

Exploring the Processes and Outputs of School Grants: The Case for Direct Support to Schools in Malawi

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Abstract

In a growing number of countries of the developing world, there has been a shift in policy from fee paying to fee free education for the basic education level of schooling. This has necessitated the introduction of grants directly to schools to mitigate delays in procurement of goods and services by centralized education management systems. In Malawi Direct Support to Schools (DSS) was introduced in 2006 to enable schools purchase teaching and learning materials and perform small scale maintenance and rehabilitation. The research reported in this paper analyzed the processes and outcomes of DSS in the schools. The aim was to explore the mechanisms for grant administration, the challenges encountered and the impact of the grant on quality of education and grassroots participation in school management so as to inform the Primary School Improvement Plan (PSIP) grant which is to replace DSS. The findings of the study have shown that the mechanisms for grant administration are participatory and therefore conducive to accountability. The grant has helped improve education quality through ensuring that teaching and learning materials are available; improving the learning environment; increasing local participation in school management; increasing the financial management skills of head teachers and SMC; and improving parental attitudes to schooling. However the impact of the grant has been negatively affected by criteria for allocation, grant amount and delays in its disbursement.

Introduction

The policy shift from fee paying to fee free education for the basic education level of schooling adopted in order to increase access to education is not a strange phenomenon in countries of the developing world including Malawi. Due to this policy shift however, schools have lost income which was brought by the students in form of school fees, relying solely on central government for provision of teaching and learning resources. With practice showing that central government provision may not necessarily be efficient there has been an equally growing trend for these countries to provide grants straight to schools so that they buy some of the much needed resources on their own. The provision of school grants, albeit in various forms, is currently common practice in many African countries that adopted the fee free policy. Literature shows that the introduction of school grants has not spared Asian countries which have adopted decentralized financial policies

similar to those of African countries (UNESCO, 2012).

Different models of school grants, sometimes to serve a varied range of purposes, have been implemented in the various countries. In Ghana for example, schools receive several types of grants with the capitation grant being the main one. The Capitation grant serves several purposes including catering for various levies such as examinations, sports, textbooks, culture; compensating schools for loss of income from students' fees, and empowering schools and communities in school management. In Kenya schools receive funds in form of a Free Primary Education Grant, a School Facility Grant and a Constituency Development Fund Grant. In addition, Kenyan schools in some cases receive grants from NGOs, Community Based Organisations, Harambees, well wishers and parents. Uganda on the other hand uses her own model where the school receives grants for a wide range of purposes including teachers' salaries, scholastic materials, construction, rehabilitation and maintenance, extra curricular activities, school lunch and contingency funds. There are also isolated incidents of schools getting donations from NGOs, school alumni, parents and PTA (Byagamusha & Nishimura, 2008).

The Malawi Government, just like many governments in Africa introduced Free Primary Education (FPE) in 1994. This was a big political policy and as would be expected, was received with mixed reactions by different stakeholders. The immediate impact of the policy was the sudden increase in enrolment of pupils from 1.9 million to 3.2 million in the 1994/95 academic year. Over-age children who had never enrolled for school or dropped out due to lack of school fees had enrolled at this time. Over the years enrolment continued to increase and access to primary education was improved tremendously. However, the challenge was that the available resources for teaching and learning remained static, so that the quality of education was greatly affected. As a result FPE led to other problems such as absenteeism, repetition, dropout, poor performance and overall low retention of pupils.

Having observed the myriad problems facing the primary education sector as a result of FPE, the government of Malawi continued to look for strategies to improve access, quality, and relevance of education which are goals within the National Education Sector Plan (Government of Malawi, 2007). One such strategy was the introduction of Direct Support to Schools (DSS) in 2006 more than a decade after the introduction of FPE. DSS has been implemented by the Malawi Government with support from the World Bank and DfID since 2006 as one way of helping address the teaching and learning resource challenges facing the schools. At the time when this study was being conducted, the Malawi government was piloting a new initiative, the Primary School Improvement Plan (PSIP) which is an initiative for sustaining DSS by the Malawi Government. The study reported in this paper was thus felt to be important in informing the design and implementation of PSIP.

