PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IN ERITREA: CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES
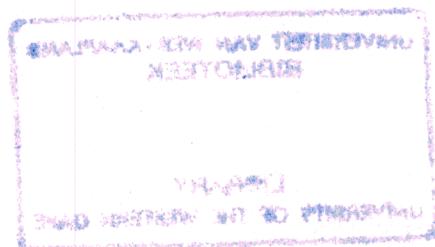
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A mini-thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters Degree in Educational Management, Administration and Policy (EMAP) in the Faculty of Education, University of the Western Cape

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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE GOVERNANCE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL IN ERITREA: CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

This study is designed to investigate the current policies and practices of secondary school governance in Eritrea. There is a basic need to investigate the nature of parental involvement in school governance, particularly in relation to policies enshrined in the PTA guidelines. The study examines the parents' commitment to execute their school governance role properly and to determine their capacity to fulfil their responsibilities with respect to the powers and functions vested in them. Education was merely the domain of the school and parents were discouraged from interfering in matters of school governance, therefore parental participation has been very limited. Thus, the focus of the study was to investigate the prevailing problems that curtail parental involvement and identify appropriate strategies for improving and strengthening school governance. The study includes a relevant survey of international and national literature on parental participation in educational governance. Specifically, the notion of decentralization of educational governance, parental involvement in the decision-making, comparative and international trends in decentralized school governance was reviewed.

The research study was done in Eritrea on two secondary schools in two different regions characterized by different socio-economic backgrounds. Five interviewees from the PTA of each school were selected to include two from the parents, the principals, one teacher and one student. The other two interviewees were senior officials from the Eritrean Ministry of Education. The twelve interviewees and the two schools were selected by purposive and convenience sampling. Qualitative research methodology was used to analyze and interpret the data. The techniques for data collection used in this study were semi-structured interviews, observation and documentary analysis.

The major findings in this research study revealed that decisions have not as yet devolved to the parents. Most decisions are still taken at the highest level of the MOE in spite of what the PTA guidelines prescribe. Parents still do not understand their roles and responsibilities in the schools. The research has also revealed that PTAs are involved in fund-raising and in the disciplinary matters of schools. Nonetheless, PTAs do not contribute satisfactorily to the development of the programmes at schools. Parents do not play a decisive role in curriculum decision-making and aspects of school management. PTAs are not given real decision-making powers and thus, the MOE retains control over key areas of school governance. Despite its manifest successes, the PTAs have since its establishment, been hampered by poor infrastructure, a lack of resources and training, a lack of communication and low levels of understanding of governance responsibilities by parents.

The study has showed that the following recommendations need proper care and attention:
- Schools must communicate the educational policies to the parents through written communication (proper dissemination of information).
- PTA members need to be given courses of short duration to optimize parental participation in the decision-making of school activities.
- PTA members need to be elected on the basis of their interest, and skills of governance.
- The university and tertiary institutions should include community-oriented courses in the training programmes of principals and teachers.
- In rural areas principals should organize school meetings at times convenient to parents' and transport facilities or financial incentives should be provided for those parents that travel long distances.

DECLARATION

I declare that this study on **Parental Involvement in Secondary School Governance in Eritrea: Current Trends and Future Possibilities** is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

SIGNED: ....   DATE: 20-11-2003

KIDANEMARIAM MENGHISTU SEBHAT

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It is obviously a great honour for me to have studied in the Faculty of Education at the University of the Western Cape. First of all, I would like to praise the Lord and give Him all the glory for giving me the strength and power to complete this thesis.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in memory of my father **Menghistu Sebhat** who passed away in 1997 and my younger brother **Tekie Menghistu** who lost his life in 1986 at a very young age in an accident. To both of them this thesis is respectfully dedicated. May God and the ever-Virgin Mary accept them in Heaven and may they rest in tranquility forever.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANC	African National Congress
DOE	Department of Education
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
GOE	Government of Eritrea
GSE	Government of the State of Eritrea
LEAs	Local Education Authorities
MOE	Ministry of Education
PC	Parents' Committee
PCA	Parents' and Citizens' Association
PGE	Provisional Government of Eritrea
PTAs	Parent Teacher Associations
PTSAs	Parent Teacher Student Associations
SASA	South African Schools Act
SOR	School Organization Regulation
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Education Fund
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

ERITREAN Administrative Regions

Source: http://www.netafrica.org/eritrea/eritrea-map.html

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. Brief history of Eritrea

Eritrea is strategically located in the Horn of Africa, sharing a border with the Sudan to the north and west, Ethiopia to the south and Djibouti to the southeast. It has a population of about 3.5 million people. It covers an area of 124,320 square kilometres, stretching from 18.2' to 12.42' degrees north latitude and 36.30' to 43.20' degrees longitude. Eritrea's coastline extends about twelve hundred kilometres, flanked by coral reefs and 354 islands, including the important Dahlak Archipelago (Killion, 1998: 1).

The people of Eritrea have been exposed to different types of colonial rule. Among them were: the Italian rule (1889-1941); the British administration on behalf of the allied forces (1941-1952); the federation with Ethiopia by the decision of the United Nations Assembly (1952-1962); and finally the annexation by Ethiopia (1962-1991). When all diplomatic and legal avenues to get the right of self-determination and independence fell on deaf ears, the Eritrean people decided to take up armed struggle under the leadership of the Eritrean Liberation Front in 1961. Throughout the protracted war of liberation, Eritrea served as a cold war battlefield for numerous powers who along with Ethiopia tried to thwart the Eritrean case. But all was in vain. Eritrea small as it is, fought teeth and nail, prevailed over the big powers against all odds to become an independent state (Kiflemariam, 2001: 70).

The state of Eritrea obtained its *de facto* independence in 24 May 1991 and its official independence in 24 May 1993 after a UN supervised referendum in which 98.8% of the people voted in favour of independence (MOE, 1999: 1).

1.2. Background to the study

The title of this study is the 'Parental Involvement in Secondary School Governance in Eritrea: Current Trends and Future Possibilities.' It is evident that neither the parents nor the teachers alone can fulfil the task of educating the learners in a completely satisfactory way. This statement emphasizes the mutual interdependence of parents as primary educators and teachers as secondary educators in a relationship that is

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continually evolving and becoming increasingly vital. For too long, education has been seen as the exclusive domain of the schools and therefore parental participation has been very limited.

In recent times, however, there has been a gradual move towards an increasing awareness and recognition of the central role of parents as equal partners in the education process. In the past two or three decades, there has been a tremendous move towards decentralization of education governance at schools. Many authors argue that such strategy is the new modern fashion of democratization and school improvement as decision-making is carried to local levels. I will focus on the prevailing problems that curtail parental involvement and identify and investigate appropriate strategies for improving and strengthening the school governance. I will give a brief historical background of the Eritrean education. This is meant to relate what has happened in the past and to signal what moves can be taken towards the future in relation to parental participation in the school governance and decision-making activities.

Eritrea has had different types of educational systems since earliest times. The history of modern Eritrean education is divided into various periods on the basis of social and political conditions. The objectives of education in general were based on colonial requirements and a policy that put more emphasis on indoctrination and subordination (Taye, 19992: 25). Eritrea inherited its educational system from a variety of sources. The education system reflected the ideological interest of the colonizing powers of the time.

Formal education was introduced by the Italians during the period 1889-1941. Indigenous Eritreans were not allowed to progress beyond four years of primary education, which was seen as sufficient to inculcate the skills required of the labour force serving the needs of the colonial rule (Ertzgaard, 1995). Basically, the main goal of education for the Eritreans during the Italian occupation was to provide the colonial government with skilled labour capable of serving the expanding agricultural and industrial sectors in the economy under the Italians. During this period, new schools were built to serve the Italian settlers in Eritrea while only a few schools were built for the Eritreans. According to Ertzgaard (1995), the objective of the Italian school programme was to establish their own language and spread their own culture.

The foundation of the modern educational system in Eritrea was laid down during the British administration (1941-1952). It is often said that the British built more schools in ten years of their administration than the Italians managed to produce in more than fifty years of their occupation (MOE, 1995). Though there was a comparatively high standard of education, the curriculum remained academic and was insufficient to meet the needs and interests of ordinary Eritreans.

Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia was a result of the resolution passed in September 1952 by the General Assembly of the United Nations Resolution 390A, 2 of December 1950 that led to the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia for the period 1952 to 1962. In fact, the laws, policies and structures of the government of Eritrea during the federation provided the Eritreans, for the first time, with the right to occupy top, middle and lower positions at all levels of the central and local government institutions. During the federation for the period 1952 to 1962, the number of schools in the country was doubled. Haregot *et al (1993)* cited in Mussie (1998: 35) contend that during the federation, Eritreans were responsible for their own education and training activities and the standard and quality of education showed much improvement.

On the other hand, the annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia (1962-1991) reduced the country from a federal state to a province. Thus, during this period Eritrea lost its federal status and became the 14th province of Ethiopia (Mussie, 1998: 36). As far as education and training was concerned, all the progress made during the British administration and the federation was subsequently lost and badly deteriorated when Ethiopia annexed Eritrea in 1962 (Haregot *et al.*, 1993; cited in Mussie, 1998: 36). During the Ethiopian rule, the Eritrean curriculum was changed from Tigrigna and Arabic to Amharic cultural values and political aspirations to show domination as part of a long-term strategy to undermine the Eritrean languages, culture and identity. In fact, this led to a thirty-year bitter war for national liberation. The effects of three decades of war have been quite devastating to the education sector in particular.

After independence, education was placed among the top priorities of the government. Educational policies in relation to the Macro Economic Policy outlined in 1994 were formulated (GSE, 1994). Some of the principles that specifically relate to the governance of schools are: encourage the provision of education by the private sector; make serious efforts in sharing of the cost of education between the government,

communities and parents; strengthen management and monitoring at all levels; strengthen community participation in education and encourage private sector involvement in education (MOE, 1999: 1-2). Thus, there is a lot of catching up to do for Eritrea, in order to meet the realization of the above and other educational policies.

In the Eritrean educational system there are 852 schools in total. Out of these, 736 are government schools and the remaining 116 are non-government schools. There are 667 primary, 142 middle and 43 secondary schools (MOE, 2001: 20). There is a high level of wastage throughout the Eritrean education system. The performance of the Eritrean education system deteriorates as one moves from primary to upper secondary. There is inadequate access to teaching and learning materials, with most schools being poorly equipped to provide a good quality education. Facilities such as libraries, laboratories, resource centres and sports equipments are not available in most of the regions. Most teachers are not properly trained and qualified.

1.3. Statement of the problem

There is a basic need to investigate the nature of parental involvement in school governance with relation to policy matters enshrined in the PTA guidelines and school organization policies. There is a need to examine the parents' commitment to contribute to the school functions and to determine their capacity to fulfil their responsibilities with respect to the powers and functions vested in them. The MOE is striving to best develop policies and strategies to enhance and promote the education sector. It can be argued that the government does not have the capacity to bear the burden of all the activities. In fact, it is the right and obligation of the communities and local people to take responsibility for aspects of the school activities.

In the area of school governance in Eritrea and other developing countries, there has for many years been a clearly drawn line between home and school. The roles of parents and administrators were more implicitly defined than at present. To this extent, education was merely the domain of the school and parents were discouraged from interfering in matters of school governance. Parents, therefore, played a very limited role in the governance of their local schools. Today, however, it is beyond any doubt that the importance of parental involvement in school governance and the local management of schools is widely recognized by teachers, educators and parents.

International and local literature around the issue of parental participation in school governance confirms that for any effective governance and leadership in schools, parental participation serves as a starting point.

The issue of parental participation in the decision-making process in the school governance, by the PTA is very limited in scope. Although it remains elusive as to what kind of contribution it makes and how this relates to the improvement of educational governance, parents are now, together with other key stakeholders, in charge of school governance. With this responsibility, it still remains doubtful as to how and to what extent parents are participating within the decision-making process of the PTA in matters relating to school governance.

From my own experience as a teacher and as a principal of a secondary school, there is lack of parental participation in the decision-making of school activities. Whenever evaluation is done during meetings of supervisors, principals and teachers this crucial point is raised and discussed and pertinent proposals are made. At this point in time, even though PTAs are elected in almost every school, they are at an initial stage and very limited work is done so far. They do lack resources, capacity and skills to perform their duties. It is an accepted fact that education is no longer the sole responsibility of the MOE and the teachers. For effective and meaningful education to be realized, it will require the full participation and cooperation of parents, community and teachers. In order to accomplish this, parents will need to be empowered, i.e. informed, guided and supported.

1.4. Aims of the study

The central aim of this study is to investigate the current policies and practices of school governance in Eritrea. Also to explore whether reform of the centralized system of school governance is desired and possible. More over, the researcher would like to ascertain how the secondary schools have taken on the challenges to implement the school governance requirements of the school policies since 1991. In principle, the Eritrean Ministry of Education (MOE) permits the PTAs to participate in decision-making and develop major responsibilities for school governance. However, in practice, schools are still financed and administered by the government. To this end, the PTAs contribution so far is very limited in scope. More specifically, the study attempts to:

- *Explain how the decentralized education policy works and to what extent parental participation in school governance takes place.*
- *Review the international literature on the decentralization of school governance.*
- *Assess the effects of decentralization discourse in school governance.*
- *Explore factors, which inform and shape the involvement of parents in the decision-making in secondary schools in Eritrea.*
- *Investigate the views of secondary school principals on the governance of their schools in Eritrea.*
- *Investigate the possibilities of more parental involvement in school governance in Eritrea.*
- *Analyze the issues relating to decentralization of school governance and the increased participation of parents in schools*
- *Make concluding recommendations to improve school governance in Eritrea.*

1.5. Rationale for the study

I am motivated to examine and investigate how the structure of school governance and participatory decision-making takes place in Eritrea. The motivation of this research stems from my experience as a high school principal in one of the schools in Eritrea. I have realized that there is a great need and challenge to involve parents in school decision-making activities. Of course, to leave the burden solely to the government is unwise and not at all cost-effective. Major shifts have taken place in school governance and there is widespread support for decentralized educational governance. Internationally, there has been a shift in all directions, with some systems emphasizing centralization and others decentralization with some doing both and others doing neither. The trend seems to be more towards decentralization but there has been a swing back to centralization in some countries.

The issue of community participation in the school governance and control of education has been central to many education struggles. In Eritrea there has been minimal progress in the past decade. Broadly speaking, the PTAs in Eritrea are expected to strive for furthering and enhancing educational aims of the school within the community. The hope and expectation of the Eritrean MOE is that PTAs play a crucial role in inculcating a democratic approach to decision-making. I have direct experience of the school

organizational challenges of involving parents in school activities. It is the hope that this study, which as far as has been established, has not yet been undertaken in Eritrea, will contribute to a better understanding of parental involvement in decision-making in school governance.

1.6. Research questions

The central research question therefore is:

Does the decentralization policy in Eritrea promote parental participation in decision-making in secondary school governance?

This main research question breaks down into a number of sub-questions.

1. *What does the literature say about the centralization/decentralization dichotomy in relation to parental participation in decision-making in the international context?*
2. *What are some of the major challenges and opportunities of decentralization with regard to parental participation in secondary school governance in Eritrea?*
3. *What are the factors that facilitate the involvement of parents in the decision-making in secondary schools in Eritrea?*
4. *To what extent do parents show involvement in secondary school governance in Eritrea?*
5. *What problems do principals face in optimizing parental involvement in secondary school activities in Eritrea?*
6. *How can the Ministry of Education be encouraged to expand local school governance?*
7. *What solutions can be proposed to resolve the problems encountered in developing parental participation in secondary school governance in Eritrea?*

1.7. Significance of the study

I hope that this study will make a significant contribution to the existing literature on school governance in Eritrea. In particular, it will contribute to the existing knowledge on the nature and the extent to which parents (PTAs) take part in the decision-making of their respective schools. It is hoped that this study will provoke new thought and discussion on issues of policy and practice of decentralization strategy to inject parental

participation into school governance with the empowerment of parents in decision-making in the Eritrean secondary schools. While extensive studies of community or parental participation in the decision-making of school governance have been made elsewhere, no such study has been undertaken in Eritrea to the best of my knowledge.

1.8. Theoretical framework

A strong community based participation in schools can bring better provision of educational services and empowerment of local people on issues, which affect their affairs. This means that the level of parents as well as community participation affects the quality of education in schools. The participation of communities tends to be elicited and solicited through the greater commitment, motivation and success of teachers' involvement in improving schooling. In this sense, community participation is one of the ends rather than the means of improving the quality of teaching and learning.

The Eritrean MOE wants the parents or the community to be involved in the school governance. Such aspects of readiness of devolving the decision-making power to the local level is in agreement with the notion of decentralization and democratization of school governance. Therefore, I shall pursue my discussion with an understanding of how the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) evolved since 1991 in Eritrea. The Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE) on November 1991 issued a legal notice (No.2/1991) that describes the relationship between school and parents. The name given to the structure was the Parents Committee (PC) (MOE, PGE proclamation, 1991: 26-31). In 1998, the Eritrean MOE came with a new proposal to transform the PC into a PTA with more emphasis on institutionalizing and organizational structure. The PTA guidelines were drafted in 1998 and were also revised in 2000 with some improvements on how to increase parental involvement in decision-making. It outlined the duties and responsibilities vested in the parents.

I shall not stick to one school of thought or paradigm but investigate several theories to assist me in developing a theoretical framework. Theory can be confirmed or generated through qualitative studies by providing a strategy for collecting, describing, or explaining data. According to Denzin (1978), the function of theory is to give order and insight so that theory and research guide each other. The organizing framework used will take me in a particular direction. I shall follow mostly critical theory "lenses" to see

or argue my research topic. In a broader sense, a critical framework will guide my project work. Critical theory is an approach that treats people as creative, compassionate living beings and not as objects. It raises questions about power, and particularly inequality, and it views social relations more as the outcomes of useful actions than laws of human nature. Through the critical framework, a system of relationships and the dynamics of parental participation in the decision-making process in the school governance will be uncovered. Baumgartner and Strong (1998: 179) contend that:

> the roots of critical theory are in Neo-Marxism; as a researcher perspective it is concerned with the political beliefs of both the investigator and subjects. Empowerment and emancipation are possible results of the research, often precipitating social action on the part of both researcher and participants. The qualitative paradigm is concerned with feelings and emotions as well as experience.

The perspective that makes such insight possible is that of critical reflection which liberates or emancipates actors from false beliefs and subsequently leads to concrete proposals for overcoming oppression. The most important dimension of critical theory is the fact that it is driven by the emancipatory interest. Its purpose is to contribute to change in people's understanding of themselves and their practices and thus free them from constraints of society. Carr and Kemmis (1986: 162) argue that:

> Critical educational theory strives to engender self-reflective enquiry amongst individuals to bring about the clear articulation of arguments in an atmosphere of openness to overcome ideological distortions generated within social relations and institutions.

Critical educational theory alleges that positivist and interpretive theories, at best, only describe or explain the social world, and that critical educational theory provides resources both to criticize and change the social world. For critical theory "… the truth or falsity of (its) theories will be partially determined by whether they are in fact translated into action" (Fay, 1975: 95).

In conclusion, critical theory does not produce a 'theory', it develops theories specific to the particular situation with which it is concerned-theories that have a particular purpose to help people to change an unsatisfactory situation. Thus, critical theorists are interested in a critique of existing ideologies and their concern to create an awareness of the possibility of a break with the existing structure of domination. They have a commitment to praxis in which theory

and practice define and shape each other, praxis aimed at self-emancipation of human subjects.

1.9. Limitations of the study

Time constraint was a major limiting factor in this study. The time given for data collection (fieldwork in Eritrea) was about three months. In fact, there was some inconvenience regarding the constraint on time due to the first semester examination period and the semester break of schools in Eritrea, which amounted to almost one month.

The two high schools in this study are not fully representative of the whole population because the study was conducted in two regions out of all six regions in Eritrea. Unfortunately, lack of access to a few PTA members and unavailability of policy documents particularly with regard to decentralization as enhancement to parental participation was one of its shortcomings. A few of the respondents were not fully aware and knowledgeable about the topic itself. The interviews were administered in the respondents' vernacular language, i.e., Tigrigna and I had to translate the responses into English. To this end, there was a lack of direct meaning for some phrases or words to be changed from Tigrigna to English, in which case I used my own interpretations and may not have captured the original or intended meaning. Hence, this by itself was a limitation to the study.

Lastly, I acknowledge the fact that my own values, beliefs and judgment cannot be ignored in what I was investigating, and similarly, that the values, beliefs, and limitations of those I was interviewing might have affected the data of the research study. Therefore, I would make it clear right from the outset that my understanding and background together with resource constraints would have affected the research findings to some extent.

1.10. Delimitation and scope of the study

Eritrea is subdivided into six administrative regions (Zobas), namely: Semenawi Kieh Bahri, Debubawi Kieh Bahri, Anseba, Maekel, Debub, and Gash Barka (MOE, 1998: 7). The scope of this study is confined to a sample of two secondary schools, one from each

of the two regions, namely, Zoba Maekel and Zoba Anseba. There are twenty-one secondary schools, sixteen in the Maekel region and five in the Anseba region. The scope of the study was limited to parental (PTAs) participation on school governance in the decision-making of secondary schools in the post independence (1991) Eritrea.

1.11. Operational definitions of terms

The departure point for any line of enquiry is an acceptable definition for the construct which is investigated. For the sake of clarity the following definitions are used in this study.

Parent: A person serving on a committee or a governing body such as the chairperson, secretary or treasurer, etc. This refers to (a) the natural parent of a learner, (b) the guardian of a learner, (c) a person legally entitled to custody (physical control) of a learner, and (d) a person who undertakes to act as a parent of a learner for the purpose of the learner's education at school (DOE, 1997: VIII).

Parental involvement: can be defined as efforts which enable parents and families to participate as partners in the educational process at home or in school (Epstein, 2001: 327).

Learner: Any person, whether a child or an adult, who receives education or must receive education in terms of the Schools Act (*DOE,* 1997: VII).

Decentralization: is defined as the transfer of decision-making authority, responsibility, and tasks from higher to lower organizational levels or between organizations (Hanson, 1998: 112). Similarly, decentralization is the devolution of power to lower levels of government to enable them to decide on issues of policy with regard to funding, allocation of resources, decision-making process, ability to raise funds locally, and ultimately to be accountable (Peano, 1999: 187).

Empowerment: Vogt and Murrell (1990) see empowerment as enabling, allowing or permitting and can be conceived as both self-initiated and initiated by others. For social change agents, empowering is an act of building, developing, and increasing power through cooperation, sharing and working together. Empowerment is an initiated process that enables the masses to gain power and extend it in such a way that they can

use this power to share in changing social, economic and political structures (Vogt and Murrell, 1990: 8).

Community participation: The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) defines community participation as organized effort to increase control over resources and regulate institutions by groups and movements of those excluded from such control, and that redistribution of power is involved (Shepherd, 1998: 179). Oakley defined community involvement as a process by which partnership is established between government and local communities in planning, implementation and utilization of educational activities in order to benefit from increased local self-reliance and social control over the infrastructure/ education (Oakley, 1991: 49).

Parent-Teacher-Association (PTA): This is a name of the association established for teachers, students and parents of one school who are organized, together and working for the development of education and the students (MOE, 2000: 3).

1.12. Brief outline of the research methodology

An in-depth investigation of parental involvement in decision-making of school governance is to be undertaken. The rationale is based on the notion that schools should fall under the auspices of parents and the management of schools be vested in Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). The study focused on two secondary schools in two different regions (Zobas) characterized by different socio-economic backgrounds. The schools were selected by purposive and convenience sampling that is discussed in depth in Chapter Three.

The methodological choice I embarked upon is the qualitative research paradigm, which is suited to dealing with people's attitudes and perceptions. Thus, I applied critical theory frameworks that would direct me to explore how and the extent to which parents participated in the decision-making process in school governance. These approaches give participants enough space to voice and express their feelings, opinions and perceptions. Baumgartner and Strong (1998: 174) contend that:

the term qualitative research is an umbrella term referring to several research traditions and strategies that share certain commonalities. There is an emphasis on process, or how things happen, and a focus on attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts-how people make sense of their experiences as they interpret their world.

Apart from using predominantly qualitative research methods, the study includes a relevant survey of international literature on parental participation in decision-making in educational governance. Specifically, the notion of centralization and decentralization of educational governance, parental involvement and participation in the decision-making, parental empowerment, and parent-school collaboration, will be discussed. A survey of these subjects in the international literature assists in two more specific ways. First, it helps to define mechanisms of parents', teachers' and students' involvement in the decision-making in school governance. Second, it assists to develop and strengthen the argument that despite all the problems associated with it, parental involvement in education does indeed make a difference.

