each for Mufulira and Kitwe districts. The findings of the study showed that the performance of pupils between those in the studied schools and the government schools were similar. Reasons for the good performance of community schools included the decentralized administration of the schools that helped to achieve the objectives of the schools; holding teachers accountable, for example by ensuring teacher and learner attendance; high levels of commitment by community schoolteachers; flexible teaching-learning conditions which among other things, allowed learners who cannot afford shoes and uniforms to learn; as well as infrastructure development. The study concluded that the performance of community schools varied from school to school. Some pupils in community schools performed better than pupils in government schools and some had similar while others had lower performance than government schools. The performance varied from year to year. Lastly, the authors recommended that to enhance good performance and quality education in community schools, teaching and learning aids should be made available by the PCSC to community schools in the country. The authors also recommended that the MoE should increase the number of teachers being assigned to community schools.*

**Keywords:** *community schools, curriculum, quality education, performance*

### Introduction

The aim of this paper was to investigate the high performance of community school pupils in the grade seven national examinations on the Copperbelt province of Zambia. When Zambia got its independence in 1964 from Britain, the government took over most of the schools that were managed by missionaries and other stakeholders (Non-Governmental Organizations, Individuals and Business Houses). The government introduced a centralized and free education system under the Ministry of Education (MoE). The government of Zambia took over some of these schools because it wanted to promote equality of education for all without regard to racial, tribal or religious affiliations (Kelly, 1999). The government was able to offer free education to all the Zambians because the economy of the country at that time was performing very well. However, in the 1970s the government began to find it very difficult to run the education system on its own. By

then the economy had begun to slump in large part due to falling copper prices on the global market. As a result, the government was prompted to restore partnerships in education provision (Yumba et al., 2019; Chondoka & Subulwa, 2001).

Apart from the MoE which is the main provider and custodian of education in the country, grant-aided schools, private schools and community schools also came on board to provide education (Yumba et al., 2019; Chondoka & Subulwa, 2001). Community schools were registered in Zambia under the Zambia Open Community School (ZOCS); this body was and is still actively managing schools in Lusaka, Kafue and other parts of the country (Carmody, 2009). This organization has been instrumental in coming up with policy documents such as the Operational Guidelines for community schools of 2007 and Education Act of 2011 which embrace community schools as legally mandated to be

operational in Zambia (Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, 2011). According to the Education Statistical Bulletin of 2016, community schools were the second largest provider of education in Zambia with a total of 8,823 primary schools. This accounted for 28 percent of the total enrolment in primary schools as of 2016. This showed that community schools were a crucial pillar in resolving the challenge of access to education for eligible children. These schools have been in existence for over 20 years now.

This article is divided into four broad sections. The first is this introduction, which lays out the critical issues and questions that underpin the article. The second presents a brief review of literature while the third section deals with methodology. The fourth section combines presentation of findings and an analytical discussion of the findings while the fifth and concluding section sums up the narratives emerging out of the discourse on performance of community school pupils in Zambia by providing recommendations, conclusions and implications.

To fill the gap in the empirical literature on the phenomenal performance of community schools in Zambia, this study was mooted. To achieve this, the study was guided by the following research question: What factors influence the high-performance levels of community schools at Grade 7 national examinations in Zambia? This article is anchored on the right-based approach to education which was spear headed by developmental groups and a School-Family-Community Partnership Model by Joyce Epstein (Epstein, 2002). The School-Family-Community Partnership Model by Joyce Epstein is concerned with the education of the child. Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, for example, identifies schools, families, and communities as major institutions that socialise and educate children. A central argument or proposition of the theory is that certain areas, such as student academic success, are of interest to each of these institutions, and are best achieved through their cooperative action and support (Epstein, 2002).

According to UNICEF (2007) the right-based approach takes on board stakeholders such as parents, communities, teachers, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and cooperating partners, for it realises that without them, little would be realised in terms of child's right to quality education (UNICEF,

2007). The creations or formations of a sustainable human rights with respect to education for all school going children requires that the concept of education is understood and owned by parents, families and all members of the community. As it is Zambia has not lived up to its promise to provide quality education to every child in the country as is evidenced by the existence of community schools spearheaded by parents in the communities. The government of Zambia has created an enabling environment for Zambians and other stakeholders to establish learning institutions for the promotion of primary education. A study, which was carried out between 1995 and 1998 by the Southern, and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality for example, measures primary school students' reading ability against standards put in place by national reading experts and sixth-grade teachers. UNICEF (2007) notes that in four out of seven countries, less than half of sixth grade learners achieved minimum competence in reading. In this vein, Heath and McLaughlin (1987) maintained that community participation is very noteworthy because challenges of educational accomplishment and academic success request resources beyond the scope of the school and most families.