At the time when the Malawi government was grappling with the challenges emanating from the increased enrolment due to the introduction of FPE, a national decentralization policy was approved in 1998, the purpose of which was to facilitate

grassroots participation in decision making processes for all public sectors including education. Specifically, the national decentralization policy was approved with a view to (Government of Malawi, 1998):

- Create a democratic environment and institutions in the country for governance and development at the local level which facilitate participation of the grassroots in decision making,
- Eliminate multiplicity in administration
- Mobilize the masses for socio-economic development at the local level.

In the education sector, decentralization policy strengthened grassroots participation through creation of School Management Committees (SMC) and Parents Teacher Associations (PTA) which would take part in the management of the schools (Government of Malawi, 2004). Within the decentralized environment therefore, DSS was meant to serve two purposes: support the purchase of teaching and learning materials and small scale school maintenance; and that of strengthening grassroots participation in school management.

Direct Support to Schools: purposes, criteria and amounts

As implied in the foregoing discussion, Direct Support to Schools (DSS) is a grant that is being implemented by the Malawi Government, with support from the World Bank and DfID since 2006. According to DSS policy guidelines (Government of Malawi, 2006) the grant started in 2006, twelve years after the introduction of Free Primary Education, under the Education Sector Support Project (ESSUP 1) of the World Bank and was funded through the International Development Agency (IDA) grant. Whilst the initial purpose of DSS was to help schools purchase basic teaching and learning materials in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, this was reviewed after the implementation of two cycles of the grant to include maintenance and rehabilitation as well. The review of purposes was implemented when the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DfID) joined World Bank in school financing resulting in the enhancement of the DSS grant (Government of Malawi, 2008). The purpose of DfID additional funding was to help schools perform small scale maintenance and rehabilitation works. Thus while the teaching and learning materials only grant was given by World Bank between 2006 and 2008, from 2009 to-date, schools in addition, received maintenance and rehabilitation grant from DfID.

The DSS guidelines show that in 2006, all schools received the same amount of US\$200 showing that no criteria was used to distinguish the schools with respect to how much they should receive. This was however changed in the following year and subsequent years when the grant was given based on enrolment whereby schools were categorised into enrolment bands as shown in Table 1. The higher the enrolment, the

bigger the amount of grant allocated.

Table 1: DSS funding in the first three years

Year/ Enrolment	Band 1 Enrolment 10-500	Band 2 Enrolment 501-1500	Band 3 Enrolment 1,501-3,000	Band 4 Enrolment 3,001-4,5000	Band 5 Enrolment 4,501 above
2006/7	\$200	\$200	\$200	\$200	\$200
2007/8	\$170	\$192	\$214	\$220	\$257
2008/9	\$514	\$600	\$693	\$784	\$874

Source: Government of Malawi, 2008 US\$= MK140

The remarkable increase of the grant amount in 2008/9 shown in Table 1 was caused by the additional maintenance and rehabilitation grant from DfID rather than an upward adjustment of the grant to the extent that DSS amount has remained the same to-date, a situation that creates challenges as will be discussed later.

The DSS guidelines show that the grant was clearly earmarked for the purposes of purchase of teaching and learning materials and school maintenance and schools were provided with a list of eligible items for purchase, showing very limited autonomy in the use of the grant. The guidelines however also show that there was a small discretionary grant that was given to schools for which the school would have some autonomy in its use. Table 2 summarises the intended purposes of DSS grant.

Table 2: Grant amounts and intended purposes from 2008/9 onwards

Grant purpose	Band1 Enrolment 10-500	Band 2 Enrolment 501-1500	Band 3 Enrolment 1,501-3,000	Band 4 Enrolment 3,001-4,5000	Band 5 Enrolment 4,501 above
Teaching and learning materials	\$171	\$189	\$214	\$236	\$259
Maintenance and Rehabilitation	\$286	\$343	\$400	\$457	\$514
Discretionary	\$57	\$68	\$80	\$91	\$103
Total	\$514	\$600	\$694	\$784	\$874

Source: Government of Malawi, 2008, US\$= MK140

But how are DSS grants disbursed and what processes are followed at school level in order for the grant to achieve its set purposes? An equally important question in this study was on what has been the impact of the grant at school level so far? This paper explores the processes and outputs of DSS in primary schools in Malawi. While the processes will shed light on the mechanisms for grant administration and the challenges encountered, the outputs will shed light on the impact of the grant on the quality of education and on grassroots participation in school management. This study was important at this time

in order to inform the design and implementation of the new Malawi Government PSIP programme.