The methodological strategies employed by the researcher to address the basic research questions are semi-structured interviews with PTAs members and the MOE officials, documentary analysis of PTA guidelines, PTA meeting minute books, and an overview observation of the two schools. Interviews (except for one) were conducted in Tigrigna to enable me to identify the interviewees' real perceptions through a smooth flow of ideas about the issue in their home language. One interview was done in English. The focus of the interviews was on parents and other stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes and opinions around their participation in the decision-making process.

In conclusion, those who embark upon qualitative research are faced with moral and ethical questions in relation to gaining and disclosing information. "The researcher is ethically responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of the subjects while conducting a study" (McMillan and Schumacher, 1993: 23). Participants in the data gathering process were told of the aims and purposes of the research study. Further, they were also informed that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained, and that the names of schools and individuals would not be divulged.

1.13. Organization of the study

This study consists of five chapters. The first chapter provides readers with an introduction to the brief history of Eritrea, background of the study, statement of the problem, aims of the study, rationale for the study, research questions, significance of the study, theoretical framework, limitations of the study, delimitation and scope of the study, operational definitions of terms, as well as a brief outline of the research methodology.

Chapter Two gives a detailed account of the literature on educational governance, the centralization and decentralization debate in educational governance, parental participation in decision-making, parental empowerment, and a comparative study of decentralization with regard to parental involvement in decision-making. This chapter is a review of the relevant international and national literature of the topic under study. The chapter concludes with some policy statements around the issue of parental participation in school governance decision-making.

Chapter Three outlines and discusses in-depth the qualitative methodology used in this study. The process and techniques in gathering and analyzing the data are discussed thoroughly. Chapter Four deals with data presentation, analysis and interpretation. The research findings are explained according to certain themes that emerged from the responses of the informants during the interviews.

Finally, Chapter Five discusses the results of the research findings. Conclusions and recommendations are made on the basis of the research findings. The study is concluded with the bibliography and relevant appendices.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

In many parts of the world, good and sufficient education, needed more now than ever before, is more and more difficult to find. Governments, the customary providers of such education, are increasingly unable to supply it and, if supplied, to sustain and improve it. As a result, the traditional centralized, top-down processes of educational development are more frequently being called into doubt. In such a situation, governments and donors, decision makers and planners, educators and trainers must be willing and able to look at other approaches of development and other patterns of planning, financing, and managing education (Shaeffer, 1992: 6).

The most important influences on the quality of education systems and much of the resources needed for improving them are located at the local level. Educational policy makers often focus on decisions and programmes at the control level. In practice, however, it is the teachers, trainers along with learners and local communities who shape the development of schools and other institutions (GOE, 2001: 114). Efforts to improve the education system and to upgrade the quality of the schools require a great deal of work in local communities. Hence, to achieve that and to maximize the local contributions to education, there will be a need to decentralize both responsibility and authority to the local levels.

In the Eritrean context, decentralization as a strategy for transferring certain levels of responsibility and authority to regional administrations has been operational since the proclamation of decree No.86 in 1996 (*Ibid.*). Within the framework of this decree, regional administrations have been empowered to take decisions on a wide range of education issues in consultation with local communities.

It is often remarked that the move the centre of decision-making concerning educational management is closer to local realities; the more educational programmes are effective and adapted to the needs of society. The decentralization and democratization of decision-making powers are also perceived by some as catalysts for innovation, leading

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to higher efficiency in the management of resources on which depends, in part, the optimal achievements of educational objectives (Peano, 1997: 35).

The issue of community participation in the school governance and control of education has been central to education struggles. In the Eritrean context, there has been minimal progress in this regard in the past decade. In the guidelines of the PTA, the MOE has vested greater autonomy and responsibility in parents to the extent that they can exercise their voice and have a say in academic matters and indeed they can be involved in most decision-making activities of the schools. Eritrea is a developing poor country in the Sub-Saharan region and unfortunately there is lack of resources, capacity and skills. In most rural areas participation of PTAs is merely superficial and they confine their involvement to contributing to routine activities such as in fund-raising. Importantly, the relationship between parents, teachers and the community is the cornerstone of the life of the school. Thus, the main role of the local PTA is to build a strong working relationship amongst parents, teachers, principals and schools in support of students.

The identification of the critical importance of local school governance is very essential. It is the level of representative democracy closest to the people. Thus, the local school will often be involved in the allocation of resources directly affecting communities. To this end, local authority administrations need to be structured in such a way as to ensure maximum participation of civil society and communities in decision-making and development initiatives of local authorities (ANC, 1994: 129).

2.2. The theoretical underpinnings of decentralization

Since the late 1980s there has been a global trend in education systems towards the decentralization of decision-making power. Decentralization of the governance or control of education is today often recommended as a solution for low levels of participation by communities, teachers and parents in the decision-making. It is argued that increased local participation will help resolve problems of insufficient finance and management inefficiencies. Nonetheless, proposals for decentralization or centralization, have no intrinsic merit, but they are evaluated in terms of which groups in society are mostly likely to benefit by their imposition (Arnove *et al.*, 1992).

Decentralizing power is aimed at reducing centralized bureaucratic control over schools that often prevents them from responding to change and transforming their

environments in order to meet the needs of the community they serve. However, there should be at least a balance of power and authority between state departments and local schools. Therefore, it is not a question of centralized or decentralized control; in fact, all decisions should retain a degree of centralized and decentralized input. According to Squelch (1999: 129), decentralized school governance is a democratic form of governance based on the principles of representation, equity and participation. In practice, the myriad of policies and practices that make up the operations of a school will shift between these two approaches along a continuum (*Ibid.*).

2.2.1. Centralization/decentralization debate in educational governance

The centralization-decentralization debate on school governance will remain a contentious issue. Any weakness in the system, be it central, regional, sub-regional, or local (school) levels is likely to have a bearing on the entire system. Reasons that are put forward as an argument in favour of either centralization or decentralization, lend strong support to the movement beyond the either /or dichotomy. This is because, in practice, once the broad objectives and goals of the system have been formulated, the decision as to where different policy and administrative functions are located should not be seen as something sacrosanct or cast in stone (Karlsson *et al.,* 1996: 116). Indeed, it is something that should be flexible and negotiable. Thus, the problem of educational governance should be conceptualized in terms of the transference of power over specific policy functions to different levels of the system. Naturally, a proper evaluation of the capacity, experience and the needs of the system at a particular time is one of the factors that will invariably determine which 'modus operandi' will be best suited to the system as a whole (*Ibid.*).

Mashishi (1994) contends that educational decentralization is a major thrust of international efforts aimed at restructuring the education system. A survey of the international literature reveals two important aspects about the centralization-decentralization debate. First, there is evidence that throughout the world, the governance debate revolves around these two structural arrangements. Buckland and Hofmeyr (1992: 3) argue that:

> *the main structural difference between education systems is the extent to which they are centralized or decentralized over time. Centralized or decentralized systems remain very different structurally, although a*

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progressive segmentation and systematization develops side by side after the initial emergence of each type of system.

Second, the international literature reveals that there is no absolute case for either centralization or decentralization of education governance since all the benefits usually associated with each are not necessarily caused by either of the two. The policy of decentralization may be an outcome of the failure and weakness of centralized forms of governance. In his study of the democratic governance of education, Fraser (1988) argues that centralization may not only fail to respond to the needs of education consumers at lower levels of the education system, but may also deny parents, teachers and students space to effectively influence the education system at the level where decisions are not only made but also operationalized.

Lauglo and McLean (1985) have identified the benefits of decentralization as mainly administrative, political and ideological. It is however, clear that it can also create new problems, as Bray (1984: 17) notes:

> *decentralization cannot be seen as a means of achieving a wide range of objectives, it should not be seen as a solution to all problems and a panacea for all evils. The extent to which decentralization will achieve any objectives depends on its degree and form, most of the objectives which decentralization is intended to achieve cannot be achieved by decentralization alone. Decentralization can itself create new problems, the nature and extent of which depends on its degree, form and factors specific to the country in question.*

One could argue that while there is evidence to support that decentralized education governance systems have had problems of their own, there is, however, nothing wrong with decentralization *per se*. Decentralized decision-making is more time consuming and the fact that there are more constituencies involved in the process creates the potential for conflict. Lindle (1996: 20) points out that decentralization has upset the status quo because teachers and principals no longer dominate the decision-making process; other groups are now represented in councils.

Decentralization by itself is no panacea for all solutions of national educational problems. For this reason, Fiske (1996) and Bray (1984) note that it is important in designing a decentralization plan to be aware of other factors that are likely to have an impact on its success or failure. Effective decentralization will demand a well-conceived plan for sharing of powers. As a minimum, efficiency gains would require a supply of

talent and commitment at local levels to take advantage of the new structure. In short, decentralization is appropriately viewed as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the improvement of teaching and learning. It can create an enabling environment for improved learning but it cannot, as an organizational strategy, ensure that learning will improve in the absence of other changes.

As opposed to the above discussion, in some countries, decentralization has been regarded almost as a panacea, and has been expected to achieve objectives that are unrealistic and sometimes even contradictory. Bray (1984: 1) argues:

> *More circumspect governments have also encountered the complexities of decentralization. Many projects have proved unexpectedly difficult to operate, and some planners have found their intentions frustrated by the activities of pressure groups within the population. Decentralization of powers is often resisted by officers at the center who did not wish to lose their political influence and means of livelihood, and it is sometimes abused at local levels by factions which become petty tyrants.*

Following from the above discussion, I put forward my view that neither complete centralization nor decentralization would be desirable. Rather than thinking in terms of a centralization-decentralization polarity, it would be better to think in terms of the distribution of power to a great many actors within and outside the school system.

As it has been noted previously, a centralized system of education can be characterized as a system which concentrates decision-making powers at the centre, whilst a decentralized system of educational governance would entail the devolution of powers to lower levels, for instance, the regional, district or local levels. The point being made is that the degree of centralization-decentralization of decision-making differs by component in many education systems. For example, curriculum decisions in one education system may be highly centralized at the same time that school construction and finance are very decentralized. Practically, most education systems are a mixed model, reflecting both centralization and decentralization. Thus, one would argue that striking the balance between the two seems to be the most appropriate policy of educational governance.

On the other hand, despite the advantages pointed out in the earlier discussion, many arguments are propounded by those opposed to the decentralization of public services in general, especially where education is concerned. The reduction in regional disparity,

which is one of the explicit objectives of any education system, is harder to achieve in decentralized systems than in centralized systems. Opponents of decentralization often justify their opposition by purely political arguments. For them, the decentralization of education systems weakens the central powers and harms national unity (Peano, 1996: 36). Many educators share the view point of Bray (1987), who considers that debt-ridden countries suffering from a lack of resources use decentralization as an escape hatch, but one that has a negative impact on education.

The point is not that decentralization is an unpromising strategy for those countries that take such initiatives, only that these countries should examine carefully the promise of the strategy in their own contexts. And this ought to begin with a consideration of the fundamental structure and purposes of decentralization. The present governance strategy has to be seen in a historical and comparative perspective. Therefore, the time and place in which decentralization occurs will affect the arguments and the understanding of rationales behind the process (Karlsen, 2000: 529). Further, Ball (1993) and Symth (1993) argue that the notion of decentralization ought to be understood within the context of resource availability, social responsibility and accountability.

2.2.2. The different forms of decentralization

Lauglo (1990) contends that the policy of decentralization is adopted for different reasons. These reasons ranged from the adoption of decentralization as an economic tool to relieve governments of their fiscal overload to the adoption of the policy as an administrative strategy to manage tensions between centralization and decentralization. Accordingly, decentralization can take different forms. According to Fiske (1996: 10), the three kinds of decentralization are as follows:

> The weakest form of decentralization is **deconcentration,** which is no more than the shifting of management responsibilities from the central to regional or other lower levels in such a way that the central ministry remains firmly in control. **Delegation** is a more extensive approach to decentralization under which central authorities lend authority to lower levels of government, with the understanding that delegated authority can be withdrawn. **Devolution** is the most far-reaching form of decentralization in that the transfer of authority over financial, administrative, or pedagogical matters is permanent and cannot be revoked at the whim of central officials.

These distinctions are relevant to strategic thinking because, like administrative decentralization, deconcentration and delegation can be carried out as a matter of

government policy without extensive outside consultation. Further, most authors agree on classifying the different forms of decentralization as deconcentration, delegation, devolution (Fiske, 1996: 10; Lauglo, 1990: 30, 1995: 21; Hanson, 1998: 112; Bray, 1996, 1999 and Winkler, 1989: 5). Few others, however, add privatization as the fourth form of decentralization, which is the total transfer of authority to private firms or individuals (Rondinelli *et al.*, 1983). Privatization would involve decentralization, although it does not necessarily guarantee a greater degree of participation in decision-making by community members (Buckland and Hofmeyr, 1992: 6).

Deconcentration is the "weakest form of decentralization" (Bray, 1996: 10). Even though management responsibilities are shifted from the central state to lower levels, the central ministry of education remains very much in control; or as Lauglo puts it, "deconcentrated authority remains state authority" (Lauglo, 1995: 21). Moreover, Buckland and Hofmeyr (1992: 6) and Sayed (1992: 4) see deconcentration, in its weakest sense, as simply meaning the relocating of administrative offices of central government to regions or smaller communities, but it does not imply real decentralization since decision-making powers remain with the central authority.

Delegation normally implies a transmission of tasks and administrative responsibilities related to specific functions, usually defined by central authorities (Karlsen, 2000: 526). In this sense, the decentralization of tasks does not necessarily mean a shift of power because the local agents generally are only given the role of executing decisions made at central level. On the other hand, delegation may indicate an extended local autonomy simply because total central control is difficult. In terms of delegation the lower levels of government are authorized to carry out prescribed responsibilities on behalf of the central authority. The delegated authority is of no guarantee as it depends on the whims of the central authority (Lauglo, 1995). Delegation becomes decentralization only in the sense that it transfers power away from the central administration, and not necessarily to local levels.

Hanson (1998) and Bray (1999) assert that devolution is a transfer of authority to an autonomous unit that can act independently without permission from the centre. According to Winkler (1989: 4), devolution implies "the creation of autonomous and independent sub-national units of government which have authority to raise revenues and spend it." Lastly, decentralization as devolution implies the transmission of

authority and real responsibility from central to local bodies (McGinn, 1992), and it is the only category of decentralization in which local authority and independence is clearly increased.

2.2.3. Rationales for decentralization

The different forms of decentralization do not necessarily reflect the different rationales for the adoption of the policy of decentralization. Against this background, I will forward some of the rationales for the policy of decentralization.

Political goals

The political rationale for educational decentralization is to redistribute, share and extend power and enhance participation by removing centralized control over educational decision-making (Lauglo and McLean, 1985 and Prawda, 1993). Likewise, Bray (1996) and Fiske (1996) argue that this rationale of decentralization facilitates participatory democracy and also legitimizes the state. Central to a political rationale is the redistribution of power from the central state in order to enhance participation of other levels in decision-making. However, the political rationale for decentralization could also be used as a means by which certain groups seek to create buffers against central authority when they expect to lose power. For example, in its negotiations preceding majority rule in South Africa, the National Party sought to redirect the power to provincial governments (Lauglo, 1995: 8).

Educational improvement

As noted at the outset, virtually all exponents of school decentralization claim that such reorganization will improve the quality of teaching and learning by locating decisions closer to the point at which they must be carried out and by energizing teachers and administrators to do a better job. Lauglo (1995) sees rationales for decentralization, which claim equality and efficiency in the light of pedagogic professionalism (autonomy from professionals), management by objectives (effective use of available resources by systematically monitoring achievement) and market mechanisms or ideology (discourse of choice, competition, consumers and the product, education).

The quality and efficiency rationales are believed to be bringing untapped local and private resources into the overall resource pool available to education. According to Prawda (1993), the quality rationale also argues that decentralization can provide greater sensitivity to local cultural variations and the matching of students' and schools' specific learning environments with national learning agendas or curriculum, usually set by central authorities. Under this paradigm, one would presume, that additional regional and local relevance is nurtured into the educational system of a given country.

Administrative efficiency

The administrative argument for decentralization is that centralized systems are bureaucratic and wasteful and that empowering authorities at regional or local levels will result in a more efficient system because it eliminates overlays of bureaucratic procedure and motivates education officials to be more productive. According to Sayed (1997: 2), the administrative rationale for decentralization is meant to:

> ...*focus on structural issues relative to the educational system and principally concerned with the way in which educational resources are distributed, managed and utilized. The key questions are, how education can be most efficiently and effectively provided and what the reflexive and flexible structure is for meeting local recipient needs.*

The idea of the responsive state (i.e. by way of distributing, managing and utilizing educational resources) in decentralized education system is challenged by Bray (1996: 27). The administrative dimension focuses on the structural issues relating to the education system and is primarily concerned with the distribution and management of educational resources. The concentration is on the effective and efficient utilization of resources in meeting local needs. The administrative dimension has to do with policy implementation rather than development and determination of educational policies. Practically, priorities and control over key policy decisions may still be in the centre (Sayed, 1998). This, according to Sayed, suggests that administrative decentralization is compatible with centralization in its real sense.

Financial efficiency

In most Sub-Saharan African countries, Peano (1999) claims that very few regions can generate sufficient resources all alone. The possibility for local representatives to draw on revenues from local taxes are generally very restricted, due to the extremely reduced

tax base of African economies. The overriding role of the central government in this situation leads one to believe that real autonomous decision-making of regions and villages concerning the financing of education will only be possible when there has been an improvement in overall economic performance.

Similarly, the changing of tax regulations favouring an increase of revenues from local communities seems indispensable to move from the simple process of decentralizing administrative services to that of a genuine devolution of decision-making powers in the area of education. According to Peano (1999: 49) real decision-making autonomy for management and financing at the local level requires a minimum of resources raised locally which should be supplemented by a contribution from a state. Hence, the widening of the revenue base of a decentralized administration should be one of the prime aims of decentralization. During times of economic hardship, decentralization may actually facilitate the reduction of financial resources for education (Hannaway, 1994; cited in Fiske, 1996: 26). Further, Rondinelli (1995) cited in Fiske (1996: 26) points out that financial stability is a matter of both will and capacity. Against this background, he emphasizes that:

> *In many countries local governments or administrative units process the legal authority to impose taxes, but the tax base is so weak and the dependence on central government subsidy so ingrained that no attempt is made to exercise that authority.*

Once again, the impact of decentralization on spending for education is as much a function of context and external economic and political conditions as it is a function of decentralization itself. Prawda (1993) recognizes that shifting part of the financial burden to sub national unit governments, to community and voluntary organizations, and to the private sector, has become an increasingly attractive alternative. The efficiency argument addresses the issue of how the education resources are used. This rationale argues that by allowing local units of government, which are geographically and culturally close to the local recipients of the educational services, to decide on where and how to allocate resources, the productivity in the educational system will be improved. Further, this rationale also argues that the decentralized units will become accountable for their resource allocation decisions.

Effects of equity

Decentralization is likely to permit and perhaps encourage social inequalities, while conversely, centralization provides a mechanism for reducing inequality; but whether that mechanism is actually used depends on goals and the will power at the apex of the system. According to Fiske (1996), one negative consequence of decentralization has to do with widening performance gaps between students in wealthy and poor areas. Indeed, I contend that in many cases decentralization exacerbates existing rich-poor gaps. Highly decentralized systems commonly permit sub-national bodies to retain most or all of the resources, which they generate. Since prosperous communities can afford better quality and/or greater quantities of education, disparities remain or even widen.

The Eritrean Government is committed to make the gap smaller between the communities in rural and urban areas. The government is laying down infrastructure-schools, clinics, hospitals and other projects in the remote areas just to have equity in education and provide health facilities throughout the country. In fact, there is no marked difference between the rich and poor families regarding education and health since almost all the infrastructure are owned by the government at present. However, there is a slight difference felt between urban and rural schools due to the socio-economic status of the communities.

In addition, local areas with abundant financial and human resources are in a better position than those with fewer resources to make maximum use of decentralized power, and even where there are universal educational gains, it is the wealthy schools that are most likely to make the greatest gains. Decentralization will certainly have implications for equity. It can exacerbate regional inequalities; teachers with similar qualifications may receive vastly different salaries in different parts of the country that can create migratory movement of the best teachers and sometimes lack of qualified experts can be the challenging question of equity (Prawda, 1993).

On the other hand, dangers and fears should be generally acknowledged and plans should be made to minimize negative consequences. Central authorities can take steps to ensure that poor schools have the necessary financial and other resources to make use of the flexibility and other positive features of decentralization. Fiske (1996: 28) argues that reserving a role for the central government is to monitor the impact and take compensatory steps, such as special grants to low performing schools, to preserve

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increased equity as an objective of school reform. In line with this, the government has to intervene with appropriate local strategies so as to maintain and balance between the rich and poor communities in a way to make the gap smaller. Thus, decentralization or centralization are instrumental options and should not be seen as ends in themselves. Equity, on the other hand, is a matter of ends. People have the same rights, and educational services are there to help ensure those rights.

2.3. Parental involvement

The parental involvement in school governance can be pursued through involving parents in the management and the governance of their local schools. Parental participation, as emphasized by Shaeffer (1992), can be initiated through the establishment of parents associations and collaboration of various stakeholders in the school governance. Parental involvement of this kind has been common in many places as a result of the inherited interest of families and communities in the education system. Education thereby becomes part of the community and not a separate institution imposed by the state.

Looking at the community participation, the fundamental key to understanding the dynamics of decentralization and participation is to look at the relationship between the state and civil society. It is a common belief by many that the state is the only institution that is best able to implement, guarantee, and effect quality and democracy. Since it possesses the appropriate institutional infrastructure, it is seen as effective and capable of yielding political authority, generating economic wealth and social order needed in society (Held, 1987). From this perspective, the government is thus central to the democratization and decentralization of the education system.

Wood (1991) argues that there is a growing awareness that parental participation can be both a means to a better education and an end itself. As a means, parental participation and collaboration is considered as a way of providing more resources, facilities and even more places within the education system. Parental participation also helps the school to become more relevant to local needs and conditions by making it more effective and efficient through community input and monitoring of both pupil and teacher attendance and assisting the community to see value in the school, an institution often seen as alien. At the community level parental participation in school governance can lead to greater

control over information, the formation of alliance and networks, more effective management of local resources and the development and strengthening of local organizations. At the social level, parental participation can lead to lower development costs, greater equity of benefits, continuity and sustainability of development programmes (Wood, 1991).

Implicitly, democratic and decentralized governance can be a significant indicator of transformation at the lowest level of education systems, but there are a number of problems linked to it. Among the most crucial is the issue that schools are teacher professional territories. Consequently, parents do not find it helpful to interfere with what they regard as the responsibility of teachers. It is not also clear how far teachers are prepared to collaborate with parents. Furthermore, parents' will and capacity to participate needs to be questioned.

For many years, schools and families understood themselves as having separate and distinct roles in children's lives. Schools had little reason to interact with families on a regular basis. As long as schools did their job (teaching), and families did their job (nurturing), that's all, everything went fairly smoothly. The school is seen to know what was 'best' for children educationally and provided parents with limited information (Fleming, 1997: 77).

Under this paradigm of school-home relationships, the flow of information was limited and often unidirectional. On one hand, convinced that teaching was best left to the professionals, the schools may have reacted to parents' suggestions as an attempt to "takeover" (*Ibid*.). If decentralization is to have a meaningful impact on improving instructional quality, community members have to know what constitutes effective instructional practice and school management (Chapman *et al*., 2002: 182). In many decentralization efforts, authority is being devolved rather quickly to individuals who have limited experience with the issue of school management and in some cases, limited interest in assuming those responsibilities. I agree with Chapman *et al* (2002) and thus, implementing a decentralization policy does little if those vested with making decision about their schools have little idea of what to do.

Communities that have little experience with decentralized decision-making need training in how to participate effectively in the decision-making. Through continuous training programmes aimed at helping citizens develop the knowledge and

understanding that support meaningful community participation in education decision-making is essentially crucial. Schuftan (1996) sees capacity building as the approach to community development that raises people's knowledge, awareness and skills to use their own capacity and that from available support systems, to resolve the more underlying causes of underdevelopment. To this end, it would help parents to better understand the decision-making processes, to communicate more effectively at different levels and eventually instill in them a sense of confidence to manage their own affairs (Schuftan, 1996: 261).

Schools are not the only places that provide conditions or situations for teaching and learning to occur; homes and communities help equally. Regardless of the particular setting, however, 'teachers' play particular roles in effecting the learning process. Professionally trained teachers in schools, and parents and community members outside schools influence the learning process. While differences in the levels of attainment are evident, all three settings have a common purpose in making the learners acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that help them develop into productive members of the family, community and society (Shaeffer, 1992: 109).