Epstein's framework, Epstein's mode of school-family-community partnership has been used in this study so that it could help explain the enhancement of the education of the learner in community schools. However, communities have received increasing attention for their role in socialising youth and ensuring students success in a variety of societal domains. According to Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, for example, recognises schools, families and communities as the most important institutions that socialise and educate children.

### **Literature review**

In Zambia schools are categorized into government, private, grant aided and community schools. Community schools in Zambia have been seen as an alternative to public schools in the provision of primary education. The overwhelming majority of these schools are started, organized and managed by the communities through the Parent School Community Committees (PSCCs) (Yumba et al., 2019; Falconer-Stout et al., 2014). Many studies have been carried out indicating how community schools have performed as

compared to government schools (Yumba et al., 2019; Falconer-Stout et al., 2014; Hungi & Thuuku, 2010; Chakufyali, 2008). In delivering education to the needy, community schools like all other establishments that supplement governments' efforts in making education accessible to all are expected by the MoE to ensure that they operate within the policy framework as enshrined in the operational guideline; to adhere to the implementation of the curriculum as approved for all schools; to ensure provision of equitable quality education to all learners in their school; to ensure equal access to materials and facilities similar to what is provided in conventional schools so as to enhance good performance; and to ensure that the education that is provided is made accessible, highly affordable and friendly without discrimination to potential learners.

However, there are various challenges that community schools must overcome as they provide education to needy children in their communities. Chakufyali (2008) indicated that community schools operated under difficult circumstances such as poor learning environments; insufficient teaching and learning materials; and use of untrained teachers. Furthermore, Falconer-Stout et al. (2014) reported that Parent Community School Committees (PCSCs) had challenges in recruiting enough teachers, both trained and untrained, and paying decent teachers' salaries and other incentives. Other challenges included providing decent school infrastructure, inadequate teaching and learning resources, high teacher attrition rate (Falconer-Stout & Kalimaposo, 2014) coupled with poor leadership and management (Yumba et al., 2019; Hungi et al., 2010). Furthermore, learners' socioeconomic status and parents' educational achievement affect academic performance and levels of attendance and absenteeism as has been noticed in Zambia (Frischkorn et al., 2016). Pupils or learners who come from households where parents cannot provide basic needs usually tend not to perform well at school. A child from such a home will always be absent-minded and will not participate actively in the class activities.

### **Methodology**

This section discusses the methodology that was used to collect data. This study was qualitative. This selection had potential for generating rich information given the diversity of expertise and experience and is consistent

with purposive sampling in qualitative research (Giampietro, 2016). A descriptive survey design was used to carry out the research which is the most appropriate for obtaining in-depth data (Yumba et al., 2019). The sample consisted of 195 participants. The 195 participants consisted of 100 volunteer teachers, 45 head teachers/deputy heads (32 from Kitwe and 13 from Mufulira districts) and 45 members from Parents Community School Committees. Multistage sampling was used to sample two districts out of 6 mining towns. The sample also included three officials from the umbrella organizations namely, ZOCS, USAID (Time to Learn) and the Flemish Association for development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB). At the district level, the District Education Board Secretaries of Mufulira and Kitwe were part of the sample. The intention was to sample all schools from Kitwe and Mufulira districts. However, only 13 and 32 schools respectively were selected in Mufulira and Kitwe districts for the study using simple random sampling. Of the 195 participants who participated in the study, 108 were males and 87 were females. These were further distributed as two male District Education Board Secretaries (DEBS), 28 male Head teachers, 45 male teachers, 30 male parents and three officials from NGOs. There were also 17 female head teachers, 55 female teachers, and 15 female parents. This study employed purposive sampling technique and a simple random sampling procedure. The participants who were purposely selected were the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS), Head teachers, District Resource Coordinator (DRCCs) and representatives from the NGOs. The purposive sampling technique was suitable for this research because the selected participants were in a position to discuss issues concerning the performance of pupils in community schools on the Copperbelt province. Simple random sampling was used when it came to selecting teachers and schools.