The research questions that were of interest in the study are as follows:

1. What are the mechanisms for disbursement and use of DSS at school level?
2. What monitoring and control processes are in the schools receiving DSS funds?
3. What is the impact of DSS funding on education quality?
4. What challenges do schools experience as a result of DSS funding?
5. How might DSS funding be improved for better impact on education quality in the schools?

Conceptual framework

The execution of the study was guided by the decentralization processes that are governing both the formulation and implementation of education policies in Malawi. In the decentralized setting for primary education there are two levels of administration – the Central level (Ministry Headquarters) and the District Assembly (DA) (Nampota & Beckmann, 2011). Within the DA, the actors are the District Education Manager (DEM), the Zonal Primary Education Advisor (PEA), School Management Committee (SMC) and Parents Teacher Association (PTA). The central level is responsible for policy formulation and implementation, the inspectorate, establishment of standards, training, curriculum development and international representation so that respondents at this level would be useful to discuss the intended purpose of DSS. DAs are responsible for, among other things, actual delivery of education services by primary schools in accordance with policies, standards and criteria set by the central Ministry Headquarters to ensure quality of education and would be useful to obtain data regarding the frequency and timeliness, and mechanisms of the DSS grant. The DEM has to, among other responsibilities, prepare district education plans, estimates for local education authorities, monitor day to day operations of education institutions, post teachers, appoint head and deputy head teachers of schools and prepare budgets and account for all expenditures in the district. The PEAs advise heads of schools and teachers on professional matters, inspect schools, assist DEM in accounting for expenditure and determine budget requirements in the zone. The SMC oversee the development and execution of school action plans while the PTA holds the SMC accountable for all activities in the school.

As seen from the foregoing discussion, at school level, management involves three groups of people, teachers, SMC and PTA. The three groups are responsible for day to day running of the school. Such groups interact with suppliers during the procurement of materials using DSS funds. The processes that take place at school level, involving interaction of head teacher, teachers, SMC, PTA and suppliers was of interest in the study. Since these processes do not operate in isolation from the other levels of the decentralized structure, respondents to the study included participants at DEM and PEA levels.

As shown in the research questions, an area of equal interest in the study was the impact of DSS on education quality. A review of literature has shown that defining education quality has always been a challenge to many educators, perhaps as a result of the many elements that influence it. In a paper *Defining Quality in Education*, UNICEF (2000) recognised five dimensions of education quality as identified by the Dakar framework for action on Education For All (EFA) founded on the rights of the child: learners, environments, content, processes and outcomes. Chapter 1 of the EFA Global Monitoring report for 2005 (UNESCO, 2004) synthesised the various definitions of education quality and developed a framework that could be used both for monitoring education quality and policy formulation. This framework distinguishes the learners, the outcomes and the context (external environment) as dimensions of quality. However, it lumps together the content, processes and school environment or school context as enabling inputs although some of these could be outputs. Furthermore it expands the environment to global contexts for education. The framework is summarized in Figure 1 which delineates inputs from outputs.