Operationally, parents and community members, with guidance from teachers, monitor the performance of their own children, in schools and at home or in the community. They assist the children in their assigned learning tasks or projects. They discuss with teachers, administrators and with the children themselves the gathered information on teaching learning activities, children's performance, problems and constraints which they perceive as critical to boosting children's achievement. Under this collaborative programme, parents and community members actively assume the role of partners of teachers and administrators in the once exclusive domain of professionally trained teachers (*Ibid.*). Communities' involvement can be difficult since the administrative and management activities are quite new to the PTAs. It is quite important that adequate time and attention is devoted to assisting them to learn how to carry out their duties. On the other hand, "more valuable time which could be spent in discussing schooling issues and difficulties may get side-tracked into assisting in sorting out administrative and practical difficulties" (Condy, 1998: 13).

Charkin and Willams (1987) note that objections to parental involvement in terms of managing the running of schools could also create problems. These include

administrative matters such as equipment purchase, maintenance of school properties, fund-raising and job performance appraisals of staff. The need to consult with parents on each decision taken is thus seen as time wasting and inefficient. Against this background and in search of greater responsibility and accountability in the partnership between teachers lies the problem associated with parents' capacity to participate (Meyer, 1996: 54). To the larger extent, parents who lack relevant skills were influenced and manipulated by school authorities, namely teachers and in particular principals (Sithole, 1994). The issue of capacity is key to parents been trained to be able to deal with a highly complex subject of school governance. Moreover, these include governance matters such as the handling of finance, policy formulation and maintenance of schools.

Locus of control and decision-making powers has resided mainly in the school principal with minimal participation from teachers, parents or students. The principals viewed the schools as their domain, organizing and managing them according to their particular frame of reference and leadership styles. Holt and Murphy note that school leaders in most countries in the past have been "lords in their own education fiefdoms," (Holt and Murphy, 1993: 175). Moreover, although school governing bodies (PTAs) have played an important role in school management, this role has been of a supportive nature, which limited decision-making powers. In contrast to this centralized, authoritarian and non-participative approach, is the decentralized, cooperative (participative) approach, which has gained increasing favour over the past two or so decades.

Equally important, it is the principals who essentially dictate how community involvement might develop in their particular school. While not understanding the significance of empowering teachers and parents through the development of multiple and shared leadership roles as noted by Jackson (2000), it remains important not to forget Southworth's (1999: 62) observation that principals 'remain' pivotal players in their schools… they are the centrifugal force in schools.

He goes on by saying that committed leadership by principals helps build trust between parents and schools. In such situations, the principal leads by example, setting the tone and creating an atmosphere of mutual respect, understanding, and problem solving. When principals openly invite parents into the school and encourage them to be actively involved in a variety of ways, parents receive a message that their presence is welcomed

and valued. An important part of an administrator's role might involve helping teachers improve their communication with parents or develop new ways of communicating. Principals also should make sure to reward the teachers' successful efforts to build partnership with parents.

Principals can play a crucial role in initiating outreach activities and attitudes, set policy that encourage outreach, provide resources and support for activities, facilitate when barriers are encountered, and reward risk-taking. In such a context, principals also need to be aware of the potential for burnout of committed parents or educators who inadvertently become responsible for maintaining a good programme over an extended period. To reduce this risk and to promote institutionalization of the concept apart from the individual who starts it, principals can privately and publicly recognize and celebrate these efforts, find funding or other incentives to compensate key staff, and seek additional programme organizers so that responsibility can be shared or rotated (Swap, 1993: 159).

Most schools now realize that parental involvement can no longer be something that 'happens' in accordance with the calendar. If parents are to become partners with the school, instead of infrequent and uninvolved visitors, educators must initiate efforts to involve parents in new and more meaningful ways. Rethinking parent involvement means, in part, paying careful attention to who becomes involved, why they become involved, and how to reach the parents who do not usually become involved. In addition, parents' involvement entails recognition that parents are a child's first teacher and that schools can help families create home environments that support learning.

Parental involvement requires the development of more effective ways to communicate with parents. It means reaching out to parents who are unwilling, reluctant, or unable to visit the school by meeting with them in their own neighbourhood or home. Parental involvement recognizes the contribution that parents can make as volunteers and supporters of school activities. Further, it also recognizes parents as contributors to, and resource for, the school. Parental involvement is about in general parents helping their children at home, and how schools can assist and support that effort. Lastly, parental involvement is also about providing parents with the opportunity to develop skills in planning and decision-making, then putting those skills to work in the school (Fleming, 1997: 78).

Since teachers control the flow of information between home and school, they are perhaps uniquely positioned between home and school; they are perhaps uniquely positioned to help parents feel informed about their child as a student and about the school. Frequent, positive communication helps parents and teachers to get know each other. With a solid foundation of good communication, teachers and parents are better able to work as partners.

In order for schools to involve parents meaningfully there has to be a healthy system of communication. It is not possible to design a single method of communication to suit all parents because of the numerous variables that interfere. These include parents' level of literacy; language preferred; daily commitments and responsibilities that may affect the time and energy available to devote to school; and parents' level of comfort in becoming involved in their children's education (Perumal, 1995: 49). It is therefore incumbent upon the school principal to get a profile of the community with regard to understanding how and when parents may be hard to reach and then to 'fine-tune' their communication to respond to the qualities, characteristics, and needs of the parents.

When parents communicate constructively with teachers and participate in school activities, they gain a clearer understanding of what is expected of their children at school. Parents may also learn from teachers how to work at home to enhance their children's education. When parents attend parent/teacher conferences, for example, it creates continuity between the two dominant spheres of influence in the child's life, home and school, and likely signals to children the parents' value for education. In addition, some have argued that children learn more when they receive consistent messages from home and school. Epstein (1996: 5-13) writes that the " main reason… for better communications and exchanges among schools, families, and community groups is to assist students at all grade levels to succeed in school and in life."

Nonetheless, phone calls, parent breakfasts, open forum, and parent workshops can spark discussion and serve as tools for encouraging parents' involvement in schools and in their children's education. School personnel, principals, teachers have a role in welcoming parents and other visitors to the school. To this end, a friendly smile and a warm hello can put parents at ease (*Ibid.*). In my opinion I agree with the preceding idea that when parents feel welcome in the school, they feel better about themselves and their children and actually this promotes the teaching-learning process to the maximum. One

of the main objectives of good communication between parents and the school is the improvement of parents' understanding. Epstein (2001: 327) contends that parental involvement efforts should be aimed at developing a climate of open communication, trust, and mutual respect among all members of the school community.

2.4. Empowerment of parents

Parents and teachers have different perspectives on parental involvement. Teachers often doubt that parents want to be substantially involved in schools. Parents may feel extraneous, inferior, or even in awe of professional educators during decision-making meetings. Nevertheless, Lieberman (1989) thinks that if teachers work with parents-respond to their input, both groups can develop the capacity for greater confidence and knowledge. Indeed, research has demonstrated that active parental involvement and influence in schools has the potential to promote significant social and academic change in schools (Comer, 1984). Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988: 726) describe empowerment as a process by which individuals gain mastery or control over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community. Although parental involvement in shared governance is an important step toward empowerment, it may not lead to real parental influence. Coupled with a lack of knowledge about school procedures and confusion about the limits of their power, parents may be reluctant to express themselves openly.

Some argue that empowerment can be achieved by increasing the number of parents and students on governing bodies. The increased representation can present a challenge to the beliefs and practice of the professionals who have had control over the system for so long. It is very likely that the professional educators, although accepting the principle of increased parent participation will be resistant to the idea of empowering people with ideas and skills so that they have access to power over the management of teaching and learning.

Vogt and Murrell (1990) argue that empowerment can be successful if the participants regard results of their action as beneficial; if the social system achieves more than was the case prior to empowerment and if the members of the social system regard the action and its consequences as valuable. The success of empowerment therefore, depends on the extent to which it has the approval of the masses themselves. Thus, when people

have a part in their own development at social, economic and political levels and the results prove to be beneficial, then they will regard empowerment as successful and valuable because it has certain advantages for them.

Cornwell (1997) suggests that participation is a cornerstone of empowerment and a prerequisite for achieving empowerment. In a nutshell, no participation implies no empowerment. More often than not, empowerment is one of the consequences of participation, which means that if one wants the people to gain power, they must participate. Further, if they participate in their own development they are in a position of authority to provide information on what they regard as important and necessary. It is therefore clear that participation must first become a reality before empowerment can occur.

Goldring (1995) cited in Blasé Jo and Blasé Joseph (1997: 77) describes the levels of parental empowerment on a continuum ranging from passive to active, with access to information and selecting a school for their children as examples of passive parental empowerment. More empowered parents are involved in school activities, and the most empowered parents have influence in decision-making at the school (Blasé Jo and Blasé Joseph, 1997: 77). Power resides within parents who want to effect changes in school decisions and develop meaningful partnership with educators and others for change. Parents may provide guidance and resources to schools that value such assistance.

2.5. Participation in decision-making

Decentralization has a chance to work if, to those at the local level, 'participation' is not merely a procedural exercise, but a conscious effort at allowing the marginalized to voice their concerns, creating a meaningful opportunity for them to affect decision-making, and hence, change. Finally, there needs to be, at the local level, clear conceptions about what 'participation' entails or ought to achieve. To some, it would be limited to merely being informed, to others it might involve consultation or, thirdly, taking part in the decision-making process itself (Kulati, 1992: 6).

Squelch (1999) notes that the main aim of decentralized school governance is to reduce bureaucratic control and enhance shared decision-making at local school level. A major consequence of the PTA guidelines in Eritrea permits for considerable parents

involvement on substantive issues that extend beyond the traditional fund-raising activities. Parents are now placed in a powerful position and have the authority to influence decisions on very fundamental issues, for example the school budget; allocation of school fees; supervision, monitoring and evaluation of school activities. Maintenance of building and school properties are some of the many duties vested in them. Rhetorically, principals no longer play the role of primary decision maker. They now find themselves as a member of governing bodies (PTA) that are dominated by parents and non-educationists.

Despite this position, the primary locus of power, authority and decision-making often remains with the principals because they are the key educational leaders in a school and responsible for its day-to-day running (Squelch, 1999: 139). Although principals' decision-making authority has been curtailed to some extent and although they may not serve as chairpersons, strong governing bodies (PTAs) require strong leadership from principals.

As has been noted from the practice of most schools, it is common for PTAs to deal with less important issues that have little impact on improving education, for example, school maintenance matters and school uniform issues. More often than not, more substantial issues that have a direct bearing on learner performance, for instance matters regarding the curriculum and personnel education, are left to the principal and staff. This is largely because teaching personnel believe that parents are not equipped to participate in such matters and should not interfere in the professional and academic side of school life (Squelch, 1999: 140). However, the Schools Act or PTA guidelines as is the case in Eritrea empowers parents and makes specific provision for parents to participate in substantive issues that principals and teachers cannot ignore.

Participation assumes that sustainable development ultimately depends on enhancing the ability of people both individually and in groups, to improve their own lives by taking greater control of their destiny. Ideally this means full participation in real decision-making at every stage of the process- from identification of problems through planning and implementation of projects to evaluation of results (Quist, 1999: 108).

David (1995: 7) states that participatory decision-making does not mean that every one decides everything. This means that some decisions are best left to the professionals and some to parents. It does not also mean that all decisions must be made at local level.

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Moreover, sharing does not necessarily mean that everyone participates equally or that a particular group needs to have the most dominant voice. Decisions are made on all levels of the education system that directly and indirectly affect schools. As David (1995: 16) comments, "…let the education professional make the important professionals decisions." I concur with David's statement in that certain autonomy or freedom must be given to the expertise in the area of specialization. Thus, certain decisions must be at the discretion of teachers or professionals and no interference needs to be attempted.

It is very interesting to note that some schools have found it helpful to include parents in staff development. They have discovered that parents become more knowledgeable and more supportive of school programmes, curriculum, and instruction issues when they are a part of training sessions (Fleming, 1997: 83). Issues that affect both teachers and parents, such as homework and discipline, are often appropriate topics for workshop sessions. Involving parents in training allows teachers and parents to establish a common understanding that can help them to work together more effectively. Comprehensive planning is one of the most critical elements of parental involvement, yet it is often the most overlooked. Practically, parents do not want to attend unimportant meetings or participate in activities that they do not find meaningful. Thus, parents want to feel that their time has been well utilized.

Discipline in education is a complex phenomenon that may evade the accuracy of one single definition when perceived by the different participants in the educational process. Lawrence *et al* (1989: 45) define discipline problems as the manifestation of behaviour that interferes seriously with the teaching process and or seriously upsets the normal running of a school.

The lack of discipline in secondary schools has been a matter of great concern for schools in Eritrea. Attempts have been made to solve the problem and to re-establish a culture of effective learning and teaching in the schools. Discipline in a positive sense refers to learning, guidance and orderliness. While, discipline problems, according to Rogers (1994: 151) refers to disruptive behaviour that" significantly affects the fundamental rights to feel safe, to be treated with respect and to learn. This encompasses behaviour that interferes with the rights and welfare of others, is offensive or inconsiderate and dangerous to person or property." One important fact that researchers,

educationists and even learners emphasize is that a safe and orderly school is necessary before learning can take place. In the United Kingdom, research conducted through a national survey on high school pupils revealed that discipline problems predict a drop in grades and achievement scores and that low grades in its turn lead to greater discipline problems (Myers *et al., 1987;* cited in Mabeba and Prinsloo, 2000: 35).

The democratic transformation of schooling has envisaged a key role for parents. Towards this end, the role of parents has been formalized via the introduction of school governing bodies (PTAs). Parents should be given a greater role in education to ensure that schools are more effective. Schools and educational authorities believe that parents will push for better standards for children if they are more formally involved (David, 1993: 3).

School governing bodies (PTAs) were constituted as a major vehicle for the democratic transformation of schools. Parents comprise the majority of PTA members. PTAs are not involved in the day-to-day running of schools but they have a key role to play in policy, including the development of a code of conduct. Parents thus can play an important, indeed critical, role in school discipline policy.

The purpose of a behaviour policy is to support the educational and other aims of the school and to ensure that the conduct of all members of the school community is consistent with the values of the school. The Eritrean student discipline policy strictly forbids the use of corporal punishment by principals and teachers. Instead, it recommends that teachers and school principals abide by the stipulation in the student discipline policy in maintaining discipline and managing disruptive behaviour (MOE, SOR, 1997: 14).

Teachers are inculcators of self-discipline in the learners under their charge and should therefore be consistent role models of socially accepted discipline. Teachers who behave in uncaring ways, impact negatively on discipline management in schools (Mabeba and Prinsloo, 2000: 40). When parents, teachers and learners hold common views with regard to discipline, learners learn effectively and successfully. It is therefore important that more attention should be devoted to those areas where parents, teachers and learners hold conflicting perceptions. Opportunities for open discussion and specialized guidance may lead to greater emotional responsibility and stability in turn to the promotion of

positive discipline. Teachers, parents and learners should play an active role in the formulation of school discipline policies. It is not sufficient to establish PTAs as governing bodies when no provision is made to teach them how to develop discipline policies and implementing them. Mabeba and Prinsloo contend that discipline policies and the consequences for violating them, should be decided collaboratively among teachers, learners and parents.

Despite the rhetoric supporting home-school partnership, Swap (1993: 163) contends that there is a lack of coherent policy, significant resources, national standards, and professional preparation that would support those who are committed to implementing them. A clearly defined and articulated policy on parental involvement can encourage the development of programmes designed to involve parents in their child's learning. To this end, a policy encouraging parental participation and involvement with a clear indication of what is expected and what is valued, and the willingness to provide the resources to do what is needed can provide a foundation upon which to build a parent-involvement programme (Fleming, 1997: 80).

2.6. Comparative and international trends in decentralized school governance

The movement towards decentralized school governance is a global phenomenon. Many countries have taken initiatives of decentralized school governance both in the developing and developed world. At the same time, they have implemented a process of decentralization aimed at creating more effective schools, those that are flexible and responsive to rapidly changing environments. Indeed, educational policies have shifted the control and management of schools on a centralization-decentralization continuum considerably to give more power to local constituencies in school governance (Herman and Carr, 2002).

This section of the international review of a few countries, explores some issues related to the notion of community involvement, of which parental, teacher and student involvement is one aspect in the democratic governance of schools. Emphasis will be placed specifically on those countries in which 'community involvement' in school governance appears to be taking the form of the PTSAs, even though the terminologies and names of school governance structures used might differ from one to the other.

2.6.1. Decentralized school governance in New Zealand

Like many other countries, New Zealand also embarked upon a process of transforming and restructuring the education system in the 1980s with a view to bringing about greater decentralization. The new transformation plan was called "Tomorrow's Schools." Under New Zealand's decentralization plan local secondary schools are now run by boards of trustees consisting of five elected parents, the principal, an elected staff representative, a student and four other people chosen to provide expertise or balance (Fiske, 1996: 16 and Wylie, 1995: 54).

The Ministry of Education provides the funding for all the state schools, sets broad guidelines for the curriculum and determines standardized assessment tasks for all schools (Wylie, 1995:54). One of the strengths of New Zealand's approach to school decentralization was that the initial administration reforms were followed by pedagogical reforms that reflected broad consensus on the goals of a national curriculum but also made provisions for schools to add local components. Rhetorically, the school board is responsible for a host of matters:

> *for appointment and dismissals of all school staff, for managing at allocating the school's budget other than teachers salaries, for maintenance of the buildings and grounds for staff development, and for the school's general performance (Wylie, 1995:54).*

2.6.2. Decentralized school governance in England

The legislative development in England over the past few decades provided an interesting example of the movement towards decentralized self-governance. According to Deem (1994) cited in Squelch (1999: 133), "as far back as 1967, the Plowden Report emphasizes the importance of parent involvement in education and called for greater representation." However, it was the Taylor Report of 1977 (*A new partnership for our schools*) that provided the most detailed recommendations for the restructuring of school governing bodies and the decentralization of decision-making powers (Squelch, 1999: 134). It called for all schools to have their own representative governing body that exercised full authority and had full decision-making powers regarding the way the school operates.

In terms of representation, the Taylor Report favoured a structure that would offer equal representation of different groups (teachers, parents, students, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and community representatives). However, following the Taylor Report, only a few LEAs experimented with student governors, a practice, which was later, prohibited under the Education Act of 1986 (*Ibid.*). The Act established the structure of governing bodies and set out basic functions, thus following the Taylor recommendations very closely. Squelch (1999: 134) asserts that the governing body is composed of five parent governors, one but not more than two teachers, the principal and a number of foundation or first governors. There are no student governors and since 1988 parents have achieved a lot of voice in the decision-making.

The Education Act required LEAs to allocate a budget to all its schools to cover almost all of their running expenses, over which schools would have full control. Levacic (1995: 8) makes clear that school governing bodies become responsible for managing the budget, and appointing, disciplining and dismissing staff. The local governance of schools provided the opportunity to control their own financial affairs and to be more self-sufficient and independent of the LEAs.

2.6.3. Decentralized school governance in Chile

During the 1970s the military Government of Chile came under the sway of neo-liberal economists and social planners who argued that the quality of social services would be improved through decentralization and privatization that would foster competition (Fiske, 1996: 20). The changes that were introduced reflected the regime's view that the politics of the past had ruined the country and that teachers as a group opposed the reform enacted by the government. Under this reform teachers lost their status as civil servants. Schools and municipalities gained control over hiring and firing, setting of wages, and school construction and developed a stake in attracting as many students as they could. However, they had little autonomy on matters such as curriculum, and few provisions were made for greater participation by parents, teachers, or others in school policy-making. The decentralization effort did not go according to plan as it became clear that municipalities lacked the capacity to carry out their new responsibilities, and the model did not embrace any plan to modify school practices (Fiske, 1996: 21).

In 1990 a new democratic government came into power and put an end to seventeen years of authoritarian rule. One of its first major policy changes was to begin a second

round of decentralization. This time the focus was on democratic reform, including the popular election of mayors, and on improved teaching and learning. The goal was to have pedagogical decentralization at the school level while strengthening governance at the central, regional, and municipal levels.

Equally important, teachers who had backed the change in government got back their civil service status, job security, and the right to organize, and the prevailing philosophy was that teaching and learning would improve only if teachers recovered their enthusiasm to work hard. In fact, local schools were given more autonomy in curricular and other educational decisions, and teachers were given a voice in decision-making.

2.6.4. Decentralized school governance in South Africa

Squelch (1999) claims that prior to the legislation of the1990s, governing schools was a much less demanding activity. Governing bodies or management councils played a supportive role with restricted powers and functions. They did not make fundamental policy decisions nor did they shape management policies to any great extent. For the most part, school governors tended to have symbolic powers rather than actual authority.

During the 1990s legislative developments resulted in governing bodies gaining more power and responsibilities. Following the general election of 1994, the adoption of a new constitutional dispensation and the phasing in of new education legislation under the new government, a new system of education has been created based on the fundamental principles of democracy, unity, non-discrimination, equity and equality. According to the first White Paper on Education and Training (1995) cited in Squelch (1999: 137):

> *...the principle of democratic governance should be increasingly reflected in every level of the system, by the involvement in consultation and appropriate forms of decision-making of elected representatives of the main stakeholders, interest groups and role players.*

Thus, in keeping with international trends, South African schools have subsequently moved towards greater decentralized school governance. The South African Schools Act (SASA 84 of 1996) has mandated the establishment of democratic structures of school governance that provide the basis for decentralized governance between education authorities and the school community. The rationale for the establishment of

representative school governing bodies is essentially to ensure that teachers, parents, learners and non-teaching staff will actively participate in the governance and management of their schools with a view to providing better teaching and learning environments (Squelch, 1999: 137).

The South African Schools Act (SASA, 1996) prescribes the composition of school governing bodies of public schools. These bodies are made up of the school principal, as an *ex-officio* member, elected member and co-opted members. Importantly, elected members of the governing body comprises parents, educators at the school, members of staff who are not educators and learners in the eighth grade or higher. The Schools Act states that parents must form the majority of membership on the governing body. Thus, there must be one more parents on the governing body than the combined total of the other members with voting rights. A parent who is elected to the governing body must have a child or children at the school and may not be employed at the school. Further, co-opted members are there to assist the governing body with its functions but they do not have the right to vote (DOE, 1997:25).

The comparative trend towards decentralization illuminates that most reform initiatives in school governing bodies or PTAs include students as members in the secondary schools. But few reform initiatives seem not to include students as members in their constituencies of the stakeholders as noted earlier in the case of England. Indeed, I support the inclusion of students as members of the governing body or PTA. The rationale behind this is that students can contribute effectively to the decision-making of the schools and their representation is also not curtailed. Obviously, the question is not a matter of including or excluding them but the overarching motive is on how to motivate, prepare and equip them with the necessary guide to fufil their duties or school activities.

What the experience of the comparative studies illuminates, however, is that when decentralization occurs in a vacuum, devoid of external interest, support, initiatives, and well-grounded information, it will not encourage school improvement or innovation (Wylie, 1995: 58). I do agree with Wylie's view in that there needs to be a baseline of active participation from all the stakeholders if success of the reform initiatives is to take place. Therefore, the gap between home (community) and the school will not be bridged simply by introducing parent representatives.

2.7. The PTA experience of other countries

Many schools have parents' associations and similar bodies that are based on families' shared concern for the welfare of students. Some of these bodies may be defined narrowly to embrace only parents, while others have broader membership. In Papua New Guinea, for example, they are deliberately called Parents and Citizens Association (PCA) and in the Philippines, Nigeria, Cameroon, Eritrea, Vietnam, etc. are called Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs); Education Councils in Pakistan; and in some other countries school boards. Where school boards do exist, their mandates, composition, functions, and the way they operate may be of considerable importance, not only for financing but also for other aspects of school life. The PTAs link schools with families in a variety of ways and include fund-raising among their major functions. According to Bray (1996), not all PTAs have formal constitutions or legal status as in Papua New Guinea, but they may perform some or all of the functions of school boards in other systems.

Moreover, the way school boards, PTAs, and similar bodies operate depends not only on their formal powers but also on the cultures within which they work. Strategies for mobilizing resources also depend on the nature of the task at hand. In particular, mechanisms to raise funds for buildings and other capital works are often different from those for recurrent needs.

The PTA in Nigeria is a formal establishment in the schools system. It comprises of parents whose children are currently registered as students in the school together with teachers in that school. The PTA members elect their own chairperson and the principal is the secretary. The PTA is an appropriate forum for disseminating official policies, for explaining needs and problems. The parents participate in the decision-making process and they identify more closely with the school and its programme (Ukeje, 1992: 410).