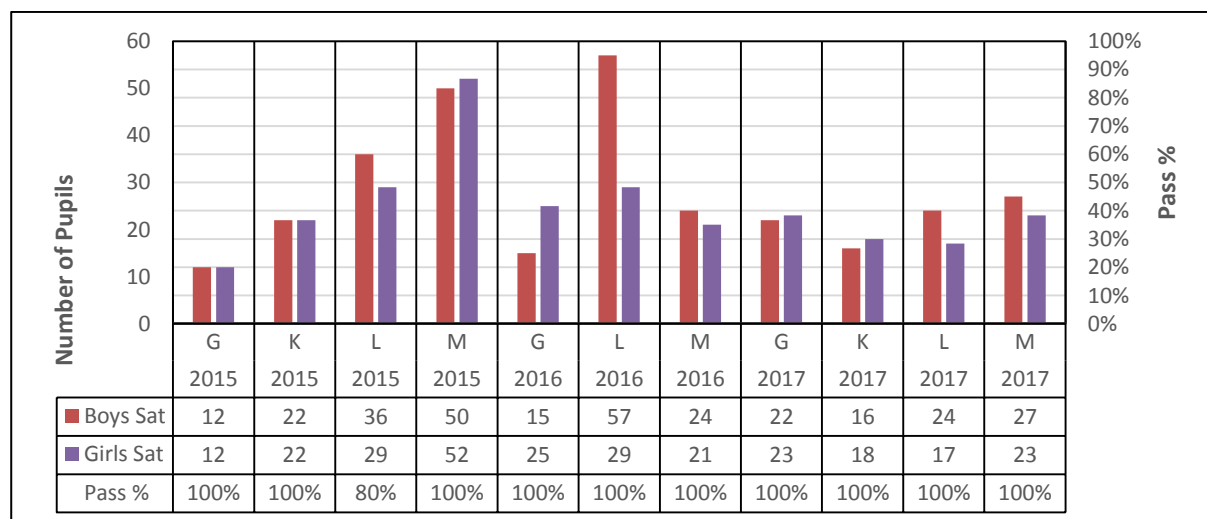
In this study, data were collected through questionnaires, interview guides, focused group discussions, observation, and documents analysis. Questionnaires were used to collect information from the class teachers and Head teachers. Primary data was collected through administering of questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussion. Secondary data was collected through analysis of documents and history inquiries (Msabila & Nalaila, 2013). In-depth interviews were used

to solicit information from community school administrators, parents, District Education Board Secretary and non-governmental organizations such as Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS), the Flemish Association for development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB). Document analysis was used to review both printed and electronic computer-based and internet-communicated material (Bowen, 2009). Focus group discussions were used also to get in-depth data concerning community schools. This study used the thematic analysis approach to analyse, classify and present themes that related to the data. The researchers also ensured that data transcription commenced as soon as data collection began in order to be familiar with the data that was collected; this allowed for follow-up where collected data lacked clarity. The researchers read and re-read the data in order to have a thorough understanding of it. After understanding the data, the researchers categorized it into themes. The process of coding, categorizing and developing themes was repeated for each transcript or set of data. All entries with the same codes were merged into patterns by finding links and connections among categories and finally data were interpreted.

**Findings and discussion**

Despite the stigma and paucity of resources associated with community schools, evidence suggests that many community schools outperformed government schools in the 2014 Grade 7 examinations. An examination of the