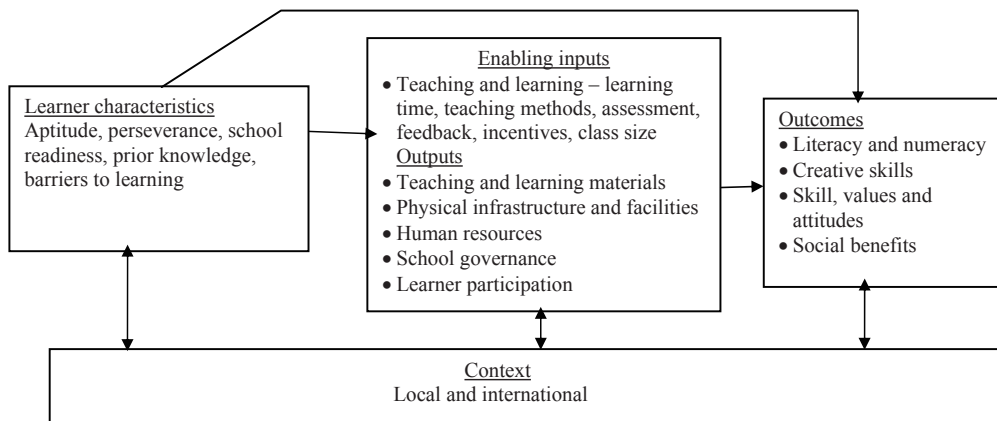


Figure 1: Quality framework, adapted from UNESCO, 2004

The DSS funds as described earlier target provision of teaching and learning materials and rehabilitation of school infrastructure. Provision of teaching and learning materials and rehabilitated infrastructure should have an impact on teaching and learning and therefore quality of learning. As such, DSS grant was essentially covering the enabling inputs component of the framework. While some of the enabling input characteristics would form the outputs of the grant, for example, availability of teaching and learning materials, improved school environment, community participation in school management, the outcomes would include knowledge, skills and attitudes of different stakeholders such as teachers, learners, school management committees. No literacy and numeracy assessment were carried out in the study so that impact of the grant on this

outcome could only be approximated. However, the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained by SMC and PTA could be discerned from the findings of the study.

Methodology

The study was situated within the qualitative interpretative paradigm with interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and document analysis used as main data collection methods. Semi-structured interview guides focusing on mechanisms for DSS disbursement, procurement processes, benefits, challenges and impact of the grant were developed. The interview guides were pilot tested at one school and refined accordingly.

The purposive sample comprised six schools from three districts of Old capital, City and Lakeshore. Two schools reflecting urban and rural settings were randomly selected in each district. The spread of the schools to three districts was necessitated by the nature of the DSS grant which is administered at District level. The numbers of district administrations sampled were thus deemed equally important as number of schools visited. For anonymity, the names of both the districts and the schools are pseudonyms and are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: The sample

District	Name of school	General description
Old Capital	Songano	Enrolment- 2,517 (50% Girls); 24 teachers (18 females); Generally poor infrastructure
	Mutuwa	Enrolment – 1,262 (48% Girls); 9 teachers (2 females); 7 classrooms in fairly good condition; use of make shift classrooms
City	Limwe	Enrolment – 2,553 (45% Girls); 29 teachers (26 females); 16 classrooms in fairly good condition, TLM present
	Bayani	Enrolment - 11,021 (52% Girls); 99 teachers (50 females); 16 classrooms in fairly good condition, double shift
Lakeshore	Salumwa	Enrolment - 566 (49% Girls) 6 male teachers; 4 classrooms, in poor condition, no functional toilets
	Maluka	Enrolment - 1,251 (53 % Girls); 11 teachers (9 female); 15 classrooms in poor condition

At district level, interviews were conducted with the District Education Managers (DEMs) and sometimes coordinating Primary Education Advisors (CPEAs). In total, two DEMs and three PEAs were interviewed. At school level, the sample included head teacher, teachers, and SMC and PTA members. Individual interviews were conducted with head teachers to ascertain the amount of grant received and how it was used at the school. Similar questions were addressed to groups of teachers, SMC and PTA separately, one in each school. In total, six head teacher interviews and six group interviews each for

teachers, SMC and PTA were conducted.

An analysis of the DSS manuals and documents both from the Ministry, district and school levels was also conducted in order to get a fuller picture of the grant mechanisms. This analysis centred on mechanisms for grant administration, the amount and uses of the grant.

Data were analysed by first grouping the findings into the two categories of process and outcomes and outputs of the grant. Within each category, themes were drawn and all data analysed according to the themes. For example, on the process, the themes were mechanism for grant administration and monitoring processes while outcome and output indicators became themes for the second category.