In Kenya schools operate with cooperation of the PTAs and the Ministry of Education. Eshiwani (1993) asserts that the PTAs, which have no legal status but operate through a proclamation by the office of the President and is directed through circulars from the Ministry of Education to the schools in a hierarchical form. The PTAs play a significant role in providing educational facilities. The membership of the PTAs will include a parent or guardian who has a child in that school. They even can be adult residents in

the area served by that school, co-opted by the Parents' Association on recommendation of the school committees. Unlike some other countries discussed earlier, in Kenya, the district or municipal education officer or the city education officer will be an *ex-officio* member (Eshiwani, 1993: 99).

The PTAs shall elect a chairperson and a treasurer at its meetings for a tenure of two years. Although the principal has no voting right he or she is the secretary of the PTA. Often, the function of the PTA in Kenya is primarily the raising of funds; providing and maintenance of the physical facilities for the schools; expansion of proposals submitted by School Committees and other aspects of school life (Eshiwani, 1993: 99-100).

2.8. Parental involvement in the Eritrean policy context

Education is an expensive enterprise. While the state may be expected to shoulder most of the responsibility for providing basic education, there is no guarantee that the current level of Government funding for the education system as a whole will be sustained. In fact, the Macro-Policy of the Government of Eritrea is emphatic about the need for diversifying funding sources:

> *The government, the community and the direct beneficiaries will be made to contribute varying amounts towards financing education costs. The government may resort to levying surcharges to meet part of the cost of education (GSE, 1994: 40).*

Such a multi-pronged approach to educational finance is intended to broaden the financial base of the education system and to ease the financial burden of the central government. It is also intended to promote balanced sharing of responsibilities among parents, local communities, the private sector and the national government. Involving people in education should include continuous follow up and monitoring schemes must be extended throughout the levels. But this may be ensured through the delegation of authority to lower levels down to school PTAs. Eshiwani (1993) notes that governments' contribution alone is not enough for the development of schools. Generally speaking, without the parents' or student guardians' contribution in the form of fees, schools development can be affected.

As a mechanism for raising resources, schools can take such initiatives as the enhancement of school fees, levies, launching ceremonies, community taxation, and other donations from NGOs and the private sector (Bray, 1994: 911). Bray concludes

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that by expanding community financing it may encourage participants to value education highly and greater parental involvement can promote the effectiveness of schools. Administration and accountability can be improved, it is argued, by making schools more responsive to parents and local communities and minimizing the need for central government decisions on local educational matters.

2.8.1 The relationship between schools and community

According to Berhane (1992) cited in Bereket (2001: 27), there are two main educational policies that specify the interaction of schools with communities. A formal link needs to be established between parent associations and schools. Parent associations are formed to monitor schools' management. The other overarching point is that the government, community and the direct beneficiaries need to contribute varying amounts towards financing educational costs. Accordingly, Fisseha (1994: 35) explains that the objectives of consolidating the relationship between parents and the schools are to shape up a student-population of an estimable behaviour and reputable morality, and to supply the schools with finance, materials and other important aspects.

Against this background, the Eritrean Minister of Education Osman Saleh in a message to the fifth Annual General Education Workshop emphasized the need of community participation by saying:

> *Education, in terms of structure or substance, does not operate simply because the government or any other societal group wants it. The process of education is a public responsibility. Since schools are part and parcel of society, it is essential that members of the public should participate actively in their inception and development. To facilitate educational progress, the government may train, allocate and pay teachers, and provide schools with the equipment and books. The reality, however, is that education cannot develop in a sustainable way without the continuous support and participation of the community (Osman Saleh, August 27, 1998; cited in GOE, 2001: 63).*

As the Minister's statement suggests, one of the current concerns of the Eritrean MOE is to encourage communities to play a significant role in the planning, implementation and management of educational programmes by strengthening linkages between the school and the community. Schools are located in communities in order to serve the needs of local people. Communities must therefore be fully involved in the affairs of their

schools as part of a wider initiative of promoting greater self-reliance and decision-making in the communities.

This involvement can take different forms. At all levels, participation in cost sharing (in the form of cash and/or labour) is being complemented with community participation in making decisions about school location and organization. Communities are also being encouraged to monitor the education of their children by visiting schools and ensuring that resources are allocated and effectively utilized. Very importantly, this kind of participation can assist in improving the quality of learning, in creating a sense of ownership and in establishing consensus among community groups.

2.8.2. Cost sharing

Sharing the financial responsibility of all kinds of costs between the government and the community seems to be plausible, especially if there is a strong demand for education and an inability on the part of the government to deal with all types of educational expenditures. A recent report organized by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank expressed the parameters of cost sharing as follows:

> *Cost sharing includes all officially sanctioned contributions made by users to the financing and management of social services. Contributions can be made either by individuals, households, employers or the community. They can vary from cash to contributions in kind, or be in the form of labour and /or participation in management decisions. Cost sharing excludes private out-of-pocket costs that individuals incur in terms of time, travel or other expenses when seeking access to these services. These costs, however, are important to consider in assessing the impact of cost sharing in the poor (ECA, UNICEF and World Bank, 1997; cited in GOE, 2001: 119).*

Equally important, the most common form of cost sharing is the payment of fees (levies or contributions) by users of educational services. In the Eritrean context, participation in the cost sharing scheme have included capital expenditure (i.e., community contribution for school facilities) and recurrent costs (paying small fees in all schools and covering certain costs). It will be necessary to sustain and deepen such cost sharing schemes as part of a complementary strategy of mobilizing resources and empowering local communities. Many of the changes towards more parental participation in education management have emanated from attempts to decrease education expenditure. Parents are encouraged to supplement social spending by users fees. As a matter of

principle, however, some parents' inability to pay user fees must not become a barrier to their children's participation in school. To overcome this problem these parents should be encouraged to contribute in non-monetary forms equivalent to the amount of money they are expected to pay and this would give them a choice in the type of participation they could offer.

2.8.3. Parents' committees

The Eritrean MOE succeeded in setting up school committees and having them function in all the schools since 1991. The Eritrean MOE immediately after the independence established the parents' committee through the legal notice of November 2, 1991 (MOE, SOR, 1997: 32-33). The main objectives of the parents' committee were:

- *To improve the organizational and 'human' relationship between the schools and the communities*
- *To achieve educational success in the teaching-learning process, the technical and professional skills of education being the responsibility of the schools to ensure also that the communities have some roles in the school*
- *To ensure the communities' financial assistance to the schools and schools' responsibility in providing an excellent service to the society*

Even though the Eritrean MOE expectation was high that the committees will meet their responsibilities, however, what was done on the ground was very insignificant. Further, in many schools the parents' committee was symbolic. It was only confined to dealing with financial matters of the school and other routine tasks. In addition, members of the committee were not willing to come and work in the schools with commitment and dedication. The Eritrean MOE made an evaluation that the parents' committee cannot bring any progress and cannot continue as it is. Thus, the Eritrean MOE was forced to introduce an institutionalized organization called the PTA in 1998 (MOE, PTA, 1998).

2.8.4. Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) in Eritrea

As it is noted above, the parents' committee has encountered serious challenges. Based on the evaluations made, the Eritrean MOE has come with a new institutionalized and structurally appropriate organization called Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to strengthen the relationship between the three parties of the school, parents, teachers and students (triangular relationship). It is more or less similar to the Parents' Committee but

the difference is in its strong institutionalization in schools, extending its coverage throughout the nation. It gives more emphasis to the academic aspects of the school. According to MOE the principal objectives of PTA in Eritrea are:

- *to enhance commitment and communication between parents and teachers;*
- *to foster community involvement;*
- *to motivate the parents, students, and teachers in their triangular relationship and stimulate collaboration among them;*
- *to ensure that partners work with understanding that the school is part of the social obligation (develop the feeling of ownership);*
- *to coordinate assistance from the community and from other associations and organizations (NGOs);*
- *to create an environment which invites students participation;*
- *to collectively ensure the safety and development of schools and students;*
- *to solve students, parents and teachers' problems (MOE, PTA, 2000: 14).*

The PTA in secondary schools has 21 members (13 parents, the principal and the school administrator, 3 teachers and 3 students). In elementary and junior schools, the PTA has 15 members in schools with 1000 or more students (9 parents, principal, administrator, 3 teachers and one student), however, with less than 1000 students, it has 11 members (7 parents, the principal and 3 teachers). The chairperson is a parent while the secretary is the school principal. The life span of the committee is three years but if the members are again elected they can serve for many more rounds and there is no particular law that prohibits this. The PTA has five sub-committees: academic committee; discipline committee; finance committee; technical and maintenance committee; and clubs and supportive systems committee. Each committee is headed by a committee coordinator (MOE, PTA, 2000).

The PTA in Eritrea functions with vision of attaining improved achievement from the interaction of the teaching-learning process by mobilizing the sub-committees to actively participate in the material and financial activities. As a result of this, the schools are expected to give an excellent service to their customers. For almost one decade, the parents' committee was confined only to material and financial activities. Parents or community members are not involved in the teaching-learning activities in schools. They only provide the financial and other material support for the children's schooling. The PTA serves as a source for financial support and other assistance such as beautification, keeping the school grounds in order, and school-initiated civic and social activities through fund-raising for special cultural or social projects. Similarly, NGOs

and private enterprises are asked for donations such as books and reference materials, and other instructional equipment or facilities.

At present the PTA guidelines describes the power of PTA in the governance of their schools. Both the School Organization Regulation Policy and the PTA guidelines indicate the power (authority and responsibility) vested in the PTA members. PTA members are required to undertake a multitude of duties, of which the following are arguable the most important: they are responsible for the general conduct of the school; they have delegated responsibility for managing the school budget; they must make information about students' academic achievements available to parents; they must participate in solving disciplinary problems of the school; they must try to upgrade the professional skills of teachers and improve the working conditions of teachers; they need to critically evaluate the school curriculum and play a crucial role in the school activities.

The PTA guidelines policy is outlined in nine chapters. The first three chapters explain the name and meaning of the association, basic principles of the PTAs and the goals and importance of the PTAs. Building on this, the next three chapters address the general and particular tasks and activities of the PTAs, organization of PTAs and tasks of the management unit. It also addresses PTA relations, implementation and supervision (MOE, PTA, 2000).

As the guidelines specify, a lot of responsibility is vested in them. At present, the PTA system is just beginning and the structure is laid down. The Eritrean MOE is trying to go further by enhancing the PTA participation through proper training programs and workshops so as to upgrade and update them and make them share the burden of school governance. The key challenge is how the existing practices and culture in many schools can be transformed into realizing the potential benefits of school-based management.

2.9. Conclusion

For Eritrea, it is therefore important to examine the experience of other countries with regard to the notion of school governance and parental involvement so that Eritrea can draw important lessons of particular relevance to its culture, and which is pertinent to its local situation. An education system's merits and demerits can neither be reasonably

evaluated nor properly planned unless there is consideration of the major forces in the world that strongly impinge on education and shape its future. While some of these forces have only domestic roots, others are global in scope, and as such have far reaching educational implications. These forces are economic, demographic and political (Coombs, 1988:11).

Decentralization of governance has been initiated in the name of promoting democratic and equitable policy, and allowing for more parental responsibility in the school management. In terms of such policy, parents, teachers, local communities and sometimes students are increasingly represented in school governance through the governing bodies (PTAs). The rationale provided for involving parents, local communities and students is that decentralizing the education system would contribute the wider representation, as well as making education responsive to local needs (Maclure, 1993: 72).

The key arguments drawn from the international literature on reasons why decentralized governance of schools often become unsuccessful can be summarized as follows:

- The unwillingness of governments to devolve real power to lower units of educational governance;
- Lack of continuity, which means that as governments change, existing structures and personnel and often dropped or transferred in favour of new structures and personnel stressing the priorities of the new government;
- Lack of formalization, which means lack of formal and legal recognition of management structures of the educational system leads to weak and not well-institutionalized structures;
- Lack of capacity, which refers to lack of experience, trained and skilled personnel for participation in governance structures;
- Insufficient funds to implement the democratic system of administration and management;
- Teachers feeling threatened by participation of non-professional in the school governance system, and
- Deliberate efforts to prevent meaningful stakeholders' participation by bureaucrats and education officials who feel that such participation would erode their performance.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This study is an in-depth investigation of the nature of parental involvement in Eritrean secondary school governance, specifically the challenges and the capacity of parents to meet their responsibilities in the decision-making of school affairs, and what the PTA guidelines prescribes. Briefly, it investigates the nature of parental involvement in school governance by looking at the roles and contributions of parents in the implementation of the Eritrean PTA guidelines. Within this framework, the study will try to uncover the difficulties or problems that parents experience in their capacity as PTA members.

Against this background, this chapter attempts to give a detailed account of the research design and approach pursued in the selection of respondents, the instruments and techniques used in data collection. This chapter recognizes and considers a detailed step by step account of the methods followed in analyzing and interpreting data and the reasons for choosing the kind of data analysis.

3.2. Research paradigms

Paradigms may be defined as:

> *Frameworks that function as maps or guides for scientific communities, determining important problems or issues for its members to address and defining acceptable theories or explanations, methods and techniques to solve defined problems (Usher, 1996; cited in Middlewood et al., 1999: 12).*

A paradigm shift may occur when a dominant paradigm is overthrown and a new paradigm takes its place. Such a shift involves a new way of looking at the world. In this study, I systematically collected and analyzed empirical evidence in order to understand the nature and the extent to which parents participate in the decision-making process in the secondary school governance. This investigation was tackled through the use mostly of the qualitative research paradigm. According to Denscombe (1998: 207), "qualitative

research is an umbrella term that covers a variety of styles of social research, drawing on a variety of disciplines such as sociology, social anthropology and social psychology." The researcher using such method to analyze and interpret data is usually seeking to gain new understanding of a situation, experience or process; learning from the detailed accounts that people give in their own words, or that the researcher records in field notes from observation or discovers in documents. Thus, qualitative methods are used in research that is designed to provide an in-depth description of a specific programme, practice, or setting (Mertens, 1998: 159).

Different methodologies require different ways of handling and interpreting the data. Some seek to create new understanding and theory from the data. Similarly, in some, the goal is rich description and vivid presentation of new understanding. It is evident that some qualitative researchers in each of the different disciplines and methodologies link their data with quantitative analysis. Behr (1988: 9) contends, the data gathered by the normative researcher may be described variously as objective, external, quantifiable, publicly verifiable, and replicable. Instead, the data gathered by the interpretive researcher may be referred to as subjective, internal, qualitative and unique. According to Berg (2001: 3), "qualitative research thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things." In contrast, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things.

Most qualitative researchers would not deny the value of quantitative analysis, even in so-called qualitative studies (Denscombe, 1998: 207; Strauss, 1987: 2; Middlewood *et al.*, 1999: 12). However, they will certainly object to the wholesale use of such technique to the exclusion of other methods. Statements of the two extreme approaches need not be mutually exclusive and are often used together. In practice, research may encompass elements of the two apparently opposed paradigms. To the extent that both types of researchers are trying to understand and explain social phenomena, they have a common purpose. It is in their respective attitudes (i.e. the paradigms from which they operate) to the data they have gathered that they diverge. Thus, researchers may adopt a flexible approach to the gathering of data, complementing a quantitative paradigm with a more in-depth qualitative research.

Qualitative research always requires that the researcher explores and sensitively interprets complex data, and avoids pre-emptively reducing the data to numbers. Strictly

speaking, the distinction between qualitative and quantitative relates to the treatment of data, rather than the research methods as such. As Strauss (1987: 2) argues, "the genuinely useful distinction is in how data are treated analytically." I do agree with Cohen and Manion (1994: 40) when they refer to systematic, scientific research that considers "people within their social contexts." The research strategy is usually of a contextual nature. This implies a focus on the individual case in its specific context of meanings and significance. The qualitative paradigm considers the overall coherence and meanings of the data is more important than the specific meanings of its parts. This leads to the use of methods of data analysis that are more holistic, synthetic, interpretative and critical (Middlewood *et al.*, 1999: 12).

I relied heavily on a qualitative methodology for it provides a rich description and colourful detail that gives the reader a feeling of the actual setting. This approach assisted me in obtaining insight and in-depth responses from the participants. Moreover, it gave participants enough space to voice and express their feelings, opinions and perceptions. According to Leedy (1997), qualitative research assists researchers who aim at discovering and exploring issues, which lead to the building of a theory rather than testing it. This study, therefore, predominantly fits into a qualitative paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2) assert a generic definition of qualitative study that gives the overall holistic approach at hand as:

> *Qualitative research is a multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials- case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts- that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives.*

3.3. The selection of research sites

In Eritrea, there are six administrative regions as is indicated in section 1.10 of Chapter One. The study was conducted in two of the six regions, namely, the Anseba and Maekel regions. The reason why I chose the Anseba region was for my own convenience. I was assigned as a principal of one of the high schools (School A) in this

region and I wanted to incorporate my experience and investigate why there is a very limited parental involvement in the decision- making of school governance. The other region is Maekel. I am well informed from colleagues that School B is said to have a rich experience of parental involvement relative to others in the region and in fact seems to show considerable improvement both in discipline and academic progress over the past three years.

Against the above background, I have identified sites in which the phenomenon of interest is strongly represented. Besides, I have approached key informants whom I viewed as knowledgeable to supply me with rich information about the parental involvement regarding the decision-making. There are a number of reasons why a particular organization may be selected for a study of an organization to illustrate the way certain administrative systems operate in certain types of organizations.

Alternatively, the researcher may be interested in accessing how decisions are made in certain types of organizations, or even how communication networks operate. Using purposive sampling and convenience sampling, I chose for the study to be restricted to the two previously mentioned regions and schools. Purposive sampling is used on the basis of the researcher's judgment of the typicality of the cases (Cohen and Manion, 1989). Purposive or judgmental sampling uses the judgment of an expert in selecting cases or it selects cases with a specific purpose in mind.

There are several reasons to adopt purposive sampling. For this particular study, I want to identify the extent of parental involvement (PTAs) for an in depth investigation. The purpose is less to generalize to a larger understanding of the PTAs involvement in the decision-making of school activities.

3.4. The selection of subjects

Before I started engaging in the fieldwork, I asked for a supporting letter from the office of the Department of Human Resource Development from both the University of Asmara and the Ministry of Education of the State of Eritrea. After handing over the letter of permission to do my fieldwork in the respective institutions, I explained the purpose of the study and how the data is to be collected. Both principals of the schools were very co-operative and helped in identifying PTA members of their respective

schools. In particular, in School A permission was a formality, since I knew all the PTA members while I was working with them as a principal of that school. However, in the School B, the principal helped to introduce me to the PTA members and asked them to co-operate with me every time I want to consult them.

During the fieldwork done in the period of December 2002 till the end of February 2003, face-to-face interview with the interviewees, five from each school and two officials from the Ministry of Education were completed. I selected the chairperson of the PTAs, the principals of the two schools, an experienced subject head teacher, one each from both schools, one parent and one learner to have representation of the key constituencies from each school. All my interviewees except the two ministry officials are PTA members. I conducted an in-depth semi-structured interview with twelve individuals. In addition, I did an observation and documentary analysis just to have reproducibility and valid and consistent findings. The selection of the respondents was based on their accessibility, on the basis of the position they occupy and the knowledge they have of the PTAs or in their respective organizations.

Before conducting the interview with the selected PTA members, I had a short meeting with them. I used this meeting to explain the aims of the research, the aims of the interview, and to explain that their opinion and suggestions would be of great help. I arranged a suitable interview time and venue with each interviewee. This in fact helped me to set the tone of the interaction. The qualities that make a successful qualitative researcher should be revealed through great sensitivity to the ethical issues that are present when we engage in any moral act. Ethical considerations are generic- such as informed consent and protecting participants' anonymity- as well as situation-specific. Thus, I reassured them that their names and even the schools' names would not be mentioned in my research report and confidentiality and anonymity would be respected.

3.5. Research design

A research design is an exposition or plan of how the researcher plans to execute the research problem that has been formulated (Mouton, 1996: 175). The objective of the research design is to plan, structure and execute the relevant project in such a way that the validity of the findings is maximized. Usually, three things are included in the

research design, namely the aim of the research, data or information sources and considerations of validity and reliability. Johnson (1994: 13) differentiates between research approaches as "the main ways in which research can be tackled" and by the same token research tools are "the means by which different approaches to research are operationalized." She includes amongst the research approaches: descriptive research; surveys; case studies; documentary research and the experimental approach.

Research design for this study was that of the descriptive research which included gathering data in order to answer questions regarding the current status of the subject of the study. Descriptive studies are based on assessment of attitudes, opinions, demographic information, conditions and procedures (Gay, 1981: 153). Descriptive data are usually gathered through interviews, observation and questionnaire (Leedy, 1997; Gay, 1981: 151).

A design is a logical sequence that connects the empirical data to the study initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusion (Yin, 1997). A research design, therefore, provides conceptual frameworks for the procedures used in collecting the data. According to Ogunniyi (1992: 82), " a research design presupposes the kind of methods to be used and the type of instruments to be developed to collect appropriate data." This means that the research design helps the researcher to spell out clearly what he or she has to do with his or her subjects and the procedure to be followed during investigation.

The governing body (PTA) at schools represents parents of different social background and with different skills and capacity. Thus, the target population is clearly described with reference to one unit which is the PTA, considered as the governing body of each school. Against this background, selecting two schools will offer and intriguing site from which to explore the understanding of roles and the contribution of parents in engaging with the PTA guidelines and school policies. The parents' capacity within school governance in fulfilling their obligations and their commitment in executing their duties will be explored and investigated in light of the specific aims and research questions posed in Chapter One.

3.6. Data collection methods

The fundamental methods relied on by qualitative researchers for gathering information are questionnaires, observation, in-depth interviewing and document review (Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 78). Amongst the range of research tools, Johnson's (1994) classification includes: questionnaires, interviews, observation, the use of records or other documents and the use of diaries as a research tool.

Against the above background, the qualitative methodological approach on which this study is based leads to the adoption of techniques of semi-structured interviews, observation and documentary analysis. These techniques stand to enable me to access information on the background of my subjects, their position on the nature of activities they are involved in, their perceptions and understanding of concepts from the experiences they have. Hoping that these techniques will allow me to gain an objective and reliable understanding of parental involvement of secondary school governance in Eritrea, I will attempt to incorporate data and method triangulation so as to achieve credibility and validity.

Triangulation is essentially the use of different vantage points and takes a variety of forms. Triangulation allows illumination from multiple standpoints, reflecting a commitment to thoroughness, flexibility and differences of experience. According to Banister *et al* (1994: 147) we have to recognize that all researchers, perspectives and methods are value-laden, biased, limited as well as illuminated by their frameworks. Triangulation makes use of combinations of methods, investigators, perspectives etc., thus facilitating richer and potentially more valid interpretations.

Cohen and Manion (1994: 233) define triangulation as the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of social science research, particularly aspects of human behaviour. Many writers emphasize the need and advantage of incorporating triangulation in the data collection in the research project. Berg (2001: 5) stresses that triangulation allows researchers to offer perspectives other than their own. Moreover, Berg describes triangulation's use as a means of refining, broadening and strengthening conceptual linkages. According to Mouton (1996: 156), the first general principle in data collection is that the inclusion of multiple sources of data collection in a research project is likely to increase the reliability of the observation. The underlying assumption

is that, because various methods complement each other, their respective shortcomings can be balanced. Banister *et al* (1994: 147) contend that all methods have their limitations, their own validity threats and distortions.

A danger of using only one method is that the findings may merely be an artefact of the method. However, if an appropriate cluster of methods is used, each allowing different information, then we can have some confidence that the material is more than a product of the method. Seeing things from a different perspective and the opportunity to corroborate findings can enhance the validity of the data. They do not prove that the researcher has 'got it right', but they do give some confidence that the meaning of the data has some consistency across methods and that the findings are not too closely tied up with a particular method used to collect the data. Thus, triangulation involves locating a true position by referring to two or more other coordinates (Denscombe, 1998: 85). From the researcher's point of view, an equal benefit springs from the way the alternative method allows the findings from one method to be checked against the findings from another. The multi-method approach allows findings to be corroborated or questioned by comparing the data produced by different methods.

Banister *et al* (1994: 146-149) give different types of triangulation as data triangulation; investigator triangulation; theoretical triangulation and method triangulation. Practically, my study embraces only the data triangulation and the method triangulation. Against this background, data triangulation involves collecting accounts or information from different participants involved in the chosen setting and if appropriate from different sites of the setting. In my study, I have collected the data from a range of different participants: parents, principals, teachers, learners, and Ministry of Education officials as it is indicated in section 3.4 of this chapter.