Grade 7 examination results from community school examination centres for the period 2015 to 2017 show that in Mufulira and Kitwe districts there was no marked difference in the performance of pupils between those in the studied schools and the government schools as shown in Figure 1. The statistics in Figure 1 are in tandem with the results of this study which showed that in 2015 at School K, 22 boys and 22 girls registered and sat for Grade 7 ECZ Examinations. The school registered a 100% pass rate. In 2017, from the 16 boys and 18 girls who sat for examinations, the school registered a 100% pass rate. At school L, 36 boys and 29 girls sat for examinations in 2015; the school recorded an 80% pass rate. In 2016, 57 boys and 29 girls, sat for the examination; the school recorded a 100% pass rate. In 2017, 24 boys and 17 girls sat for examinations; the school again recorded a 100% pass rate. At School M, 50 boys and 52 girls sat for examinations in 2015. In 2016, 24 boys and 21 girls sat for ECZ examinations while in 2017, 27 boys and 23 girls sat for examinations. In each of the three years (2015-2017) School M recorded 100% pass rate. Finally, at School G 12 boys and 12 girls sat for the examinations in 2015; in 2016, 15 boys and 25 girls sat for examinations while in 2017 22 boys and 23 girls sat for the examination. Just like at School M, in each of the three years (2015-2017) School G recorded 100% pass rate. All the pupils in the above-mentioned schools sat for the national examinations administered by the Examination Council of Zambia. This information is reflected in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Grade 7 examination results**

DEBS and DRCC noted that the academic performance of learners in some community

schools was almost at par with learners in government schools. They observed that

although pupils in government schools were expected to perform far much better than those in community schools because of the substantially superior resource base that government schools possess, in actuality, in general terms, pupils in government schools tended to perform only marginally better than pupils in community schools. DRCC, PCSC, noted that: *community schools which had teachers provided from government schools performed just as well as some government schools.* With regards to these NGOs, ZOCS and Time to Learn observed that: *some people have argued for a long time that community schools were outperforming the government schools and others argue the opposite. The reality is that overall community schools are not performing worse or better than government schools. In fact, they perform about the same. However, there are always examples of some schools that outperform others.*

The above position was shared by parents and the PCSC who observed that at times some community schools performed better than public schools despite having more challenges than the public schools as reported by Chakufyali (2008). With specific reference to the performance of pupils in the Grade 7 national examinations, the parents and the PCSC observed that the achievement levels of the community schools and government schools were almost at par. From the responses of the head teachers on the performance of pupils in community schools at grade seven level from the period 2014-2018, 17.7% (n=8) of head teachers indicated that pupils' performance in the years 2014-2018 had been very good, 48.4% (n=22) indicated that the performance was good, 22.2% (n=10) indicated that the performance was average and 11.1% (n=5) indicated that the performance was poor. Although there was no agreement on the performance of community schools by head teachers, there was consensus on the good performance of community schools.

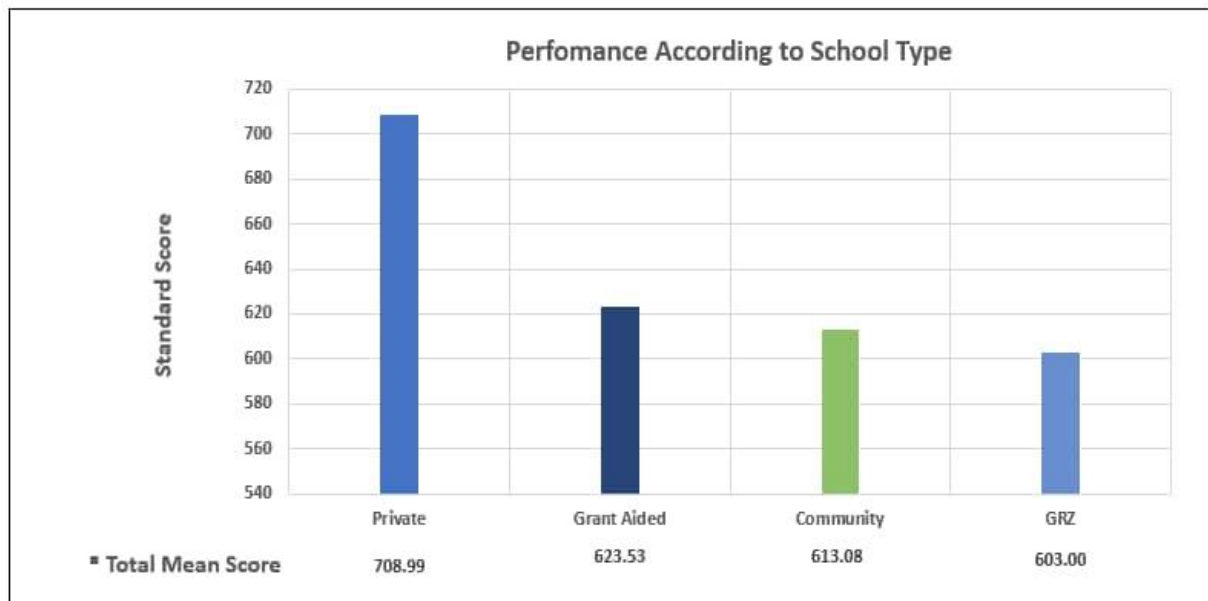
This consensus is also reflected in the affirmative responses of the head teachers regarding whether the performance of pupils and teachers in community schools had met their expectations. Twenty-six (57.7%) of the head teachers indicated that their expectations were met; 12 (26.6%) indicated disappointment with particular reference to high attrition rate of teachers who left for greener pastures thereby affecting negatively