Findings

The findings from the study show that in general, the mechanisms for DSS administration followed to a large extent, the guidelines set by the Ministry of Education (Government of Malawi, 2008) although there were some areas where guidelines were not adhered to. Similarly quite significant contributions to the schools' functioning and quality have been made with DSS over the years although there are areas where improvements need to be made in order to enhance impact. These issues are discussed in detail beginning with the processes.

The Process of DSS grant

The general understanding by different respondents in all the three districts was that DSS grant does not reach the school in form of cash. Rather, the grant reaches the schools in form of a cheque that is made payable to the supplier of the materials purchased.

Mechanisms for DSS grant administration at school level

The findings of the study show that DSS grant is disbursed according to the process described in the DSS guidelines (Government of Malawi, 2006) which is; first the Education Development Management Unit (EDMU) prepares payment instructions for Ministry of Finance to advise NBS Bank (the commercial bank where the special account of the project is kept), to release funds to the National Local Government Finance Committee (NLGFC); second, the NLGFC transfers funds to the District Development Fund (DDF) Account at the respective District Assemblies across the country; third, the funds are released to each school. The responses from the District and school level respondents more or less reflected this understanding although with some minor differences where some respondents could not mention the MLGFC, for example DEM City district, and most of the school level respondents just said that the funds come from government to the DEM and then to the supplier.

With regards to mechanism for procurement of materials, there was consensus amongst respondents of the different districts that schools are asked to come up with a list of needs for the year in a participatory manner involving teachers, SMC and PTA. Based on the needs, the schools are asked to source three quotations from shops and make a tentative choice of shop to purchase the materials from. Schools are then expected to submit the quotations to the District Education Office (DEO) together with the minutes of the meetings where they decided on what and where to buy. Once the quotations are scrutinised and approved by the DEO a cheque is issued to the supplier although in the first year of the grant the cheque was issued to schools that would later present it to the supplier. Once the money is accredited into the supplier account, schools are called to collect the materials purchased.

In the Lakeshore district, while head teachers and teachers were aware of the mechanism as explained above, there was a general outcry that in 2009, the schools were directed to get quotations from specified shops and the materials were bought by the DEO as expected. However, contrary to the agreed mechanism the DEO collected the materials from the suppliers and delivered them to the schools. Respondents therefore complained that it took a long time before the goods were delivered to the schools and also that most of the goods were not of the quality that they wanted and there were instances when these did not come at all. For example, at Salumwa School, teachers said that *they gave us iron sheets of different sizes than what was on the quotations; we wanted to buy hoes and were given handmade instead of factory made ones, "makasu osula", and we wanted some paint but never got any*. At Maluka School goods brought were perceived by the school actors, not worth the money allocated to the school as some things on the quotation were not delivered and they also received expired cement. Most of the respondents were of the view that schools should be allowed to buy the materials on their own or even given the money directly. The DEM for the district however could not corroborate the story and neither was he able to provide an explanation as he was new at the school.

Not all these anomalies were observed for the other two districts. The only one which is shared is that of the DEM selecting suppliers to get quotations from in the first cycle of the grant. However this was improved in subsequent years so that for 2011, the schools had autonomy to choose the supplier. This is what teachers at Bayani School had to say: *this year, schools were free to get quotations from any shops but last year schools were told which shops to get quotations from*.

While the mechanism for DSS distribution and implementation went on well in most schools in the City district, some shortcomings were noted. The City DEM for example complained that *some schools had to be pushed to get quotations because most of them found it difficult to understand government procurement procedures*. Although most parents and SMC chairpersons expressed satisfaction with the issuing of cheques to suppliers instead of providing cash to the schools because they said, *money is evil*; they nevertheless observed that it took a long time between the time the school got quotations and the release of cheques to suppliers. For instance, in 2011, Limwe School obtained

quotations in February but only received the goods in April and this resulted in collecting fewer goods because prices were hiked.