In addition, method triangulation entails the use of different methods to collect information. Each method approaches the collection of data with a certain set of assumptions and produces a kind of data that needs to be recognized as having certain inherent strengths and certain limitations in relation to the aims of the particular research and the practical constraints (time, resources, access) encountered by the researcher (Denscombe, 1998: 84). Thus, different methods can be used to collect data on the same topic. Each can look at it from a different angle- from its own distinct perspective-and these perspectives can be used by the researcher as a means of comparison and contrast.

The point I want to make is that I have to compare and crosscheck the consistency of information derived from the different qualitative techniques I have employed. This is to say that the information obtained through interviews and observation is validated by checking documents that can corroborate what respondents say during the interviews. From a different perspective, Patton (1990: 467) asserts that the triangulation of methods will seldom lead to a single, totally consistent picture. In view of these, different sources and reasonable explanation for the differences in the data from a variety of sources will contribute significantly to the overall credibility of the findings. Based on this, I will only describe and treat the techniques used in my study in the following sections i.e., interviews, observations and documents.

3.6.1. Interviews

Interviews involve a set of assumptions and understandings about the situation, which are normally associated with a casual conversation (Denscombe, 1998: 109). Interviews can be used in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes, depending on the background of the researcher and the context in which the interview occurs. As an information-gathering tool, the interview lends itself to being used alongside other methods as a way of supplementing their data thus adding detail and depth.

I decided on using interviews for my study because they offer a very flexible and accessible means of information gathering. Interviewing people can be informative and stimulating if it is done properly. It is a chance to peer into another person's world for a short period of time. Data is collected through direct oral interaction in which the interviewer elicits responses to a set of structured questions.

Many writers concur in classifying interviews as structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Denscombe, 1998: 109-113; Fontana and Frey, 1996: 56; Klein, 1997: 32; Cohen and Manion, 1994: 276) as a qualitative data collection tool. Interviews, especially the unstructured ones, give the flexibility other techniques do not provide. For example, in addition to exploring a point further, interviews enable the researcher to ask for clarification when a reply from an interviewee fails to make sense. Further, the low return rate of questionnaires also leads to a preference to use interviews to gather data. For different reasons, people fail to return questionnaires, which limits the pool of information one hopes to draw the data from. Also, it is often observed that subjects fail

to fill in questionnaires seriously. Often, they are filled in within a short period of time and negligently. This greatly affects the reliability of the data. Although lengthy questionnaires can perhaps elicit more information from the subjects, a bulk of questions puts unnecessary stress on them, as they need to answer the questions in detail and explain in some length. Thus, I decided against using questionnaires to explore the attitudes, feelings and beliefs regarding parental involvement in decision-making of the Eritrean secondary school governing bodies. However, I used semi-structured interviews, observations and documentary analysis to obtain information from subjects. For Kvale (1996: 296), interviewing is a means of knowledge production, which involves the researcher's processing of the data collected. In this process, Kvale explains, the researcher's interpretation of the data plays a major role. Further, the process includes reviewing relevant literature, through which findings are compared to other results in similar situations:

> *The interview is a situation of knowledge production in which knowledge is created between the views of the two partners in the conversation. The construction of knowledge is not completed by the interaction of the researchers and their subjects, but continues with researchers' interpretations and reporting of their interviews, to conversations with other researchers about their findings (Kvale, 1996: 296).*

The major use of a highly structured interview, according to Merriam (1998: 74), in qualitative research is to gather common socio-demographic data such as age, income, history of employment, level of formal education, and so on from interviews. However, "the problem with using a structured interview is that rigidly adhering to predetermined questions may not allow you to access participants' perspectives and understandings of the world" (Merriam, 1998: 74). Fontana and Frey (1999: 56) state that:

> *a structured interview aims at capturing precise data of a codable nature in order to explain behaviour within pre-established categories, whereas an unstructured one is used in an attempt to understand the complex behaviour of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry.*

Interviews, even with the highly structured interview schedule, provide an opportunity to obtain qualified answers. This is done in two ways, namely probing and prompting. Probing is when the interviewer asks the respondent to explain an answer in a little more depth. Prompting, on the other hand, is an attempt to ensure that the respondent has

considered all possibilities when replying to the question. Probing, according to Zikmund (1997: 491), may be needed for two types of situations:

> *First, it is necessary when the respondent must be motivated to enlarge on, clarifying, or explain his or her answers. It is the interviewer's job to probe for complete, unambiguous answers. The interviewer must encourage the interviewees to clarify or expand on answers by providing a stimulus that will not suggest the interviewer's own ideas or attitudes. The ability to probe with neutral stimuli is the mark of an experienced interviewer. Second, probing may be necessary in situations in which the respondent begins to ramble or lose track of the question. In such cases the respondent must be led to focus on the specific content of the interview and avoid irrelevant and unnecessary information.*

Semi-structured interviews provide much more scope for the discussion and recording of the interviewees' opinion and views. The interview schedule needs to be carefully designed but it will consist of some fairly specific questions, each of which may be probed or prompted, and a few which are completely open-ended. The latter questions mainly serve as checklist for the interviewer to ensure that the question is asked, that different facets are explored and that all the possible questions are covered. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 157) contend the semi-structured interview is much more flexible, the one which tends to be most favoured by educational researchers since it allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the subjects response. This is because the interviewer asks certain questions of all respondents, but each time they can alter the sequences in order to probe more deeply and overcome a common tendency for respondents to anticipate questions.

In this study, I decided to use a semi-structured interview because it enabled me to structure the responses of the interviewees so as to gain information on the required area. It further allowed me to raise necessary questions, which might occur during the interview period. The value of a semi-structured interview is to enable researchers to probe the responses made by the interviewee while at the same time controlling the tendency to deviate from the topic in question. With semi-structured interviews, the interviewer still has a clear list of issues to be addressed and questions to be answered.

In addition, with the semi-structured interview the interviewer is prepared to be flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered, and, perhaps more significantly, to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on issues raised by the researcher. According to Behr (1988) cited in Klein (1997: 32), one of the advantages of

semi-structured interview is that it allows for flexibility. I used this feature during the interviews raising questions such as how, why, when etc. As a beginner in research, I also felt that a semi-structured interview would give me more control over the situation.

Many authors (Nalagy, 1984: 59; Klein, 1997: 32; Middlewood, 1999: 146; Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 80-81; Denscombe, 1998: 207) have indicated the advantages and limitations of an interview as a data collection technique. Even though the advantages out-weigh the limitations possible care is needed in order to achieve the reliability, validity and consistency of the overall findings. According to Denscombe (1998: 207), the potential strengths of interview as a data collection tool are listed as: ensuring the depth of information; need simple equipment; flexibility; enhancement of validity (direct contact at the point of the interview means that data can be checked for accuracy and relevance as they are collected); assurance of a high response rate.

On the other hand, some of the limitations of an interview that need due attention are: resources (the cost of interviewer's time, of travel and of transcription can be relatively high); time-consuming; interview effect; invasion of privacy; not suitable for data analysis (semi-structured and unstructured interviews produce data that are not pre-coded and have an open format due to non-standard responses); reliability (consistency and objectivity are hard to achieve).

3.6.2 Observation

As a researcher, I attempted to make firsthand observations of activities and interactions to understand fully the complexities of school governance particularly what decisions PTA members take and to what extent they can be implementable. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995: 79), observation entails "the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviours, and artifacts in the social settings chosen for study." This method assumes that behaviour is purposive and expressive of deeper values and beliefs. It is evident that observation is a fundamental and critical method in all-qualitative inquiry.

Just to have the overall picture of what PTAs are doing in relation to decision-making of school governance in the Eritrean secondary schools, I have participated in the meetings of PTAs. In the school that I was working as a principal, I did not find any sign of

inconvenience since I was the principal of that school and most issues or projects were initiated while I was there. All of them, in fact welcomed my participation and I was freely making my observations of how PTAs engage in the decision-making on the different agendas initiated by the school principal.

At the other school (different site), I knew the principal of that school and as a colleague I did not have much difficulty in approaching him. Actually, he allowed me to observe in one of the executive PTA meetings of eight people. I did my observation of how decision-making process takes place regarding school governance. Moreover, I did have the opportunity to informally observe the schools as a whole and their surrounding communities. That is, how visits of parents to schools take place, their manner of operation, values, routine and physical features in each school, and social features of the surrounding community.

Douglas (1976) cited in Mouton (1996: 157) indicates that subjects tend to be unusually reluctant or unwilling to participate because they regard the investigation as an invasion of their privacy. One possible strategy to reduce the effect of such responses would be to emphasize the anonymity of responses and observations where possible. As to the ethical considerations regarding to the issues of privacy, I promised them that I will take maximum care and just the information I note and observe will be assessed for the sole purpose of academic use. The problem of information leakage, violation of privacy and secrecy and the attitude of subjects of not willing to be observed are some of the instruments' limitations.

3.6.3 Documentary analysis

Documentary analysis and observation are research tools that tend to be used as a supplement to interviews. They may be used to obtain background material and derive research questions.

Middlewood *et al* (1999: 143) and Marshall and Rossman (1995: 85) concur that the use of documents may be to discover the official view of school aims or to identify policy statements, or alternatively documents that might provide an official record of events, such as PTA meetings. Further, documentary analysis relies on the use of available printed or written data, although the term may be extended to include non-written

documents such as films and photographs. Marshall and Rossman (1995: 85); Robson (1993: 243) and Mertens (1998: 324) list as documents a very wide range of general documents including: minutes of meetings; letter, memoranda, etc.; diaries, speeches, logs, announcements, formal policy statements, and so on which are very useful in developing and understanding of the settings. However, Robson comments that in studies of schools and colleges, documents could include: written curricula; course outlines and other course documents; time tables; notices; letters and other communications to parents. The qualitative research must turn to the documents and records to get the necessary background of the situation and insights into the dynamics of everyday functioning.

I have chosen documentary analysis as my research tool in order to enable me to use it as a means of triangulation. Since I have used an in-depth interview, in particular a semi-structured interview, these techniques of using more than one type enabled me to study the same subject from more than one point of view, thereby establishing greater confidence in the findings of my study.

Both Denscombe (1998: 169) and Middlewood (1999: 146-147) concur in giving the strengths and weaknesses of documentary research. Some of the potential advantages that both writers have indicated are the accessibility of data, cost-effectiveness, and permanence of data. On the other hand, the basic limitations of such an instrument can be attributed to the credibility of the source, on the nature of secondary data and social constructions (i.e. documents can owe more to the interpretations of those who produce them than to an objective picture of reality).

3.7. Analysis and interpretation of data

Qualitative data analysis is a term applied to a very wide range of methods for handling data that is relatively unstructured and considered not appropriate to reduce to numbers. Data analysis is usually used in seeking to gain new understanding of a situation, experience or process; learning from the detailed accounts that people give in their own words. The data that I have collected from an in-depth semi-structured interview; observations and documents will systematically be analyzed. All the interviews were audiotaped since permission for it was obtained. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and the resulting texts analyzed. The analysis process begins with reading the

data at once and then dividing the data into smaller, more meaningful units. According to Tesch (1990: 95), "the analysis process is systematic and comprehensive, but not rigid."

Analysis of such data requires sensitivity to detail and context, as well as accurate access to information and ways of rigorously and carefully exploring themes and discovering and testing pattern (Baumgartner and Strong, 1998). In light of this, I will compare categories to discover connections between the themes and make thematic analysis as I have already indicated in section 1.12 of Chapter One. There is typically not a precise point at which data collection ends and analysis begins (Patton, 1990: 377). Nonetheless, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that the data analysis end with the emergence of regularities, which is when no new information emerges with additional analysis.

Periodically throughout the research, I have to study all the data carefully and critically, seeking similarities, differences, correspondence, categories, themes, concepts and ideas, and analyze the logic of previous analytical outcomes, categories, and weaknesses or gaps in the data. Ultimately, the basis for judging the quality of analysis in a qualitative study like this study rests on corroboration to be sure that the research findings reflect the actual people's perceptions. Data analysis is therefore used to confirm or develop explanation for how and why things happen as they do.

3.8. Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the overall methodology of the research exercise. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, observations and documents. A mini-cassette recorder has been used to collect data after agreement reached by all the subjects. The validity and reliability of qualitative research are more difficult to establish but no less important. The research study took place in two schools, which possess their values, customs and styles of communication and the data sources being people, the environment and communication patterns inherent at the schools.

In addition, the context of research largely depends on the researcher's perception and skill in making interpretation, absolute reliability and validity becomes problematic but not impossible. The validity and reliability of qualitative data depends to a greater extent

on the methodological skills, sensitivity and integrity of the researcher (Patton, 1990: 11). Practically, generating useful and creditable qualitative findings through in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis requires discipline, knowledge, training, practice, creativity and hard work. Specifically, triangulation requires the convergence of multiple data sources from a variety of participants under a variety of conditions. Triangulation is less a strategy for validating results and procedures than an alternative to validation, which increases scope, depth and consistency in the methodological proceedings of this study.

It should be noted that all people and sources may not agree, and this differences in opinion is going to be made explicit in the report. Data analysis leads to the results of any research activity because it is at this stage that they are generated, manipulated and in essence reduced so that they provide information for the overall conclusion. Van Maanen (1983: 118) asserts that collecting and analyzing the qualitative data is a highly labour intensive operation, often generating much stress even for top quality research staff.

However, the most serious and central difficulty in the use of qualitative data is that the methods of analysis are not well established. More often than not, securing of interviews slots with individual school PTAs and Eritrean MOE officials proved to be costly and time consuming. A few participants were reluctant to speak out freely on certain issues experienced by them, as they were not frank enough to unfold the settings as they are. In conclusion, I would say that these and the others discussed in section 1.9 of Chapter One are some of the daunting limitations of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Introduction

Chapter Four deals with analysis and interpretation of the data. The central aim of the study was to investigate the current policies and practices of school governance in relation to parental involvement in the decision-making. The study is further aimed to focus on issues of how parent-teacher-learner (PTA) relationships could be improved to strengthen the school governance. The key question under investigation concerns the capacity and commitment of PTA members to discharge their responsibilities in terms of the PTA guidelines.

Against this background, the activities, experiences and perceptions of PTA members were analyzed. The data obtained through interviews, observation and documents are categorized into six broad themes with several sub-headings. These themes that emerged from the research aims will be discussed in this chapter. The research findings that are also linked to the research aims are outlined, interpreted and tentative conclusions are drawn.

4.2. Profiles of two schools used in study

This section deals with profiles of the two schools under investigation.

4.2.1. Profile of School A

School A is located in Anseba region, which is forty kilometres north of Asmara. The documents of the school reveal that it was established in 1971 from junior level. It has gradually grown to include the secondary level from 1988 and has accommodated both junior and secondary levels till 1998/99 academic year. Since then School A is operating as a secondary school. In this school, science and arts streams are offered. School A is under- resourced, i.e. the offices lack basic facilities such as computers, photocopying machines, and has less facilities than the other high schools in the towns.

School A is in a semi-urban area where most of its students come from the surrounding villages. Consequently, most parents are farmers. It follows that most PTA members of School A are inhabitants of the surrounding villages. The students find it difficult to pursue their studies due to economic reasons and the unavailability of transportation facilities. On average they walk around eight kilometres to reach the school.

In the academic year 2002/2003 the total student population was 1361 of which 904 are males and 457 females. The school has 17 teachers, two females and 15 males. The number of non-teaching staff at School B is 11, two females and nine males.

The main focus of the study is the PTA. The PTA has 13 members elected from the parents, the principal, the school administrator, three teachers and three students. The 21 members are elected democratically for a period of three years. The eleven PTA members of School A who were not interviewed were all males. The formal education levels of the PTA members vary from being literate to a junior high school level qualification.

4.2.2. Profile of School B

School B was built in 1954 and it is located in Asmara. It is one of the oldest and biggest schools in Eritrea that accommodates a large number of learners. The total enrolment in the academic year 2002/2003 was 2791. There are 59 teachers, five females and 54 males. The number of non-teaching staff at School B is 15, six females and nine males.

Most of the PTA members of this school are qualified with a good educational background. Five out of the eight executive members came from overseas. School B elects its PTA members on the basis of their interest and educational background. It is a well-resourced school that has library, laboratory, and computer facilities, photocopying machines, telephone services and other services which School A did not have. The school compound is excellent as an educational facility. It is a comprehensive high school, which offers a science, arts, commerce and vocational stream. However, it has a shortage of classrooms for the different departments. The staff room of School B is very small compared to the number of teachers teaching in that school. They do not have rooms where teachers can accommodate parents and other guests. During my observation at the school, I heard teachers complaining about the staff room. Teachers

do not have a room where they can have discussions with their students and engage in school co-curricular activities.

Table I profiles the PTA members and the two MOE officials interviewed during the fieldwork in Eritrea during the period of December 2002 till the end of February 2003. The interviews and schools' names are coded in order to have confidentiality. The gender and educational background of the participants are indicated to provide the overall picture. The second table illustrates the total population of the two schools being studied. It represents the total number of students, teachers and non-teaching staff of the two schools, also in terms of gender.

Table I: PTA members and the two MOE officials interviewed

	IDENTIFICATION OF INTERVIEWEES	SEX	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND
SCHOOL A	PA1	F	GRADE SEVEN
	PA2	M	HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETE
	TA	M	FIRST DEGREE (B.SC)
	SA	M	TENTH GRADE (SCIENCE STREAM)
	DA	M	FIRST DEGREE
SCHOOL B	PB1	F	FIRST DEGREE
	PB2	M	DIPLOMA (12+2)
	TB	M	FIRST DEGREE
	SB	F	TENTH GRADE (ARTS)
	DB	M	FIRST DEGREE
MOE OFFICIALS	M1	M	MBA LEVEL
	M2	F	ADVANCED DIPLOMA

N.B **PA**: Parent PTA member of School A   **PB**: Parent PTA member of School B

　　TA: Teacher PTA member of School A   **TB**: Teacher PTA member of School B

　　SA: Student PTA member of School A   **SB**: Student PTA member of School B

　　DA: Director (principal) of School A   **DB**: Director (principal) of School B

　　M: MOE officials (**M1 & M2**)

Table II: Total population of the two schools studied

SAMPLE SCHOOLS		MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
SCHOOL A	STUDENTS	904	457	1361
	TEACHERS	15	2	17
	NON-TEACHING STAFF	9	2	11
	TOTAL	928	461	1389
SCHOOL B	STUDENTS	1262	1529	2791
	TEACHERS	54	5	59
	NON-TEACHING STAFF	9	6	15
	TOTAL	1325	1540	2865

4.3. Analysis of documents

The Eritrean MOE is responsible for formulating and monitoring the implementation of educational policies in the country. It is also responsible, through its various departments, and regional offices, for rendering educational services to all citizens in the country. Currently the focal concern of the educational policy and delivery system includes increasing access to educational opportunity, ensuring equity in educational provision, improving the quality of education, and making education more relevant to socio-economic needs (GOE, 2001: 58). Concerted efforts have also been made to redress regional and gender disparities in educational provision.

The documents analyzed included the PTA guidelines, policy documents circulated by the Eritrean MOE regarding PTAs, minutes and reports on PTA meetings and activities within the schools.

4.3.1. The PTA guidelines

The PTA guidelines broadly explains the meaning of association, basic principles, goals and importance of the PTAs, tasks and activities of the PTAs, organization of PTAs, tasks of the management, reporting and evaluation formats, PTA relations, implementation and supervision (MOE, 2000). Details are given under each heading. Importantly, the PTA guidelines need refinement and further assessment. Nonetheless, most of the principles, aims and objectives are clearly stated.

The principal objective of PTA is discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two. It tries to achieve commitment, motivation to empower parents, provide material support, ensure the safety and development of students and schools, and attain effective communication. However, the role of PTAs is understood by most people to be one primarily of material support. In principle, PTAs are not entitled to interfere in matters relating to pedagogical methods and programme content, which is specifically, left as professional territories.

Several operational constraints faced by the PTAs emerged from the different interviews. The outstanding one being the lack of a clear perception regarding the role that should be played by PTAs in the school system. This can be partly attributed to lack of guidelines from the MOE stipulating clearly what a PTA can and cannot get involved in. The PTA guidelines did not have clearly spelt out methods of operation and the responsibilities of the PTA were not clearly understood. In essence, the rights and obligations of the PTA members were also not stipulated. As a result there was no clear indication of the desired conditions that the PTA strived to achieve and therefore no standard for measurement of success.

When one Eritrean MOE (**M2**) official was asked to comment on the triangular relationship of PTA and the overall policy of PTA, she responded by saying:

> *The PTA guidelines was introduced in 1998 and also revised in 2000, so it is at its infancy stage. The main objective of this policy is in a way to share authority and the responsibility to the parents and slowly devolve the power of decision-making down to the local level. Almost all schools have PTAs and some schools have elected student representatives to strengthen the triangular relationship. I am not saying we have an excellent policy that we could be proud of. As a new nation we are starting from scratch to lay down basic policies that would be tested during implementation and could be improved with time. We are still preparing the training manual for capacity building of PTAs. Overall, my understanding about the PTA is fine and we know our institutional capacity and resource constraints. The commitment and motivation of PTA members is still at its lowest level. Relatively, the PTAs in towns show more participation than their counterparts at the villages or semi-urban schools (**M2** interviewed on 03/02/2003).*

Another parent member of School A was asked whether she had knowledge of the PTA guidelines and also whether she enjoyed being a PTA member. To answer this question, **PA2** responded by saying:

As to my knowledge, we were called to the parents meeting during the parents' day. At the school we were told to elect representatives of parents that will serve in the PTA of School A. I personally did not have any prior knowledge and knew very little about what PTA stands for. To my best capacity I am willing to work and serve the people that have elected and put their trust in me. However, I feel my contribution to the school will be very little (PA2 interviewed on 14/01/2003).

In School B, when **PB1** was asked about her awareness of the PTA guidelines and to what extent the policy was put into practice, she replied by saying:

The PTA members of this school are very much aware of the PTA guidelines. The PTA guidelines were read on different occasions to all the members. The PTA members of this school meet every Monday and perform our tasks accordingly. We are eight active (executive) PTA members almost all of us with rich experience and capacity to perform the work of PTA. The PTA of our school participates in different aspects of school decision-making activities. The main activities are: fund-raising; monitoring school disciplinary problems; maintenance of school property; planning and budgeting; and school development. In the PTA meetings academic issues are even raised and discussed. The problems of teachers and their solutions are discussed. Almost all the PTA guidelines prescribe are in fact met (PB1 interviewed on 09/01/2003).

The PTA member of School B (**PB1**) and PTA member of School A (**PA2**) gave opposing views regarding the PTA guidelines in the above discussion. The reason for the opposing views is attributed to the different socio-economic status of the schools. The PTAs of these two schools had different experiences and capacities. This point was supported by the responses received from the Eritrean MOE official (**M2**) who stressed that PTAs of schools in the towns have more participation than those in the countryside.

According to the principal of School A, the mismatch between education policy and the actual practice was commonly explained in terms of lack of resources, motivation, skill and capacity to translate official vision into contextual reality. Policy as text is the product of negotiations and compromises. When the Eritrean MOE official (**M2**) was asked whether stakeholders participated in the policy formulation and development of school governance, that is, the PTA guidelines, she commented:

In my view, representatives were called from each interest group. Discussions have taken place in order to enrich the PTA guidelines and their views were taken into consideration. It is understandable that we cannot invite each member to participate and ask to make contributions. However, the issue was discussed and communicated through the PTA

The principal of School A and **PA2** indicated that most PTA members of their school have little knowledge about the roles of PTAs. At times there are some forms of interference as there is no clear demarcation line between the work of the school administration and the role of PTA in the school governance. The parents and the teachers were of the opinion that the MOE did not consult them in the formulation stage of the PTA guidelines. The oversight of local people's perceptions and needs in the process of formulating the parental involvement policy, has a grave implication in the implementation process. It is obvious that local people are likely to resist the effective implementation of PTA reform if they are not informed about it. The process of formulating education policies and strategies must include not only national and international forces but also the views of local people (Maclure, 1993: 75). Equally important, for an "education system to be in tune with change it needs to be flexible, adaptable and responsive to constantly changing circumstances and needs" (Whitaker, 1993: 6).

Educational policies of school governance with particular focus on the PTA guidelines need not be handed down directly from the top as regulations to be enforced. If the school governance policies are handed down straight from above without consultation and scrutiny and without opinions and feedback from those that are expected to play an active role during implementation, I think it may not be fruitful and implementable. Nonetheless, when policy makers share the issue of school governance and forward it to the lower levels in which constructive ideas are generated from the side of the stakeholders, the policy or the project could easily be implemented without any interrogation or resistance for change. Thus, for implementation to be realized the key ingredients, that need due attention could be understanding, capability, resources and cooperation.