the support to pupils; 7 (15.5 %) of the head teachers did not respond. Similarly, when asked about the academic performance of pupils in the Grade 7 national examinations in community schools, the majority of the teachers reported that the performance of the pupils was average, 20 (20%) reported that the performance of pupils was very good; 28 (28%) indicated that the performance was good, and 12 (12%) indicated that the performance was poor. In line with these views, one of the teachers said: *generally, the performance of the pupils in the community is slightly lower than pupils in the government schools though they performed better at Grade 7 level as shown in the 2014 Examination Council Report.*

The above findings are in agreement with the findings of the 2003 ECZ all-embracing sample-based assessment of pupils in primary schools. In that survey pupils in grade five from government schools were scientifically sampled from urban and rural areas in the nine provinces at that time. Five thousand pupils from two hundred and fifty government schools were included in the sample. The 2003 assessment contained a sample of hundred community schools which were selected from the nine provinces. Community schools which participated were moderately stable and had manageable enrolment figures (Kanyika et al., 2003). The pupils in these schools performed above the national norm for minimum and desirable levels of proficiency. Specifically, the community schools performed well in English and Mathematics. The National Assessment Survey Report (2003) shows that 29 percent of community school pupils reached minimum proficiency in English, compared to 18 percent of government school pupils. Additionally, community school pupils out-performed pupils in public or government schools in English in every province.

In addition, in 2014 in Zambia, when Grade 7 examinations were written, ranking by performance indicated that private schools were the best performing schools followed by grant-aided schools, community schools and lastly, government schools (Examinations Council of Zambia, 2014). The mean scores of the four categories of the schools were as follows: private schools (708.99); grant-aided schools (623.53); community schools (613.08) and public school (603.00). In addition, Falconer-Stout et al. (2014) indicated that the community schools performed relatively well

in the 2012 Early Grade Reading Assessment.



**Figure 2: Performance of private, grant aided, community and government schools at Grade 7 in 2014**

The data in Figure 2 show clearly that generally community schools on the Copperbelt particularly in Mufulira and Kitwe districts not only performed well, but the performance of pupils in community schools was slightly higher than that of pupils in government schools. (The authors would like to state here that efforts to obtain latest statistics on the performance of community schools from relevant authorities have borne no fruit). The findings of this study show that pupils in community schools have generally not performed worse or better than government schools although some respondents indicated that learners in community schools showed low performance compared to government schools, grant aided and private schools. This should not be surprising if true, considering the many challenges that community schools often encounter. What is surprising is that government school learners on average tended to perform only marginally better than community school learners. Even though pupils in community schools outperformed pupils in government schools in the Grade 7 national examinations, generally pupils in community schools perform slightly lower than pupils in government schools. This is the same view shared by Frischkorn et al. (2016) who indicated that primary-level community school learners, on average, perform only marginally lower than government schools as shown by the Zambia Grade 7 National

Assessment Surveys.

#### **Reasons for good performance by community schools in Zambia**

The real question then is why is the scholastic achievement of pupils in community schools almost at par with that of government schools if they have less qualified teachers and fewer resources overall as indicated in the literature review under challenges that community schools face (Yumba et al., 2019; Frischkorn et al., 2016; Chakufyali, 2008; Falconer-Stout et al., 2014; Falconer-Stout & Kalimaposo, 2014; Hungu et al., 2010). The DEBS and Head teachers observed that public schools can learn a lot from community schools. A number of plausible reasons are behind the scholastic success of community schools.