Monitoring and control processes

Generally, most respondents in the schools visited explained that monitoring and control on the use of DSS grant at school level was mainly done by the head teacher, SMC and PTA. However, not much was explained on the way the monitoring was done in some schools except in a few schools. For instance, at Limwe School teachers explained that the SMC and the head teacher check when the materials arrive and are being used although it was found that the SMC did not know much about it. Generally however, it was observed that there was some laxity in the monitoring of the grant as most schools relied on showing the materials bought to different stakeholders but no records were kept as to how they were being used. In one school, Salumwa School, parents and the SMC/PTA reported that a committee made up of one representative each for SMC, PTA, parents and the chairperson of village policing was chosen to check the development activities and look at how the materials were used but this could not be verified as teachers never mentioned it.

There were two areas where monitoring as spelt out in the guidelines (Government of Malawi, 2006) were not adhered to by all schools visited. One area was where the head teacher and SMC chair were expected to complete a Purchase Form in triplicate with receipts and invoices after the purchase which did not happen in all the schools visited. Half the schools however kept delivery notes instead and these were shown to the research team. The second area is where the head teacher is expected to display on a flipchart the materials purchased and display the “Stock Control of Materials form” to show how the materials are being used. It was found that the materials purchased were displayed only in one school, Songano, and none of the schools displayed the Stock Control of Materials Form. Although there was evidence that in some schools a meeting of parents and pupils is held to showcase the purchased materials and an explanation given in terms of how they were used, lack of the two displays raised concerns not only among the local school actors but also the DEM and Ministry Headquarters. These concerns were however not followed up with any punitive measures to the head teachers of the schools concerned as might be expected.

In general, it was observed that in all the six schools, SMC monitors any maintenance or renovation works taking place so that they may check on appropriate use of the materials procured. However, for all schools, the DEO was found to rarely visit the schools to monitor progress or use of the procured materials. The DEO’s interest centred on submission of balanced receipts by the school, an area which creates accountability flaws especially in schools where only the head teacher collects materials without involving other members of the larger school management team.

Besides limited adherence to monitoring of use of materials at school level, the study also found that there was no evidence of auditing for DSS funds in the visited

schools. It is possible that this happens at DEO level using the balanced receipts sent by schools. This is one area that might need to be looked into critically.

Outputs and Outcomes of DSS Grant

The findings of the study have shown that DSS funding has impacted positively on some of the outputs and outcomes that are important to education quality although the impact has been to a limited scale due to the small amounts of the grant received.

Learning environment, teacher and learner motivation

Improvements in the learning environment emanated from the maintenance and rehabilitation grant that saw many schools rehabilitate classroom floors, doors, and broken windows. For SMC and PTA, this improved the safety and discipline of the learners as they could no longer go out of the classrooms through the broken and open windows. This was experienced particularly by schools that had very poor infrastructure:

When the windows were open, learners could get out of the class through the windows, a practice that resulted in some injuries and disturbance of others in class. With the rehabilitated windows this is no longer practiced. Interview with SMC, Songano School

In addition, the rehabilitated windows and doors meant that no passersby would go into the classrooms when unattended and do all sorts of mischief while the learners are away. Learners would thus come back to a clean classroom unlike the case before when they would have to clean the dirt inflicted by passersby. This had the impact of increasing learner motivation to go to school in all the schools.

The improved learning environment had an impact not only on learner discipline, motivation and safety but also on teacher motivation. Teachers woke up to learners who were now more disciplined than before and the learners no longer talk to outsiders while the teacher is teaching. In addition, teachers are happy to leave their charts in the classroom without fear that someone would steal them. In some schools like Maluka and Songano, teachers' houses were painted using DSS money. Such teachers were happy to stay in better houses and even the painted classrooms were a better teaching and learning environment for both teachers and learners, even though this often involved a simple use of lime not necessarily proper paint.

The general impression was that DSS has had some impact on enhancing learning. Apart from provision of teaching and learning materials that increased teacher motivation to teach, DSS money was used to rehabilitate broken desks for learners. Teachers felt that the change from sitting on the floor to sitting on the rehabilitated desks motivated learners more especially the older ones. This could in the long run lead to better learning.