The Eritrean PTA guidelines state that a parent having a child in the school could be elected as a PTA member (MOE, PTA, 2000: 3). The PTA requirement that a parent must have a child at school to be a PTA member is perhaps potentially debatable. Should it not be parents with a genuine interest in education that should be elected? Should it be the community members instead of only a parent with a child in a school? Sipamla (1995: 115) also argued that the PTA guidelines should not preclude other

community members from involvement as school governors even though they do not have children in the school. I do concur with Sipamla because in my view what matters are the interest, motivation, commitment, skill and capacity. Most respondents commented that community members who do not have children need to be elected as PTA members as long as they have interest, commitment and capacity.

The PTA guidelines are not yet applied in practice. There is a mismatch between what the PTA guidelines demand and what is actually performed on the ground. It can be argued that the reason for the mismatch is that there is lack of interest, motivation, skill and capacity. Furthermore, there is less commitment and dedication. In addition, the respondents state that the unclear roles and functions of the PTA were constraints for the effective implementation of parental participation in school governance. Accordingly, Mankoe and Maynes (1994: 29) argue that the problem with unclear roles and responsibilities in school governance resulted in educators leaving parents out of the process of participation.

4.3.2. Centralization /decentralization strategy in educational governance

As it is clearly stated in the introductory part of the literature review decentralization as a strategy for transferring certain levels of responsibility to the regional levels has been operational in Eritrea since the proclamation of decree No. 86 in 1996 (GOE, 2001: 114). In view of this, the comments of these documents have to be verified and corroborated with what the interviewees have said. To have a clear notion of the Eritrean MOE policy for education regarding centralization or decentralization of school governance, I interviewed one of the senior MOE officials (**M1**). In answering this basic question **M1** commented by saying:

> *At the moment we have a rather highly centralized system of education in this country. But the idea is to gradually devolve authority to the local levels. Maybe this can take place step wise, first authority and responsibility will be vested to regional levels in many phases. Afterwards to sub-regional and eventually down to schools to have much fuller authority and responsibility for their own affairs. The idea is to gradually step by step devolve the authority from the central level to the local levels. The system that was established immediately after independence was highly centralized. The MOE has envisaged that it would devolve authority but that it will be controlled from the centre. A decree to decentralize authority to lower levels, which also applies to all the other ministries, was announced through the proclamation No. 86/1996. The legal framework of the decentralization*

*process for education is based upon the proclamation. (**M1** interviewed on 25/01/2003).*

The student PTA member of School A was interviewed to share his view as to how he feels about the strategy of employing decentralization in the education system. I explained to him what is meant by decentralization, the devolving the power of decision making to local levels. Further, I wanted to find out what strategy is actually practiced right now, centralization or decentralization. He commented by saying:

> *In my view, I think centralization is practiced at the moment. Schools lack resources, they rely on the Government for everything and in every aspect decisions are taken by the central office. In my opinion, very little activities are decided by the regional levels. I can say the majority of decisions are done at the centre. At times decentralization exacerbates inequalities. In my view certain sensitive issues must be controlled from the centre. I feel that some control mechanisms or certain impositions are necessary by the central office. Otherwise, undesired effects such as sex discrimination, religious beliefs and others might emerge. When the level of consciousness and the skills, capacity is met then gradually Eritrea can go for decentralization (**SA** interviewed on 14/01/2003).*

The MOE official (**M2**), parent two PTA member of School A (**PA2**) and both teachers of the two schools involved in this study concur with the views of the student PTA member of School A and the MOE official (**M1**) presented above. However, parent one PTA member of School A (**PA1**) gave her remarks that the decisions of school governance are top-down with very minimal consultation and participation of the stakeholders. She could not identify which strategy the Eritrean educational policy follows at the moment. In addition, the student PTA member of School B (**SB**) was also not sure which strategy the school system is using at the moment.

In the Eritrean educational policy texts, I did not find much evidence about decentralization programmes or strategies. Therefore, to have a clear picture of the overall challenges and opportunities of the school governance, I have asked **M1** to give me a broader explanation concerning centralization /decentralization of educational policies. The Eritrean MOE senior official (**M1**) responded that there are many challenges facing the process of decentralization of the system of school governance. According to the MOE senior official (**M1**), in terms of the regulatory framework, the government issued a decree on decentralization although the decree needs to be worked out in detail for its implementation. It is one thing to come up with that decree and it is another thing to decide on the basis to put in place all the regulatory as well as the

structural and organizational frameworks that would be required to implement such a decree. Therefore, this is one of the challenges that needs to be addressed.

The second most important challenge or constraint that the ministry is facing in the process of decentralization is the lack of institutional capacity. Eritrea being a new nation, the institutions are not well established at all levels. In terms of institutional capacity, the MOE senior official explained that lack of skilled personnel, lack of financial resources and facilities are the main constraints encountered in developing efficient institutions. So if the MOE is going to decentralize or devolve authority to local levels, the most important thing one has to have is a sufficient number of qualified personnel that take responsibility for all the educational affairs and implement them satisfactorily. To do that **M1** again felt that one has basically to concentrate on developing the managerial skills at Zone, Sub-Zone and school levels through various educational and training programmes.

There is also a need to increase or develop the overall awareness of the community to assume responsibility and devolve power to the lower levels. It is not an easy issue for Eritrea because it is a country where approximately 70% of the country's adult population is still illiterate. Under such circumstances especially in remote places it would take time to devolve all authority or greater part of authority in educational matters to the local levels. The MOE senior official (**M1**) believes that it takes a long process to develop institutional capacity.

Decentralization has an input in the overall efforts at democratizing the whole nation and also in the political arena of the society. As to the issue of creating inequalities there are ways and means of handling them. In accordance with the equity concern, the government or the authorities at the central level take all the necessary measures to ensure that adequate capacity be given at all levels. If the equity issue is not addressed properly certain areas of the nation or population groups who are relatively advantaged will enjoy more benefits and the disadvantaged groups could be at risk. This means that the population that has not yet developed the minimum institutional capacity would be required to assume responsibility to run educational affairs even to respective local levels. In pursuing the general policy of equity in education the Eritrean MOE has plans to build capacity equitably throughout the nation. If this policy is well implemented **M1** believes that the fear of creating serious imbalances would not have much effect.

In terms of institutional capacity one of the things that the nation needs is adequate facilities. Among the main ones are effective communication facilities, which are very essential to facilitate the routine office work. It is the view of the MOE official (**M1**) that the nation plans to have modern communication facilities including access to information technology at all levels to facilitate this process. The MOE has started to extend communication facilities such as computer and internet services to each of the local MOE offices and to each high school to have direct access for communication with the central office.

Another very crucial resource constraint of local schools is the issue of finance. At the moment although certain aspects of the budget are administered by the local levels, the major part of the budget is allocated by the central level. To this end in Eritrea there is a centralized school system that heavily relies on the centre for planning, budgeting and financing. Thus, apart from the small amounts of funds raised by local communities, the schools are heavily dependant on the government for their financial needs. Gradually, it is the hope of the government that decentralization could be developed and certain powers of decision-making devolved. The communities would then have to assume greater responsibilities. As a result local schools or communities will have their own budgets by raising increasing portions of their budgets from their resources through their own efforts. Those are some of the main challenges that the ministry official (**M1**) believes that have to be faced as one assumes greater responsibilities.

I asked the Eritrean senior MOE official (**M1**) to comment on another basic issue regarding the policy aspect of decentralization of school governance. What could be the long-run vision of the Eritrean MOE, whether it is to devolve the power of decision-making to the local levels or to maintain a balance between centralization and decentralization. He added that it is very difficult to envisage at this stage what the ultimate situation would be. It takes a long process to broaden the limited capacity. In a sense as a new nation Eritrea has to go through rather a lengthy process for establishing an effective and efficient system of educational administration down to the school level. So it is not easy to reach the final elements of decentralization. The MOE official thinks that it is a question of decades. This nation cannot have such a system in a very short period of time. In his opinion, the MOE would end up having some sort of a mix of the two.

The MOE senior official (**M1**) does not think that it would be total decentralization. It would be mainly decentralization but some aspects of centralization will remain. Some of the reasons may be that Eritrea is a relatively small nation and therefore, there are advantages that certain aspects of work in education probably administered centrally.

One issue raised by the MOE senior official was the issue of curriculum planning and development. Although the school curriculum is relevant to all stakeholders in education, the Eritrean MOE official (**M1**) believes that for a small nation like Eritrea it is very difficult to envisage within the near future that the MOE would have all the necessary capacity for curriculum development at the school level. So it is important that the MOE sets up a core curriculum that would serve as a base for all instructional activities. The core curriculum gives space for local authorities to exercise the decision-making power in accordance with the national curriculum.

Similarly, when one thinks of training programmes it would be very difficult at this stage to envisage that the local educational authority would have the capacity to conduct all the various training programmes. Even at the national level since the educational and training institutions that the ministry have are very few, this by itself is a big challenge. And it will take a very long period of time for the MOE to establish such capacities at the local level or to deploy professional and qualified personnel all the way down to the school level in all regions of the country. Thus, the senior MOE official has emphasized his concern that by and large for the foreseeable future the MOE policy would be a mix of central authority and local authority with efforts towards devolving more and more authority in decision-making gradually to the local levels.

4.4. Strengths and impediments of PTA: Parental involvement in the governance of schools

The main impediments to parental participation will be discussed under the sub-themes of socio-economic background, commitment, resources and capacity building.

4.4.1. Influence of socio-economic background

School A draws students mainly from a lower socio-economic background. Since most of the students come from rural area and poor families, the contribution made to the

school is very minimal. Phrased differently, this contribution is not enough for all the demands of the school. Furthermore, the parents' financial capacities and the community's socio-economic status determines the success of community support to education. In communities of low socio-economic status, school support in the form of materials and services may be more easily provided rather than financial contributions. As it is explained above, parents from poor communities find it very difficult to pay school fees and other contributions demanded by the schools. In this regard, parents can contribute labour services to the school rather than granting them total exemption from all school fees. One of the objectives of the PTA is to give support to the school in its educational implementation by mobilizing financial as well as non-financial resources (MOE, PTA, 2000: 14).

As one MOE official **M2** has indicated, parents in rural areas find it very difficult to be active participants in school activities for socio-economic reasons. Parents have work and home commitments. Another PTA parent member **PA1** concurred with the second MOE official (**M2**) that parents are preoccupied with work and other commitments and complained that they had pressure of time, work, home and other commitments. The student PTA member (**SA**) in School A made it clear that there were students that go to work when they are not having classes, since their parents were unable to provide them with the minimum requirements for schooling, such as books, clothes and even food. He further asserted that most problems of these students were related to socio-economic background and the consequences of the war imbalances. **SB** is in agreement with **SA** that the attitude of parents towards education seem to be very disappointing. She said that parents give priority to their work and this was due to lack of skill and capacity over and above socio-economic reasons.

The chairperson of the PTA of School A is also the parliament (Baito) representative of the community of School A. When asked about his home background, he replied that most parents in that community are preoccupied with their work and home commitments. On top of that, parents are hit hard by financial stress. When parents are called for the meeting they do not come on time, even worse, they sometimes do not appear at all. The reason given was the socio-economic constraints as parents cannot afford transportation costs or they are totally tied up with work or home commitments (**PA2** interviewed on 14/01/2003).

There are obvious problems that are emanating from the socio-economic status of parents. Parents that stay far away from the school fail to get involved in school activities. As it is indicated in 4.4.2, most parents in rural areas fail to attend school meetings. Poor parents, who fail to provide for their children, often do not come to school. Thus, poverty appears to compound the problems of parental involvement. Poor parents fear that schools may require them to contribute financially. Parents fail to come to school due to the distance they have to travel to the school or because the school is not within reasonable walking distance from home. This in fact exacerbated by financial constraints and lack of own transport. Parents who stay far from school regard getting to school as an extra burden on their already depleted finances. For them it becomes an extra burden to pay for transport to school when they already experience survival difficulties.

As a concluding remark, School A with low income parents experience greater financial stress and health related problems. Likewise, many of the parental practices described above are highly correlated with socio-economic status. Due to the negative influence of the socio-economic background School A made a little progress towards effective school governance and parental involvement in its decision-making. School B has displayed a better capacity to develop parental involvement. I want to contend that effective parental involvement would mean that parents take part in policy making and governance of their schools. It means that parents must view themselves as committed 'owners' of public schools, willing and able to speak up and take action to defend and promote the quality of public education. But as witnessed in the case of School A, where there is a lack of both material and cultural resources in the parent governors (PTA), the situation is gloomy and not promising. Despite the lack of 'hard evidence' in regard to the nature of the decision-making there is greater teacher and parent involvement in School B.

4.4.2. Commitment

The study has revealed that the PTA of School A and School B vary considerably in the way they function and in their successful contribution to the success of their schools. The PTA members of School A attend their meetings once a month and whenever problems occur. However, as the principal explained to me, the PTA agreed to make its meetings once a month. The principal further made it clear that sometimes the meetings

were cancelled or postponed due to not having a quorum of its members. The meeting minute book of School A showed that PTA members are repeatedly absent from the PTA meetings. My experience as the principal and the secretary of School A confirmed this tendency of low attendance of meetings by parents.

On the other hand, in School B meetings are held every week, that is every Monday at 6:00 p.m. The meetings take place irrespective of whether there was a problem or not. The PTA meeting minute book of School B showed that the attendance of PTA members was regular. The PTA executive committee has weekly meetings. When problems are identified immediate measures are taken. I think this has helped School B to show improvement in academic and in disciplinary matters.

According to Serebnick (1992: 312), commitment is defined as a willingness to devote extra effort so that the organization will be successful and a desire to maintain membership as an indication of considerable loyalty to the organization. From this vantage point, local school PTA meetings can serve as avenues for discussion about a variety of educational issues. Teachers may talk to the parent community about student discipline issues. Experts from the community may talk about building better relationships with adolescents, or share important information about school reform initiatives. Parents may raise concerns about such things as homework or proposed changes in school curriculum or assessment policies. The PTA can also serve as a powerful mediating function, providing a neutral forum for resolving conflicts that sometimes occur in schools around controversial issues.

Parents' participation and commitment reflected passivity in terms of their contribution in taking decision. When asked as to how parents participate in the decision-making process, the principal of School A **(DA)** said:

> *Despite parents being absent from our meetings, parents do not take pride in their duties. We are experiencing a situation whereby parents occupy a passive position within school governance. It is in fact humiliating to see a parent sitting without saying a word in the decision-making process. To this end the democratic right of parents in the decision making of school governance can easily be violated* **(DA** interviewed on 15/01/2003).

Parents' views in the meetings do not have much influence on the decision-making of school PTAs due to the parents low level of attendance; passivity in contributing towards discussions and debates; or absenteeism of parents in the PTA meetings. As a

result, parents' voices have little impact and consideration. To this end, an imbalance of power between different stakeholders emerges where professionals gain an upper hand in the decision-making process.

TA expressed his view of the difficult task of teachers and commented by saying " one cannot clap with one hand." This means that if parents do not cooperate and do their share to help the teachers in the education of their children, the school cannot function effectively. To elaborate this, he echoed his frustration by saying:

> *There is no morale and commitments from the side of parents to either take part in the problem of the school or on the decision-making process. Parents are not participating at all. This kind of behaviour forces the school management to decide upon issues on their behalf* (TA interviewed on 14/01/2003).

The power relations that exist in the PTA of School A reflect that not everyone participates equally. Firstly, the gap between the level of education of the principal, teachers and learners, on the one hand, and the parent governors on the other hand means that parents do not have the knowledge to deal with the complicated school governance matters.

The PTA chairperson of School A (PA2) complained that professional staff members dominate the discussions during meetings and parents feel incompetent as they lack the knowledge and skills to take part in the decision-making. PA2 commented by saying:

> *Parents are not participating as expected and they are showing no responsibility and commitment in dealing with issues that are central to the functioning and effectiveness of the school* (PA2 interviewed on 14/01/2003).

Because of incompetence when compared to professional administrators, and parents' lack of confidence, parents feel that professional staff members are best able to take decisions. This attitude results in a situation whereby suggestions and proposals by those in the high positions go unchallenged and are not questioned during meetings. It does not appear to be the intention of other stakeholders in the PTAs to overpower and dominate parents in terms of decision-making. It is because of the way in which parents participate in the decision-making process that other participants take decisions with little or no contribution of parents. Parents from the schools from a lower socio-economic background confirmed that professional staff members dominate discussion

and parents feel incompetent as they lack the knowledge and skills to take part in the decision-making process.

In general, the schools of lower socio-economic status which have a high proportion of less trained parents participating in the school governing body, the PTAs revealed a lack of commitment and sound involvement in the decision-making process. Lack of time, parents preoccupied with work and home commitments, lack of transport or financial constraints and lack of knowledge, skill and capacity are some of the obvious obstacles that School A is facing at present. Parents from the lower socio-economic background were said to have a tendency of showing no interest in attending school PTA meetings and are thus not actively engaged in the decisions-making process of School A. During the informal discussions I had with parents, one parent indicated to me that parents from lower socio-economic background schools only attend meetings when they are promised certain incentives.

On the other hand, the executive PTA members of School B showed maximum commitment and interest and gave priority to the school affairs. When I asked **PB1** how the interest and commitment of the PTA members was with regard to the role they played as PTA members, she elaborated by saying:

> *The PTA participation of this school in different activities was very high. We advised students to be disciplined citizens. We called seminars for both teachers and parents. This was meant for hearing and reporting the views of teachers and parents on the academic progress of students. The other crucial point was to explain the role of parents with collaboration of the school in shaping the discipline of students both at home and in school. A lot of activities have been accomplished during the past four years. She touched several areas in which the PTA of School B has played a part. For example, when the abolishment of corporal punishment was announced through the students' discipline policy i.e. 'the 30 Golden Rules', teachers did not agree with it. We started to explain our experience of the PTA while we were overseas and tried our best to convince them. In fact, a lot of improvements have been made to have good discipline and academic progress (PB1 interviewed on 09/01/2003).*

The PTA members of School B showed much involvement in every aspect of the school's activities. The principal **DB** of School B appreciates the work performed by PTA members. I heard him saying that " the school is so lucky to have these PTA members." The PTA members of School B showed commitment and dedication to perform the different activities of the school. From what the principal (**DB**) and **PB1**

have indicated, the PTA members made a lot of effort by sacrificing their time, energy, money and their knowledge. Thus, in School B parental involvement is a thing that the school and the community should be proud of and it is indeed very promising and exemplary to other PTAs.

To summarize the findings around commitment, the study revealed that the attendance, interest, willingness, and readiness of the school governing body or the PTA of School A had many difficulties due to lack of skill, capacity, and socio-economic background of the parent community. The study suggests that the attendance of school governing body (PTA) meetings was low in School A.

In School B, the study showed that the attendance of the school governing body (PTA) meeting was found to be relatively high with the indication that most PTA members attended meetings every week. I counterchecked what I have observed during one of the meetings with what the documents indicated regarding the attendance of PTA members in meetings. The two schools operate in quite different socio-economic backgrounds. In the case of the PTA members in School B, most of them lived abroad for long years where they acquired rich experience in school management and governance which helped School B to a large extent. The PTA members are elected voluntarily with commitment to play their part in transforming the school. Even though this seems to violate the democratic rights of the election process, it is done for the best service of the community I don't think it has any serious defect. The way I see it is from the vantage point of the school. PTA members must be elected by bearing in mind things like education, commitment and interest. It should not be just for the sake of representation that parents are elected.

4.4.3. Resource constraints

One of the basic reasons of the government to decentralize power of decision-making to the local level could be to get relieved of its resource commitments. Parental knowledge, interests and experiences are valuable resources for the school. The Eritrean MOE development expenditure on education is high and understandably cannot keep pace with the expansion of the education system. To this end, acute shortages of teaching materials, equipment, human and material capacities are experienced at all levels. The difficult economic conditions obtaining in the country result in increased demand for

community support through Parent Teacher Associations. Thus, the PTAs are expected to become the major funding bodies of the schools and assume a pivotal role in the development of the education system. The largest contribution from parents is financial support on a yearly or semester basis.

The major functions performed by the PTAs included fund-raising for school projects, contributing to the purchase of stationery and other school supplies. The PTA also played a great role in maintenance of school property and in maintaining school discipline. The findings, however, revealed that PTAs had concentrated on peripheral functions at the expense of other functions that PTAs would ideally perform.

Teachers perceive some of the key problems in schooling as lack of sufficient and adequate pedagogical materials including textbooks, and furniture; teacher absenteeism affecting education. To illustrate the resource problem, the principal of School A, commented as follows:

> Primarily the school was suffering from acute shortage of teachers. Often, the teachers were inexperienced with less enthusiasm and commitment and a lot of absenteeism is recorded. About 50% of the teachers in our school are making their national service and teach without salary. In this regard, the school is operating under stress and in difficult situation. Besides, the school is found in an area from lower socio-economic background and as a result many resources are lacking. In addition facilities like computers, photocopier machines are not yet available. The school is in fact under resourced and handicap in many aspects (**DA** interviewed on 15/01/2003).

On the other hand, when I interviewed the chairperson of School B, how their school managed its resource constraints, his response was:

> The PTA members of our school are committed to make available whatever the administration and teachers ask for the benefit of the students. We have raised funds for pedagogical and physical needs of the school. As far as resources are concerned our school is better off than many of other schools. We do have shortages of rooms for office use and I hope this also will be solved (**PB2** interviewed 10/01/2003).

Most interviewees of School A concur that the school has financial constraints, a shortage of experienced and committed teachers and above all facilities are its major problems. The senior Eritrean MOE official **M1** expressed his concern that schools are grappling with acute shortages in terms of institutional capacity, management skills, and professional capacity.

4.4.4. Capacity building

Most interviewees in both schools made it clear that they did not have any sort of training concerning PTA development. A few of the PTA members stated that they had attended a two-day workshop arranged by the MOE at Asmara in 2001 when the PTA started to function. The attempts to understand the issues of PTA training have not yet yielded much fruit. However, there was a wealth of information from stakeholders in both schools regarding what skills the PTA needed and thus what the focus of the training should be.

Most of the interviewees identified an urgent need to train governing bodies (PTAs) in the basic knowledge and skills that would enable them to function effectively as organs of democratic governance. This would include, among other things, the role and functions of PTAs, fund-raising skills, conflict avoidance and conflict resolution skills, and the basic knowledge of accounting and financial controls. Most parent PTA members of School B have rich experience of PTAs in different countries. When **PB1** was asked whether she needs training for the PTA, she commented that even though most of them had experience while they were overseas, every PTA member requires the training for refreshment and for inspiration of how to do the job more effectively. She added that being a PTA member without participating actively is not helpful to the school. **SA** echoed his frustration for not taken any sort of training with regard to PTA. He commented by saying:

> *Any training has its objectives. Training enables one to expand his or her understanding what the PTA is all about. It adds flavour and skill, capacity and widens the scope of looking at and understanding things. Further, training helps one to recognize the mistake and seek solutions. Training enables one to enrich awareness and investigates the demand of students. In fact, one gets remedies to his or her problems via these training programmes* (**SA** interviewed on14/01/2003).

In addition, **SB** stressed the need to sensitize the community. Parents must have the knowledge so as to bring change in their schools. She emphasized that schools have to infiltrate the villages through the village administrators by giving continuous and extensive awareness till the parents are fully equipped with all the basic requirements. **SB** further commented that the only way out to make parents active participants in the school decision-making process is through education, that is to teach them and get acquainted with the school programmes, regulations, policies and the overall vision of

the schools. Lastly, she asserted that the skills and capacity cannot be achieved overnight, it can take years but the need to start giving training to PTA members in the first place is very crucial.

PA2 indicated that he had attended several workshops at national, regional and at school levels. PA2 was the chairperson of the PTA in School A and had the chance to participate in workshops and had some knowledge about PTAs. However, he confessed that the other PTA members did not receive any training. Importantly, PA2 emphasized that all parents must be well informed about the PTA guidelines, schools' regulation policy and the students' discipline policy.

Equally important, PB1 explained that to be a PTA member is time consuming, requires dedication and commitment, interest to sacrifice one's own time, energy, money for the sake and benefit of students. To do all these, one needs to be aware of and equipped with the necessary training. Thus, all interviewees concur with the idea of PB1 where parents are believed to lack skill and capacity in addition to having socio-economic constraints. PB2 also saw a need for training and skills development for the classroom parent representative. Again, PB2 believes that if parents were going to make the most of the opportunities available and make a real contribution to the school then they would need some skills development.

Most of the interviewees indicated that parental involvement improves instructional practice in the school. However, communities that have little experience with decentralized decision-making need training on how to participate effectively in the decision-making. In addition, the PTA members can develop their knowledge and understanding through continuous training programmes. Schuftan (1996) argues that capacity building increases people's knowledge, awareness, and skills that help to solve the problems of the school. This also concurs with what one of the MOE officials M1 clearly said that the long term plan of the ministry is to develop and train the human resource capital and equip communities to explore their resources for the effective use and development of their schools.