The success of the community schools, in terms of good performance of the learners, depended mainly upon the administration by the PCSC who have been given authority of running these schools by the MoE. Each community school is managed and organized by the PCSC, composed of parents, community school head teacher and teachers, and prominent community members (MoGE, 2016; Frischkorn et al., 2016). All the players in the community schools play their part in the decentralized way to achieve the objectives of the schools. This is different from mainstream education which in Zambia has been managed through highly centralized bureaucracies.

Under this arrangement, most functions are carried out directly by the MoE or its agencies stationed at regional or district level acting on detailed instructions from the MoE officials at the Headquarters (Glassman et al., 2007).

In times past, parents detached themselves from the education of their children, for that duty was given to the schools. Significant academic research regionally and globally has demonstrated the ability of parental involvement in school management to influence school quality (Barrera-Osoria et al., 2009). Falconer-Stout et al. (2014) emphasized the significant potential of PCSCs to hold a range of school actors accountable, for example, by ensuring teacher and learner attendance and lobbying local government for resources. The study agrees with Kochhar (2011) who acknowledges the notion by Epstein (2002) who indicated that parents are important in the education of children. Community schools employ effective teaching and learning activities. These activities contribute to a better performance of pupils compared to those in public schools. According to Mulenga (2010) Action Aid in Tanzania had students in their ACCESS centres sitting for the same end-of year examinations as students in primary government schools. The Action Aid students performed better, taking the ten highest scores.

In addition, there is commitment by community schoolteachers. One of the Head teachers had this to say: *some teachers in community schools were committed to their work despite the challenges they pass through for example erratic payment of salaries or allowances. Some volunteer teachers worked without pay for more than 3 months or so*". In agreement, the DRCC added that: *"the volunteer teachers despite not being paid on time continued rendering their services to the community"*. Furthermore, community schools have flexible teaching-learning conditions which among other things, allow learners who cannot afford shoes and uniforms to learn. Generally, community schools on the Copperbelt particularly in Mufulira and Kitwe districts performed well. To enhance performance and quality education in these community schools, the MoE has provided teachers to these schools; some have been seconded as teachers in charge and others just as class teachers. As a condition, a community school with teachers provided by the government also qualified for full government support like any other public school. Although

it is not a guarantee that when a school is upgraded it will automatically start performing well, the presence of qualified teachers has clearly made a positive impact on the performance of these schools.

Some Community Schools have received a facelift in terms of infrastructure development for example at Kalindini, Kawama Community Schools in Mufulira district new classroom blocks were constructed. The schools were upgraded, and some given a face lift. The Zambian government has embarked on upgrading community schools, despite the lack of official strategy and clear understanding of upgrading by all stakeholders. During the upgrading process, community schools receive funding for infrastructure development, teachers, grants, and school requisites (Macwan'gi et al., 2016). Those are the benefits the schools and community receive, but, the drawback is that once the school has been upgraded, automatically its status changes, it adopts the standards of a government school in terms of the way it is managed.

### **Conclusion and implications**

The performance of community schools varies from school to school. Some schools perform better than others. Others perform better than government schools and some lower than government schools. This study revealed that pupils in community schools outperformed pupils in government schools in the grade 7 national examinations. Although community schools were producing good results, the quality of education being offered in the community schools, as reported by some parents, needed to be improved. Some schools with trained teachers provided by government could claim to be offering a reasonably high quality of education. Unsurprisingly, the quality of education being offered in community schools ranged from top performers in the country to those where virtually no learning was taking place (Frischkorn et al., 2016). What is important about these community schools is that they offer a service to the communities and assist the government voluntarily in the provision of primary education. They are selfless in the provision of education for they consider a child as the reason for their existence. The implication of all this is that in spite of their shortcomings, community schools are likely to be a permanent feature of the education landscape in Zambia for a long time to come.

## Recommendations

To enhance good performance and quality education in community schools, it is recommended that teaching and learning aids should be made available by the PCSC to community schools in the country. In addition, it is recommended that the MoE should increase the number of teachers being assigned to community schools and also encourage continuing professional development of teachers in these community schools. It is also recommended that the MoE working in tandem with the PCSC should embark on improving the infrastructure in the community schools. Lastly, it is recommended that funding of community schools should be in terms of grants directly given to these schools.

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