Teaching and learning

DSS led to greater availability of teaching and learning materials, at least compared to the time when school solely depended on the central Ministry to provide them. As would be expected therefore, different respondents agreed that the DSS fund had improved the teaching and learning situation at the schools sampled. This observation was backed by different understandings. The first understanding was that pupils learn better when they see real examples or their exemplifications on charts. They even scramble to be nominated to name something they see as a real object or on the chart. As discussed earlier therefore, learners got motivated to learn because they could see these representations and therefore learn in a meaningful way. The second understanding, mentioned largely by teachers, was that availability of different teaching and learning materials enhanced teacher motivation and as a result they were able to use a variety of learner-centred teaching methods which research has shown that leads to meaningful learning. Head teachers said that availability of teaching and learning materials eased their management task as teachers were motivated. There is a need however to substantiate these findings with classroom observations and further research.

Achievement of literacy and numeracy, which would have been a good measure of the impact of DSS, was not measured in the study. This happened realizing the difficulty of attributing any changes to DSS alone as there are many factors that affect achievement. At Songano School however, DSS helped in the rehabilitation of a classroom that was used as a hostel for students who were about to write their school leaving examinations in order to provide them with more time to study than is available to them when they go home. At that school, student performance and selection to secondary school had improved in subsequent years, something that might be attributed in part to DSS. Although similar impacts have been reported as a result of financial decentralization policies in some Asian countries as well, it has been quickly noted that such improvements are usually of small magnitude (UNESCO, 2012).

Stakeholder participation

The mechanisms for grant use at school level as described earlier involved SMC and PTA members. The findings of the study suggest that DSS enhanced the involvement of these stakeholders in school management and more importantly, it increased the speed with which decisions were made at school level which is in line with Government recommendations (Government of Malawi, 2004) and findings from Asian countries involved in similar reforms (UNESCO, 2012). The head teacher of Maluka School observed that DSS grant had helped improve the relationship between the community and the school '*since we were identifying issues affecting the school and budgeting together*'. The PEA for the zone added that this relationship led to increased ownership of the school by the community:

DSS helped empower the community to make decisions about the school on their own thereby increasing community ownership of the school. Interview with PEA, Maluka School

Acquisition of skills, values and attitudes

The involvement of different stakeholders in the management of the DSS grant led to acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes. For example stakeholders especially head teachers, SMC and PTA executive members gained financial management skills as they prepared a budget and procured goods amounting to the money that was allocated to the school. In addition, the SMC and PTA improved their attitudes towards ownership of the school and the learning of their children. This was achieved largely from the trainings they received but also through monitoring use of the materials purchased using DSS grant.

Challenges and suggestions for improvement

The foregoing discussion has shed light on the benefits and challenges of the DSS grant in as far as its contribution to education quality is concerned. The respondents in addition mentioned some suggestions to improve the grant. Since benefits have been discussed in the previous section, this section discusses the challenges and suggestions for improvement as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Challenges and suggestions for improvement

	Challenges	Suggestions for improvement
Process	Delays in grant disbursement	Disburse grants on time
	Price fluctuations and lack of cooperation by suppliers	
	Lack of record keeping by the schools	Retrain stakeholders in record keeping
	Laxity in monitoring of grant	Enhance monitoring of grant
Outputs	Grant amount too little	Increase grant amount
	Grant does not come regularly	Grant should come regularly
	Grant is earmarked	Increase autonomy in use of grant
		Grant should be transferred directly to the school
		Involve parents, learners in grant administration

Table 4 shows that a number of challenges were experienced particularly with the process and outputs of the DSS grant. The process challenges as mentioned by respondents include: delays in grant disbursement which meant that immediate needs are not properly met since goods arrive when these are no longer urgent; price fluctuations

by suppliers where lower prices are given in the quotation and raised when goods are being collected; suppliers who provided quotations but were not selected in the previous year were not cooperative to give more quotations in subsequent years. In addition, the researchers noted that record keeping of the items bought through DSS was poor. Only one of the six schools had data for the teaching and learning materials purchased using DSS funds and none of the schools was sure of the specific amounts of money allocated for teaching and learning materials as well as for maintenance purposes.