Other areas of need for capacity building raised by stakeholders interviewed, particularly by both principals of the two schools and by PB1 and PB2 include:

- *Training on the distinction between management and governance and their respective roles and*
- *Training on governance of the parent component (PTA), especially in the area of development of school policies.*

Most respondents remark that they need to acquire training that will give them a wide range of knowledge and skills. This includes: knowledge of how education or schools function; knowledge of governing bodies (PTAs), and PTAs functions and rights as laid down in the guidelines; skills of conflict resolution; on how to conduct and record meetings; on how to keep financial records; knowledge on the dynamics of change and school culture; control of the admission of students. Training ensures that all participants understand their role, develop skills to be effective members, and develop understanding of education issues that affect student learning.

To this end, useful lessons have been learned regarding the democratic governance of schools. Foremost of these is that attempts to implement national policy such as the PTA guidelines by schools without the necessary resources and capacity have inevitably resulted in conflicts and tensions between various levels of the system. This situation is aggravated by the specificity of problems faced by governing bodies (PTAs) especially in schools in rural areas. Most importantly, support structures and training must be seen as vital given the lack of skill, confidence, time and money of many parents from poorer communities.

4.5. Predominant areas of involvement of PTAs in school governance decision-making

The PTA guidelines state a number of duties and responsibilities for the PTA members to be actively involved in school management activities. However, the PTA members are mostly limited in fund-raising and discipline matters. The following sub-themes deal with the issue of fund-raising, discipline and academic matters.

4.5.1. Fund-raising

In line with the government policy, education is free in Eritrea (MOE, PTA, 2000: 2). However, in order to strengthen the school management processes and reinforce community contributions, efforts were made to involve parents and local communities

in school financial activities in the two schools studied. Against this background, student fees were collected from registration and other payments (sports, book services, ID cards, certificates/transcripts, etc.) made. Further, fees will be pegged according to rural-urban differentials and will also take into account the number of students in a school (MOE, 1997: 27). To this end, at secondary level rural schools will charge 30 Nakfa whereas urban schools will charge 35 Nakfa per year (*Ibid.*).

However, if the PTA in collaboration with the school administration might want to implement certain projects, then they can agree and decide what amount each student is going to pay at the beginning of the academic year. Then schools can announce the decision reached to the learners and to the parents. The school organization and regulation policy (MOE, SOR, 1997: 27) allows for those students who can demonstrate that they are unable to raise school fees to be exempted. Such learners should provide proof of such inability and their cases will be considered by the school and the PTA.

Alternatively, schools generate income by organizing fund raising projects and by involving parents, local communities and former students of the school. In the process of mounting a programme (i.e. school construction of classrooms or renovation), some kind of cost sharing mechanisms should be worked out. As it is indicated in section 2.8.3 of the literature review in Chapter Two, it is vital to share the financial responsibility of all kinds of cost between the government and the community. The school organization and regulation policy permits the community contribution (in cash or/and labour) to be 30% to 40% at secondary levels (MOE, SOR, 1997: 27). This is meant to shoulder the responsibility of schools on parents and have the feeling of ownership over their schools and also to relieve and share the burden of resource constraints to the government.

I presented and discussed how funds are raised in relation to what the documents specify about fund-raising. The fund-raising in the two schools differ too much. Since School A is in rural area with low socio-economic status the funds that are raised are small amounts of money, 80,000 Nakfa (Eritrean currency about 40,000 Rand). The PTA members in School A do not have the capacity to raise enough funds. In addition, the community is poor and finds it difficult to contribute money for the school. Thus, the major source of the school funds is students' school fees and income generated from a small piece of land.

However, in School B, the fund-raising activities were done quite satisfactorily. Most of the executive PTA members are professional parents since many of them have come from overseas and they have rich PTA experience of different countries. Noteworthy, they have the skill, capacity, readiness and interest to contribute towards the realization of the school PTA objectives. The principal of the School B has said it clearly that these PTA members give service with commitment and dedication to change the school.

When I interviewed the student PTA member (**SB**) of School B, about the fund-raising activities they do in their school, her response to this was:

> *There is the opportunity that PTAs in collaboration with the school administration arrange to raise money during the parents' day and other special occasions. We raised funds by organizing income generating activities such as exhibitions, selling school magazines, lottery draws, food and drink sales, leasing the school hall or playgrounds, and organizing sport events* (**SB** interviewed on 09/01/2003).

Further, the principal of School B (**DB**) said that in the past three years the PTA took initiatives to ask different organizations and NGOs for support and raised about 800,000 Nakfa (Eritrean currency), that is about 400,000 Rand. With this money, the PTA has repaired all desks, windows, blackboards and made full renovations. Besides the compound was asphalted and one cleaner recruited. The principal of School B remarked that the school has no intention to replace such PTA members till the PTA finalizes all of its projects that it had planned to do. He further noted that the majority of the parents would support them even after their term has expired.

4.5.2. PTAs involvement in discipline

Research evidence (Qonde, 2000; Samson, 1993; Magabane, 1999; and Van Wyk, 2001) has revealed that poorly kept school facilities, disrupted authority relations among principals, educators and learners; poor attendance of students and often teachers; lack of motivation and morale of students and teachers will have great effect on school discipline. This together with poor socio-economic conditions negatively influences school discipline. Discipline in education is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to define and often incorrectly equated with punishment. In a positive sense discipline refers to learning, guidance and orderliness.

The election of parents, educators and, in secondary schools, learners onto newly constituted school governing bodies (PTAs) seems to contribute to fund-raising and improved discipline. It has given parents authority to assist principals and educators to deal with the overall school governance and issues of school discipline. Likewise, school governing bodies (PTAs) have given principals an important support in the running of the school and parents are now able to use the PTA to hold educators and students accountable for their conduct.

In school B, when I interviewed **PB1** and asked her how they were doing with disciplinary problems of their school, she commented by saying:

> *The MOE has given a student's discipline policy to schools, known as the '30 Golden Rules'. One of the rules prohibits the use of corporal punishment. Teachers and school principals were used to it. It was very difficult for them to adjust and not to apply corporal punishment in schools. We have had several meetings to convince teachers that the negative implications of corporal punishment outweigh than its benefits to correct students' disciplinary problems. For the first few months it was a great challenge for the PTA members to convince the teachers. However, with time the issue has changed and almost now there is not much problem of discipline in our school* (**PB1** interviewed on 09/01/2003).

When the same question was put to **DB**, he responded by saying that his school was lucky to have these PTA members. With regard to discipline, the PTA had tried its best to maintain and improve the school discipline. What the PTA does was, they call the students to a meeting and give them all the necessary advice. The PTA members recommend the students to respect their teachers, elders, parents and to study and be disciplined. They tell the students to act according to the rules and regulations and culture of the school. The PTA or the parents insist on telling them, "people without good discipline is the same as food without salt." In this way, the PTA members often give their inspirational advice to the students. Parents indicate that the students' prime concern must be first of all to cultivate discipline and to be successful academically as well. Thus, the parents invested heavily in the improvement of the school. The principal of School B remarked that the discipline of the school had greatly improved and that this had raised the academic performance of the students. Equally important **PB2**, **SB**, and **TB** have similar views and agree with both **PB1** and **DB** regarding the discipline of School B.

Frequently educators do not have a thorough understanding of the assumptions that underline various discipline approaches nor sufficient knowledge of theory and practical applications. Generally, most participants interviewed at School A viewed discipline narrowly and equated it with obeying school rules only. Observations at the school during the fieldwork reveal that learners are generally well behaved. Most wore school uniforms. During the interviews participants did, however, mention that few learners attempted to fight with educators in school A when educators became too strict on issues of attendance, marks and dropout cases. **PA1** echoed her concern about a few teachers that showed rude behaviour such as carelessness, frequent absenteeism, disagreement and those that simply complain without valid reasons concerning learners.

The educators' main grievances were that learners do not apply themselves to their schoolwork and do not do their homework. As **TA** said:

> *Most of our students show a lack of commitment to their schoolwork. They just come to school because their parents send them. They have no clear vision at all* (**TA** interviewed on 14/01/2003).

Some participants argued that the children coming from poor socio-economic background would invariably exhibit problem behaviour. In my view this may not be necessarily always be true but from my experience it has some validity. Involvement in school disciplinary problems was thus often difficult for many parents who were struggling to survive and had almost no energy left for school functions.

When I probed **PA2** as to whether the socio-economic background of poor families has a negative contribution to non-fulfilling school obligations, his response was, " --- nowadays children have taken control of their parents instead of parents controlling their kids." To this end, the abdication of parental responsibility places an additional burden on educators when dealing with learner misconduct. With the exception of some PTA members in School B, for the reasons I have already explained, most school governing bodies (PTAs) are not fully equipped to deal with misconduct in secondary schools.

From the PTA guidelines section 4.2.2 (MOE, PTA, 2000: 5), the PTA is vested a power and responsibility to deal with discipline and student guidance issues. However, the members of most governing bodies (PTAs) lack experience of such matters, while some members are illiterate or semi-literate and struggling with issues of discipline vis a-vis guidance and counselling aspects, thus compounding the problem. The training of

these governing bodies or parents, which should be provided by the government or MOE, often does not take place due to a lack of resources. Although the commitment of the PTA cannot be faulted, their insights and ability to distinguish between major and minor transgressions of learners were often questioned.

4.5.3. Participation of the PTA in academic matters

The PTA guidelines (MOE, PTA, 2000: 5) section 4.2.3 permit the PTA members to actively be involved in academic issues such as evaluation of the curriculum, their depth and scope, as well as relevance to the interest, ability and age of learners. Further, the PTA members are permitted to do classroom visits and supervise how educators teach. They can investigate whether the syllabi are meaningful and have relevance to the needs and interest of the child. However, from experience and observation conducted in the two schools, the PTA has a limited role in campaigning and in raising the awareness of the society about the importance of education.

In School A, when **PA2** was asked how their participation was with regard to academic matters, he responded:

> *In this school all of us are not qualified. It is very difficult to find a PTA member or any parent for that matter with such skill and capacity. We did not help with any academic matters. With the little knowledge I have about academic subjects, I sometimes share my views with the elementary teachers since I was a PTA member for quite a number of years with them. I hear teachers and students complaining about certain subjects that cannot be covered within the specified academic year. I feel that certain basic amendments need to be incorporated in the overall curriculum. Ideally speaking, I support the involvement of the PTA in academic matters. Nonetheless, at present we have not yet gained much skill and capacity to interfere and give the necessary help academically. Right now the foundation is laid and we hope to do better in the future* (**PA2** interviewed on 14/01/2003).

Interviewees **SA**, **TA**, **PA1** and **DA** concur that the PTA did not show any involvement in academic matters so far since the PTA lacks resources, skills and knowledge of the schools academic programme. On the other end of the spectrum, in School B, the situation seemed to be different. When I raised the previous question with **PB1**, she confidently responded by saying:

> *The PTA of our school did involve itself in academic issues of School B. At different meetings we heard reports and evaluations and the complaints of*

each class presented by either the class teacher or the principal or the PTA class representative. We are very concerned and gave much attention to the teaching materials requested by subject teachers, librarians and department heads. Accordingly, we made all their requests available to them. Particularly to grade eleven students we had arranged special revision class to further help them to become successful in the matriculation examination locally called the Eritrean Secondary Education Certificate Examination (ESECE). We prepare and duplicate notes and handouts for revision purposes. At times we recruited teachers that gave extra help to students on a part-time basis. In addition, if there were cases of cheating reported to us from the school principal in examinations, we discuss the issue with teachers as how to handle them. Then we convey the message to the parents that they should take care of their children. The PTA also made discussions with students and we asked them why they were not studying? Why the participation of girls was less? Why there were many cases of dropouts? At present things have improved and changed a lot both academically and with discipline matters. Thus, we can only change serious behaviour of students gradually through consultation and persuasion and not by punishment, particularly corporal punishment (**PB** *interviewed on 09/01/2003*).

Likewise, the principal of School B contended that the parents in his school participated in academic matters. Many of the PTA members had come from abroad and they had the experience, skill, and knowledge about aspects of curriculum and textbook evaluation, guidance and counselling activities. They contributed significantly to academic issues as well. To this end, **DB** emphasized that the PTA of his school was indeed performing well. Everything the PTA of School B does depends on the basis of consultation, collaboration with teachers, administrators and learners to meet the demand of the school and for the interest and benefit of the learners.

The research reveals that PTAs were involved in fund-raising and disciplinary issues. In School A, the fund-raising activities were not very attractive and promising. Even though there were some initiatives undertaken, there was a very limited amount of progress. On the other hand, the PTA of School B played a big role in fund-raising, disciplinary issues and the school academic programme. The major differences between the two schools can be attributed to the socio-economic status of the school community. School A was influenced negatively and hit hard by the lower socio-economic background. It serves a poor community, less skilled, less motivated with less committed PTA members in a semi-urban area. In School B the parents were mostly of a middle-class background. The PTA members' background and level of education significantly differed from that of School A.

The findings of the investigations at these two schools seem to vary for the reasons I have explained above. Despite the relatively positive findings in respect of fund-raising activities, discipline and guidance in these two schools, what is yet to emerge is evidence that greater involvement in schools by parents, teachers and learners leads to improvement in student learning or even more generally in the quality of education available.

4.6. Perceptions of parents by other stakeholders

The reasons for the low level of participation of parents were perceived differently by different stakeholders. In this section the researcher discusses how parents were perceived by teachers, students and principals.

4.6.1. Teachers

One of the main challenges of education in Eritrea, is getting the level of parent and community empowerment that ensures their control of decision-making responsibility on maters affecting their children's education. The role of the PTA has been limited to the provision of material and other support. When parents attend parent-teacher conferences, for example, it creates continuity between the two dominant spheres of influence in the child's life, home and school, and likely signals to children the parents' value in their education. Socio-economic factors also influence how parents interact with teachers and school administrators. Research evidence has shown that high-income parents value education more and participate actively while the low-income parents were less involved.

Generally it is the view of most teachers in School A that the relationship between the parents and teachers is weak. This implies that there is no much closer interaction or contact between them, usually parents do not come to the school to ask about the progress of their child unless they are forced to. Often, parents stay at homes even if they have ample time to spare. Educators wanted parents to be actively involved in administration matters such as disciplining their children and helping these children to keep the values of the school. However, educators felt that parents were not competent enough to participate in educational matters. Thus, **TA** and **SA** emphasized that parents

do not actively involve themselves in the school activities due to their low awareness of the educational processes.

In School A, the low level of participation among learners was explained by the lack of experience and due to some cultural values that stressed that elders talk and learners listen. Accordingly, principals and teachers pointed out that parents from rural areas and parents who have lower levels of education were silent and submissive during the discussions about school matters. This is because they believed that the teachers were more professional.

In expressing his view about parental involvement in the decision-making process, the teacher PTA member of School A (**TA**) noted that on some occasions he felt as though decisions had already been taken by 'the school' and that they were really only being provided with information, and not to give their opinion. Another argued that parents often were inadvertently marginalized from making an input because of the jargon surrounding the issue. Educators, she noted, need to ' speak in simpler language so that we can all sail on the same boat'. She believed that this turned some parents off or made it confusing for them as to how they might get involved in the school. The PTA parent member (**PA2**) thought that there should be better communication between the school and the parent body.

At School B, educators argued that meaningful contribution by parents are constrained by the limited amount of time parents have for discharging their duties and responsibilities. Regarding the level of participation for teachers and parents, the principal (**DB**) of School B commented:

> *This is learning curve for all of us. Now we have committed parents, teachers, students and not just me, talking about priorities and how we debate and argue to reach consensus on decision-making. We have all got to learn some new skills and make progress in our notion of the governance of our schools* (**DB** interviewed on 20/02/2003).

Some educators claim that parents are often not objective enough when dealing with issues and sometimes personal interests do surface. One teacher in School B made it clear that certain parents seem to support their children irrespective of the merits of the case. Parent **PA1** concurred that parents at times are on the side of students without sound reasons, because of personal bias and hidden interests.

Nonetheless, educators at School A were concerned about the lack of insight parents have with regard to school related issues as a result of the lack of commitment, interest, skill and capacity they have. In this sense, educators claim that the government or the Eritrean MOE should take responsibility for training and capacitating parents about the duties and responsibilities that have been entrusted to them. It is evident from my observation during the time of fieldwork and from my experience while I was with them, that, should the parents be offered these opportunities, they are willing to learn. Inevitably, this should place them in a favourable position when confronted on issues of a complex nature. Educators feel that sometimes parents are easily misled or accept issues on face value without critically analyzing information placed before them. For example, **TB** claims that PTA members listen uncritically to the principal and as a result they are easily misled.

Teachers have their own misconception on the issue of parental involvement. As discussed in section 2.3 of Chapter Two, teachers fear that parents will undermine their authority (Fleming, 1997:77). Moreover, teachers complain regarding the time expired in accommodating parents and they consider that as a barrier rather than a help in their work. In addition, schools project an image that 'teachers know best' thereby discouraging parents from contributing to school affairs and academic issues at a greater depth. Educators believed that parents could not make fair educative decisions because they did not have professional expertise. Inevitably, as the benefits of parental involvement become more evident teachers have to show more commitment and dedication and get rid of barriers and areas of misunderstandings that may be created among both parents and school personnel.

There are several reasons for believing that good parent-teacher relationships are conducive to children's school performance. This is confirmed by the comments of teacher **TB:**

> *When parents communicate constructively with teachers and participate in school activities they gain a clearer understanding of what is expected of their children at school and they may learn from teachers how to work at home to enhance their children's education* (**TB** interviewed on 09/01/2003).

This study reveals that teachers were not satisfied with the attitudes of parents towards them. Yaffee (1994: 704) indicated in her study of parental participation in school

governance, that parental involvement resulted in " the loss of trust between the parents and the teachers." This evidence shows that there is a need to create a conducive environment for both parents and educators in school governance so that each group feels comfortable.

4.6.2. Students

The PTA is a governance structure at schools comprising of parents, teachers and learners. The ability to forge the three constituent groupings into a unified system needs to be examined seriously. In this sense, the success or failure of the PTA as a structure to govern effectively will stand and fall on the balance of power among its components. I appreciate, how Sipamla (1995: 38) in an earlier study argued very clearly using the metaphor of a three-legged pot to explain the triangular relationship of the constituencies. As he explained, to maintain the health of the PTA as a governance structure the three components can contribute individually and in turn satisfy the common interest of all three to keep the pot standing straight.

A teacher member of the PTA of School B expressed his concern about the learners' participation in the PTA. According to him, students treat themselves as equals to teachers. Learners demand to have equal power as teachers and parents at school. They do not want to be disciplined. They want to put their finger on everything that was discussed at the school. Thus, **TB** feels that there should be a limit on students' participation in the PTA. At School B, learners reinforced the positive aspects of parental involvement in their education by acknowledging the variety of skills, commitment, interest and cooperation of different stakeholders. Their understanding of issues of the PTA confirms that they have the potential to contribute to its effective functioning.

Alternatively, learners were happy with what parents do in order to meet the demands of schools via the PTAs. Nonetheless, they were very concerned at the poor attendance and lack of interest shown by some parents. Most of the time learners do admit that parents lack knowledge, skill and capacity. Occasionally, learners view some parents as siding and defending irresponsible educators. Parents are at times criticized by learners for showing up only when they have an interest in issues that only concern them.

4.6.3. Principals

It is the principal who essentially dictates how community involvement might develop in their particular school. While not understanding the significance of empowering teachers and parents through the development of multiple and shared leadership roles as noted by Jackson (2000), it remains important not to forget Southworth's (1999: 62) observation that principals 'remain' pivotal players in their schools--- they are centrifugal forces in the school. The student PTA member of School A when asked whether students feel dominated by the principal while making decisions, responded:

> *As I have observed in most of the meetings, there was no straightforward domination by the principal. Nonetheless, in my view most agendas were initiated by the principal. From what I have observed in the PTA meetings the principal of School A (DA) has a tendency to direct decisions in his favour and the PTAs are asked by him merely to confirm and approve decisions. Meanwhile, I did not notice deep-rooted discussions; no one seriously examined the pros and cons of the discussions. Most often, I feel that the principal has more influence and power or voice over the PTA members and decisions are influenced mostly by the principal himself (SA* interviewed on 14/01/2003).

At School B, the principal **DB** highlighted the positive aspects of working with parents in that they were committed and responsible to deal and be interested in the overall school affairs. The chairperson of School B **(PB2)** gave his view about the principal by saying that the principal was an important person in the decision-making process. The principal was perceived as having more power at school than all other interest groups. Thus, his influence on decision-making at the PTA meetings was very crucial.

Further, the principal of School B welcomed the divergent views of parents as they were focused to improve and enhance discussions as they can be managed properly to benefit the school. He revealed that debates were at times heated but at the end consensus was reached. Parents in the main were supportive and did understand the challenges facing the school. Thus, the relationship between the principal and the school governing body was very cordial. I counterchecked this through observation I did during the fieldwork at School B.

The PTA which is the school governing body would allow the principal to have control because of a genuine perception that the principal knows the needs of the school better than anyone. He or she knows the personnel at school, controls resources, controls the

information and he or she is the mouthpiece of the school. The school organization regulation and the PTA guideline policies emphasize that the principal is the key player. Principals have access to important resources and are in a position to influence and manipulate decision-making. The decision-making process brings micro-politics into play. Micro-politics would include the forging of relationships and the undeclared factors that come into play during the bargaining process, like the formation of coalitions that are built among the three interest groups of the PTA. This was one of the issues that this section tried to present and discuss critically.

In conclusion, both schools have developed a variety of structures and processes to enhance students', teachers' and parental involvement in the schools in recent years. The involvement by parents in direct classroom teaching-learning matters is minimal, except at a strategic level through the PTAs. The nature of parental involvement is quite varied but ranges from the strategic to the operational, and is much greater than it was previously in Eritrea.

4.7. Effective participation in decision-making of school governance

This section focuses on power (authority and responsibility) of PTAs, examines the dissemination of information (communication) and the type of decisions that are made by the PTAs.

4.7.1. The sharing of authority, responsibility and accountability

Among the main educational arguments for devolution of responsibility and authority to the community is that those closest to the local schools are in a position to make more responsive and relevant decisions about how teachers, principals, and schools should operate to best serve the needs of local children (Chapman *et al.*, 2002: 182). This argument assumes that community members know what they want from their schools and that, given the authority and opportunity, they would act to promote effective educational practices (*Ibid.*).

When the Eritean MOE official **M1** was interviewed about the sharing of authority and responsibility to the school levels he responded by saying:

The government has come up with the decree to decentralize all the main authority and responsibility for all ministries and this also applies to the Ministry of Education. At present we have rather a highly centralized system of education in this country but the idea is to gradually in many phases devolve authority to the local levels, maybe stepwise to give greater responsibilities first to Zones, sub-zones and eventually the schools to have much fuller authority in the management of their affairs (**M1** interviewed on 25/01/2003).

From my observation during the fieldwork, both principals were no longer the single decision-makers in the schools. The authority and responsibility was shared among teachers and parents.

Another way of conceiving this notion is the shift that, due to the empowerment of teachers within a clearly defined strategic set of operational parameters, as described by one principal, started by saying:

You see! You have got to be able to lead, to set the directions, to take others with you...then give them the responsibilities and have the trust they will do it (**DB** interviewed on 20/02/2003).

Decisions made by the PTAs seem to have been reached through compromise, consultation and consensus, in fact consensus has been the order of the day. Every participant in School B has been accorded the right to influence decisions to a certain degree whereas in School A, the democratic approach to decision-making is still at a low level, and there is a long way to go in this regard.

4.7.2. Effective communication

In order for schools to involve parents meaningfully there has to be a healthy system of communication. Lack of effective communication can clearly foster mistrust between parents, teachers and learners. School principals are important in brokering and mediating good parent, teacher and student relations. Eventually, the role of principals is very difficult. The principal must support and uphold the teachers' professional status, and as a facilitator, at the same time, encourage parents to have a greater say in school level decision-making.

The literature on school governance emphasizes that the school community requires parents to have the opportunity, responsibility and accountability for many more

decisions with regard to effective communication. With regard to communication patterns of School B (**PB1**) gave her view by saying:

> *Two-way communication is in fact desirable, for example, when school personnel meet the learners and their parents thus creating two-way interaction between the parent and the educator. Parents as well as educators need to recognize the meeting as an excellent opportunity for clarifying issues, seeking solutions, deciding on goals, determining mutual strategies thereby laying good foundation for sound communication* (**PB1** interviewed on 09/01/2003).