Output challenges were that the DSS grant was too little for the teaching and learning materials and maintenance needs of the schools. Worse still, the grant was not regular and almost always came late.

Based on the challenges raised by the respondents, a number of suggestions for improving DSS were made in all the six schools visited. The most widely mentioned was that the amount of the grant should be increased as it was perceived not to be sufficient for the needs of the schools.

The money is too little for our needs. It should be increased and should be used for activities that will help the school sustain itself such as construction of a school hall.

Interview with parents, Mutuwa School

A related recommendation was that the grant should be disbursed to the schools every year and should be given timely so that schools can plan for it. The flip side of the recommendation for increased DSS grant was that the criteria for DSS disbursement should not only be based on school enrolment but rather on prioritized needs of the school. This was mentioned by head teachers and teachers of mostly rural schools that had many needs. What this meant was that prioritized needs of the school were beyond the amount of money given.

A second set of recommendations, which was mentioned by almost all the respondents, was that DSS grant should be transferred directly to the school and not to the DEM so that the school should buy what it needs straight from the shops. For example the head teacher of Limwe School said that *the process being used currently has a problem in that sometimes expensive items are bought from the recommended Asian shops than the local shops around*. Obviously, the Lakeshore district actors were more upbeat on this since as argued earlier, their items were not only sourced from shops where they were directed to, but also the DEO actually purchased the items on their behalf and distributed them. This, according to the SMC chair and teachers of Limwe School, would ensure *timely delivery of goods and purchase of all items identified by schools*. The challenge with this proposal, though plausible, is that it would create some form of mistrust, but where the SMC and head teachers are working well; this could be one good way forward.

A related recommendation was that DSS grant should include money for transport. There were slight variations in explaining this recommendation among schools and actors. For City schools, the general view by SMC and teachers was that the grant should include

money for transport while for the head teachers of the same schools the issue was to do with DSS transport money being given in a timely manner. This is indicative of the fact that transport money might have been included in DSS grant only that it was not disbursed on time and with some transparency. The DSS guidelines however do not indicate any transport money. Rather, they include discretionary money which no respondent mentioned in the schools.

There were a number of recommendations to do with accountability of the DSS grant. One recommendation from parents of almost all schools visited was that involvement of parents, learners and PEAs should be emphasized in DSS.

There is need for emphasis on reporting to various stakeholders by the school in terms of how DSS money is used. Besides, there is need for proper monitoring to ensure that the materials bought are put to good use. Interview with PEA for Salumwa School

There were recommendations that these actors should be trained adequately on the grant.

The DSS people should follow the example by PSIP. Training is important and They should not train only very few people but include more parents and learners. This is important so that all stakeholders know clearly what they are supposed to do. Interview with SMC, Limwe School

The second recommendation came from PEAs who argued that there was need for emphasis on reporting by the school in terms of how DSS money is used. Besides, there is need for proper monitoring to ensure that the materials bought are put to good use.

PEAs should not be sidelined in the monitoring of the grant. We are the people who know the schools better and we know the type of people surrounding the school. Interview with PEA, Maluka School

Other respondents suggested that there should be a proper monitoring and auditing component. Other suggestions were not pertaining to the process of DSS. Rather, perhaps frustrated by the DSS process, the suggestion was that government should consider bringing the needs of the schools directly to the schools instead of the money. However, this would lead to the same failures that were noted before DSS funding was put in place. The other suggestion was to have flexibility in the use of DSS funds by not having the money earmarked.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have shown that DSS grant has made some difference in the schools, although not so much on the outcomes. In terms of teaching and learning for example, DSS has enabled schools purchase basic teaching and learning materials that made a difference in the nature of the lessons from both the teacher and learner perspective. The improved classroom environment motivated both learners and teachers. Involvement of SMC and PTA in the decision making processes has increased the participation of stakeholders in school management in line with decentralisation policy. However improvements on the grant are inevitable in areas such as increased amount, regular and timely disbursement and more visibility in monitoring and evaluation, if the grant is to make more desirable impact.

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