The parent PTA member of School A (**PA2**) said that at times PTA members could be fully occupied with their own work. So, he wanders whether this is considered as non-involvement. He further remarked that the work and home commitments could become a hindrance to the parental involvement in the school decision-making activities. He continued to stress the issue and wanted the notices of meetings to be communicated to each PTA member well ahead of time.

When the principal of School A was asked concerning the issue of communication in his school, he responded by saying:

> *We do not find timely information. The regional office sends messages through letters or through radio communication via sub-zone administration. However, the message sent reaches the schools very late. If meetings or workshops are arranged, sometimes we receive the message after the meeting has started or afterwards we are told that the meeting was postponed. Sometimes even the local authorities do not cooperate to send the message to us. At times we are late for the meeting due to transportation problems. Therefore, in addition to infrastructure problems, the communication gap also compounds the problem* (**DA** interviewed on 15/01/2003).

Hallak (1995: 111) argues that the improvement of the organizational capacity of schools requires a clear communication line among the different actors. All the respondents in both schools stated that dissemination of information is important for the improvement of parental participation in the school governance. Sharpe (1996: 8) raises a similar view that for effective implementation of decentralization approaches districts must communicate goals, guiding images and information. To this end, PTA members would know and understand their responsibilities, and thus be in a position to implement parental involvement effectively.

Many parents and educators, and a host of theorists and researchers, have asserted the value of positive communication in home-school relationships if children are to receive maximum benefit from their education. The parent-school contact may take the form of notes to parents, conferences, home visits and joint participation in workshops and classes. Other forms of communication include telephoning parents and using the school newsletter. Parents value these contacts because they often are the only alternative to the child's account of what transpires at school.

4.7.3. The power or voice of PTAs in decision-making

The PTA members are not given real decision-making powers in the area of teachers' appointments, transfers, promotion, demotion and dismissal. As in most countries that initiated educational decentralization, the Eritrean MOE still retains control of staffing, curriculum, inspection, examination and funding. Hallak (1995: 111) states that although governments devolve power of educational management to local authorities, they still retain control of teachers' appointments, transfers, promotion, demotion and dismissal. The participants stated that they were not clear about their roles and responsibilities and it was difficult for them to be accountable for that which they did not participate in actively. In agreement with the previous statement, Riley (1997: 167) states, " if accountability is not clear to those working within the system, it is unlikely to be clear to users and beneficiaries of services."

In School B, it appeared that decision-making was a participative process which takes a democratic form ranging from debating issues, arguing and voting in an effort to reach consensus at meetings. When asked about the way PTA members participate in the decision-making process, **PB1** responded:

> *There is full participation where everybody takes part and takes it very seriously. We do not accept any decisions from anybody without clear understanding of the issue. At the end we do have responsibility and are accountable for what we do* (**PB1** interviewed on 09/01/2003).

PTA members at School B showed their acceptance that decision-making indeed is an important requirement for the collective consultation, debate, responsibility and accountability. Parental participation clearly involves elements of willingness and commitment on the part of parents to share not only ownership but also responsibility

and accountability. These issues were reflected by the parents' willingness, commitment, and their ability to take and implement decisions at School B.

The teacher PTA member of School A **(TA)** when asked about what kind of decision-making activities the PTA of his school perform and whether collaborative decision-making was practiced or not, **TA** responded by saying:

> *Most delicate issues are done at central level. The school has very limited power and say about issues concerning the salary of teachers; promotion or demotion of its staff; hiring and firing of personnel; training of its human power; policy issues and the curriculum issues etc. I feel most decisions are undertaken at central and regional levels. Even the school calendar and examination periods are fixed or decided by the central departments of the MOE offices. In my view, if the local levels would decide their own things could have been more fruitful. The reason is that they know more than others about their own needs are. I can say most problems can be solved if they are done at local levels. Only sensitive issues such as policies, standard setting, training etc. should be done centrally. Nonetheless, in most of the decisions done at the centre the voice of educators, principals, learners and parents have to be incorporated and immediate feedback has to reach down to schools* **(TA** interviewed on 14/01/2003).

The student PTA member of School B **(SB)** declared that the meetings and decisions made were on the basis of collaboration and consultation and with consensus of all the stakeholders. To strengthen the view of the student, the Principal of School B **(DB)** put forward his view by saying:

> *The PTA of our school is a bit different from other schools. We do not have any problem regarding the PTA in our school. I do not see any point where the principal or the educators do all the work alone. Everybody is concerned about the school. Therefore, without exaggeration decisions are taken in consultation. Besides, the decisions taken are transparent to every parent and student by calling him or her to attend meetings four to five times a year. Ultimately, an overall report is also sent to the regional and central MOE offices so that there will be follow up* **(DB** interviewed on 20/02/2003).

It was evident from my observation during the fieldwork that the principal of School B demonstrated sound leadership and interpersonal skills to create, a welcoming, inclusive and trusting collaborative culture. Such a culture is a marked shift from the previous situation where the principal dominated decision-making and teachers tended to keep parents at 'arms length'. Gradually things seem to have improved and changed particularly in School B.

4.8. Motivating parents, learners, educators towards active participation in the decision-making of PTAs

Making people feel that to be trusted and valued are strong motivators. The responsibility parents had been given is without any payment, but the effect it had on their self-esteem was tremendous. Praise, thanks and attention provide what are called positive strokes and these help to build up morale and confidence (Fleming, 2000: 51). It is essential, therefore, to engage parents, teachers and students, actively in the shaping of the school and to ensure that they feel valued and in position of high levels of skill. Everyone wants to be appreciated and valued, however, the media have little that is positive to say about teachers' and parents' involvement in school activities. This can undermine the morale and self-confidence and make it all the more difficult to motivate PTAs. It is true that success breeds success and it is also true that negative talk can create failure or at least sap enthusiasm.

TA who is a teacher in School A was asked how parents could be motivated in school activities. He responded by saying:

> First of all we need to show a smiling face when parents come. It does have an impact- the first move we make with parents. Then make them feel comfortable and make them visit and see the school environment. They can sense the problems and the school situation for themselves (TA interviewed on 14/01/2003).

According to **TA** who is a teacher and PTA member of School A the following factors can help to raise the motivational aspect of PTAs in general and that of parents in particular.

- *Being willing to share decision-making with parents, the issue of power, delegation and empowerment;*
- *Develop a welcoming culture;*
- *Develop a trusting partnership with parents and teachers;*
- *Strive to ensure that involvement is meaningful*
- *Understand parents problems and sense of appreciation for what they contribute to the school;*
- *Award certificate of participation for parents that have shown active involvement during parents day and make it public.*

He concluded by saying that he thinks these factors will do more than mere financial incentives given to those parents. The principal of School A **(DA)** expressed his feeling about the issue of motivating the parents. The first thing that schools must do is to persuade and train the community that the school is their own property and also that

parents should protect their schools. To do this, a sense of ownership must be cultivated through continuous training programmes.

Most of the PTA members in School B are giving service on a voluntary basis and work with commitment and interest. The principal of School B **(DB)** gave his view on how to handle the parents by saying:

> *When a PTA member comes to the school a welcoming face must be given to him or her. Even a cup of tea will do and recognition must be given for whatever work they do. At the end when they have finished their term of service as PTA members, then the school can award a merit certificate for the active participation offered to the school and to the community with appreciation in front of all the community during the school closing ceremony or any other school festivals* **(DB** interviewed on 20/02/2003).

Both learners concur in their views on how to motivate parents. The first thing that needs to be done is just training parents through workshops and seminars. It is the view of both learners that school administration needs to invite parents to school in order to be involved in the school activities. Parents may not have any motivation to send their children to school. The children do not like to remain in the school if education, in its content, gives no hope or prospects of better jobs and better life in the future than those who fail to attend school. The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) should be well organized in order to enhance effective parental involvement in the teaching and learning process as a whole, in particular, to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Parents who send their children to school must be encouraged because they demonstrate good interest and attitude to enhance the teaching and learning process. The student PTA member of School A commented that learners who do not have teaching materials need to have them so that they can be motivated together with their parents. Encouraging good achievement by learners also heightens parental involvement in the school. It is evident that there is a shortage of money and resources to motivate parents and learners in implementing the designed activities. The community must be encouraged to participate in fund-raising to cover these costs. In addition the mass media can play a decisive role in motivating parental participation in their children's education. In urban areas awareness of the parents can be raised easily by using the available technologies. However, special attention needs to be given to the communities who live in the rural areas. The school administration, the teachers, the learners and

other stakeholders must take initiatives to raise the awareness and empowerment of the rural community.

4.9. Conclusion

A major purpose of the school governing body, the PTA is to give effect to the principle of democratization of schooling, by giving all stakeholders meaningful power in their schools. The establishment of PTAs represented a significant step towards decentralization of power in the Eritrean school system. While such decentralization can mean an increase in democratic participation in the governance of schools, the rhetoric seems to not be meeting the reality. This means there is a gap between the PTA guidelines as a policy text and practice at schools. The local level governance structures have been slow to get off the ground and have not been provided with the necessary human and financial resources.

The study indicates that the level of understanding of school governance in the decision-making in different activities of PTA of both schools were uneven, as a result of their different socio-economic backgrounds. There is noticeable difference between the two schools studied in terms of material, cultural resources, and the capacity to fulfil responsibilities and functions of the PTA members. Most of the PTA members of School B were of the middle class and often had an opportunity of gaining experience in school governance through the different exposure they had while they were overseas. They had acquired skill and capacity to discharge their duties and to fulfil their obligation as PTA members of School B. On the other hand, parents in School A are eager to be involved in the school governance but the skill and capacity has been a major limitation for them to function effectively.

The study concluded that whereas the PTAs studied represent an important step towards the decentralization of education in general, and in their schools in particular, their roles in school governance could not be described as an unqualified success. However, their roles do have the potential to improve schools.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Overview of the study

This chapter deals with conclusions and recommendations. It serves to reflect on the extent to which the research aims were met. It notes the limitations of the study and presents proposals for future research. A summary of the research findings is given in conclusion.

The perceptions of learners, educators and parents towards parental involvement were analyzed and discussed. Parental involvement remains a crucial topic as schools continue to grapple with the problem of involving parents in school activities. As it has been indicated in Chapter One, section 1.3, parents played a very limited role in the governance of their local institutions. However, today, it is beyond any doubt that the importance of parental involvement and participation in school governance and the local management of schools is widely recognized by learners, educators and parents. The issue of parental participation in the decision-making process in school governance in Eritrea, through the PTAs is very limited and in its initial stages.

The main issue that the study seeks to address is whether learners, educators and parents can make a positive contribution to school governance and management. The central aim of this research study was to investigate the current policies and practices of secondary school governance in Eritrea. In accordance with the Eritrean MOE policies and to what the PTA guidelines describe, the PTAs are the main role players with regard to decision-making on school activities. In this study several mitigating factors for parental involvement have been identified. As a remedial solution immediate engagement in capacity building is the first priority that need to be taken up. The key recommendations can have an impact towards seeking solutions and minimizing the problems already identified.

Through critical theory, a system of relationships and the dynamics of parental participation in the decision-making process in school governance have been critically

examined. The most important dimension of critical theory is the fact that it is driven by emancipatory interest. Its purpose is to contribute to changing people's understanding of themselves and their practices.

The study focused on two secondary schools in two different regions characterized by different socio-economic backgrounds. The schools were selected by purposive and convenience sampling. Qualitative research methodology was used to analyze and interpret data. The techniques for data collection used in this study were semi-structured interviews, observation and document analysis.

The major problems for parental involvement revealed by this study are highlighted and elaborated on in sections 5.3 and 5.5. The socio-economic constraints deter parents from involvement in school activities. Parents do not find time to attend to school activities because of work commitment and due to lack of transport. Parents also lack skill and knowledge of their roles and therefore there is less commitment and motivation towards parental involvement. Most decisions have not yet devolved to the parents and are still taken at the highest level of the MOE. While the PTAs remain the formal body through which a wider representation of people can be involved, other strategies such as the identification of classroom parent representatives can create opportunities for the training of participants.

5.2. Main findings and implications

The study's main findings are strengthened by revisiting relevant literature under the basic categories of sub-themes of the research study.

5.2.1. Centralization/decentralization strategy

From the experience gained from countries in the comparative study of the literature in Chapter Two, it is concluded that educational decentralization has often operated or is perceived to be a mechanism of control, rather than as a democratic intervention. Parents and the community still feel unrepresented and uninvolved. The importance of acknowledging the complex and different ways in which people see themselves and their realities becomes necessary in order that educational decentralization may be seen

to work. Ironically, this is in fact an argument for even more educational decentralization.

According to Fullan (1993), the centre (centralization) and local units (decentralization) need each other. One cannot get anywhere by swinging from one dominance to another. What is required is a different two-way relationship of pressure, support and continuous negotiation. The importance of an educational centre is precisely to ensure that people's interests and experiences are taken into account. The Eritrean MOE senior official (**M1**) said that certain decisions such as hiring and firing of staff, appointment of teachers, promotion and demotion, curriculum development and inspection are done centrally. In fact, both centralization and decentralization will operate side by side. Therefore, the centre will not disappear from the picture, but will facilitate decentralization to gradually flourish and promote local decision-making. One can argue that educational decentralization cannot, in itself, be assumed to lead necessarily to an increase in democracy. It needs to speak to the actual ways in which people experience their identities, and be monitored centrally, to ensure that educational decentralization leads to a deepening of democracy in practice.

One of the functions of public education should be to produce the virtues required for democratic citizenship. Even the Eritrean MOE official (**M1**) has made it clear that in Eritrea at present there is more of centralized control, but slowly, it is the policy of the government to decentralize part of the decision-making to local levels. I do concur with what the MOE official (**M1**) and the student PTA member of School A (**SA**) have said regarding the centralization /decentralization policy. In Eritrea the human capacity is not developed yet. Schools are suffering from acute shortages of resources, in terms of facilities, equipments and finances.

In addition, there is lack of skilled and managerial capacity throughout the nation starting from the central office down to the school level. Schools cannot do things alone without the support of the government and therefore they need to maintain the balance between centralization and decentralization on a continuum. Rather than thinking in terms of a centralization /decentralization polarity, it would be better to think in terms of distribution of power to a great many actors within and outside the school system. To this end, schools need to be autonomous with a certain degree of freedom but they must rely on resources, supervision and guidance from the central office.

5.2.2. Influence of socio-economic factors

The relationship between parents and schools should change from a client type of relationship to a partnership relationship. Previously parents were perceived as clients, and they did not have any say in the management of schools. Currently, it is expected that parents must be partners, which indicates that parents are part of the decision-making process and its implementation in schools. Khan (1996: 60) contends that parents have equal strengths and equal expertise, they contribute and receive services on an equal footing and finally share responsibility and accountability with the professional staff in schools.

The PTA guidelines also support the above statements of Khan and wants parents to contribute and receive services on an equal footing. So what the literature emphasized was found to be the same as what the policy documents prescribed. However, on the ground, it was totally different. Therefore, I completely disagree with Khan in telling us that parents have equal strength and equal expertise as teachers. Throughout the data analysis portion of Chapter Four, most respondents concur with the idea that parents lack skill and capacity even though they seem eager to be involved in school activities.

Ironically, the PTA guidelines also encourage parental involvement by ensuring that school governance is vested in the hands of parents who must be in the majority on the PTA. This may be interpreted in terms of a community or a consumer vision. Accompanied by a lack of material and capital resources and in the absence of any sustained capacity building programmes for parents in particular, meaningful involvement of parents is an ideal to which the parent governing body of School A and School B in the study aspire. Despite the relatively positive findings stated in respect of fund-raising activities, discipline and guidance for the two schools studied, what is yet to emerge is evidence that greater involvement in schools by parents, teachers and learners leads to improvement in students learning or even more generally in the quality of education available.

It is evident that the socio-economic context within which the schools are located greatly affects the dynamics within the schools. Schools mirror the community in which they are found. Parental involvement renders educators the opportunity of familiarizing themselves with the socio-economic conditions of the communities in which they teach.

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The main thrust in this study is how schools and educational authorities at the micro-level can ensure parental involvement at the functional level. The emphasis, therefore, is on individual parental participation in education of their children and thereby strengthening the governing body, which is the PTA. Departing from the premise that parents were major players and stakeholders, this study has sought to investigate what the PTA as the school governing body can do to increase and encourage parental involvement in the education process. In light of this, Gene and Stoneman (1995) mention that the participation of parents in schools has a positive influence on the academic achievement of children. Accordingly, parents and teachers must take note of these important reasons why it is vital for parents to participate effectively in school activities.

Legotlo (1994) cited in Van der Westhuizen and Mosoge (2001:191) argues that poor and uneducated parents have a tendency to be reluctant to get involved in school activities because they feel inferior to the highly educated, knowledgeable educators. This also means that parents feel that they should not interfere with teachers who are presumed to be adequately trained to handle the school academic programme.

The above arguments mean that a clear delimitation of the respective duties of principals and teachers and those of parents must be made. Quite often both parties are not clear about the duties that parents should fulfil. Parents feel that they should not be seen as 'tools' invited only when there are problems at the school. Improving parental participation in school governance has presented difficulties in the areas studied. The principal of School A commented that parent interest was neither constant nor sustained. Often, parents see the school as having responsibility for their children and for running itself, and attempts to involve parents may be viewed as the school not fulfilling its responsibility. Yet others mentioned that in poor communities, parent participation in the school was seen as an activity warranting payment.

As highlighted above, efforts by the principal to involve parents may be thwarted by problems related to the low socio-economic status of parents. Kitavi (1995) cited in Van der Westhuizen and Mosoge (2001: 191) states that school principals working in developing countries do not have the power to turn parental involvement into financial support for the schools. When parents are unable to pay school fees or acquire books for their children, principals are placed in an awkward position when they are to face such

parents. In turn, such parents will surely view the school with mixed feelings and will not be keen to be involved in school activities. As it has been revealed from the study, some parents are not keen to be meaningfully involved in school activities because they are afraid that this would place an extra financial burden on them. As a result of poverty, most parents find themselves too busy looking, among other things, for the next meal of the day, next term's school fees and thus fail to address the basic needs of their children's education. These problems become more pronounced in rural areas.

Additionally, students in rural areas have to travel long distances to school and arguably, their parents are unable to attend meetings because of the inaccessibility of the school. In this vein, poverty exacerbated the above problems. Some parents are sometimes forced to work even on weekends and thus find no time to serve in school activities. This confirms the view of Wissbrun and Eckart (1992: 121) that parents lead their own stressful lives and are generally too busy to cope with additional engagements at the school.

The obstacles to parental involvement in education that have been encountered and revealed in this study are numerous. Among the problems experienced by the parents, lack of time, stressful conditions at home, negative attitudes of teachers and principals and the air of unassailability projected by them, feature prominently. The skills that parents have and the amount of time that they can spare will influence how they feel about becoming involved. Most of the parents from low-income backgrounds are illiterate. Many believe that they lack the ability to participate in educational decision-making or argue that they are too preoccupied with their daily struggles to attend to school matters (Pena, 1995; cited in Gaynor, 1998: 48). The research findings that deal with socio-economic background were in agreement with what Pena has illustrated. Parents from a lower income background confirmed that professional staff members dominate discussions and parents feel incompetent as they lack the knowledge and skills to take part in the decision-making process.

In conclusion, parental involvement in School A was limited, despite the fact that in this school respondents acknowledged the potential importance of parental involvement. Parental involvement, where it exists, is left to trivial issues such as fund-raising, providing of school equipment, school property maintenance or to peripheral issues which do not cater for the needs and the aspirations of parents about the education of

their children. While the Eritrean PTA guidelines have resonated a lot to clarifying the duties of parents in the school, only a handful of parents in the school governing bodies (PTAs) are engaged in determining the issues that concern the education of their children. Having said that, in School A parents were not involved in day-to-day issues, and played little or no role in decision-making. While the research indicates that schools benefit from a generalized form of parental support in fund-raising activities, including support in maintaining discipline, only School B had a consistently active and engaged parent body.

5.2.3. Teachers' and principals' perceptions of parents

This study confirmed that teachers are often defensive and sometimes try to establish a professional 'wall' around themselves and the profession. Many educators fear, however, that parental involvement, if not controlled, can undermine their professional status and erode the internal sovereignty of the school. It is claimed that teachers experienced anxiety with regard to the threat to their professional status and were therefore, cautious of foraying into the realms of working with parents. In this vein, the major problems identified with the educational system was the reluctance of educators to accepting parents into the mainstream of the school programme.

Literature sources claim that teachers often seek refuge in their professional expertise as a means of safeguarding their autonomy. According to Gaynor (1998: 48), a study in New Zealand identified the different ways in which teachers undermine parental participation. Gaynor emphasized that some teachers use jargon, while others try to dominate meetings or call meetings for times that suit teachers but not parents. "Teachers feel threatened by parental involvement, believing that it will diminish public regard for their professional status" (Gaynor, 1998: 48). Many teachers believe that parents are manipulated by principals and thus, the teachers feel threatened by close supervision and loss of authority over learners. Some parents may react to these processes by withdrawing, and teachers then claim parental apathy (Capper, 1994; cited in Gaynor, 1998: 49). This study confirmed that parental participation would not diminish or undermine the professional status of teachers. However, it facilitates and enhances the learning and teaching. The negative attitudes of teachers in seeing parents as rivals may spoil the relationship and therefore they need to consider each other as partners for the sake of rendering the best education for the children.

It is claimed that not all teachers are competent in handling parents. The problems experienced by teachers in involving parents in the education of their children are exacerbated by the prejudices of the parents. Having unreasonable expectations and demanding preferential treatment for their children are not uncommon. The researcher is of the opinion that the reluctance of educators to accept and encourage parental involvement and the minimal participation of parents in education may be attributed to ingrained prejudices and misinformation. What a teacher may interpret as apathy and lack of interest in a parent may in fact be a symptom of the parents' lack of ability or confidence to communicate with the teacher (or the teacher with the parent) or a reluctance to intrude into the education process that they may interpret as the domain of professional educators.

Building good relations between teachers and parents is important. The Eritrean PTA guidelines state that schooling is a joint responsibility of parents and teachers and the school. The study concluded that teachers need to be more open to constructive criticism, more open about what they are doing, and more confident in their profession. It also concluded, however, that teachers are beginning to see parents as consumers with a legitimate role to play and that some teachers are even beginning to view parents as potential allies (Wikeley and Hughes, 1995; cited in Gaynor, 1998: 48). Importantly, while acknowledging emergent tensions of time and workload particularly for teachers, this research has identified no major 'losses' for schools as a result of greater learners', teachers' and parental involvement in decision-making. Rather, a set of 'gain' has been identified.

5.2.4. Communication

It is claimed that poor communication can be responsible for numerous problems in schools leading to misunderstanding and prejudices. Communication, therefore, must be unambiguous, relevant and effective. When parents attend parent-teacher conferences, for example, it creates continuity between the two dominant spheres of influence in the child's life, home and school, and likely signals to the children that their parents' value for education. Needless to say, parents exert a lot of influence on their children's cognitive development in the early years and thus the contact between home and school should be maintained if the child is to learn effectively at school. Central to the idea of parental involvement in education is communication. The importance of this component

of parental involvement in education cannot be over emphasized. It influences all spheres of parental involvement.

Lack of communication is compounded by the often ineffective methods schools rely on to contact parents. The size of the school and limitations with regard to amenities at the school may seriously hamper communication between parents and school. Kitavi, Van der Westhuizen and Legotlo (1996: 74) cited in Van der Westhuizen and Mosoge (2001: 190) warn that the absence of telephones, duplicating machines or typewriters hamper effective communication with parents. Principals have to rely on verbal communication and this is subject to filtration, distortion, and snowballing. Wrong messages, distorted information and forgotten messages give a poor image of the school and this undermines efforts to involve parents. This study showed a similar situation in the schools studied in Eritrea.

Erosion of communication with parents has negative consequences. When parents get information late they cannot act with the full effect of a timely response. On the other hand, receiving no information leaves the parents with less ability to respond to misconduct or exemplary behaviour of their students. Poor communication from the school leads some parents to withdraw from their corrective guidance role and then expect the school to handle such matters.

The role of principals is very difficult. The principals must support and uphold teachers' professional status and as a facilitator, at the same time, encourage parents to have a greater say in school level decision-making. Many parents and educators have asserted the value of positive communication of home-school relationships if children are to receive maximum benefit from their education. As it was noted in the data analysis of Chapter Four, the parent-school contact may take the form of notes to parents, conferences, home visits and joint participation in workshops and classes. Notwithstanding, parents and teachers who work together are less inclined to blame one another for lack of student motivation, poor performance or misconduct. Accordingly, teachers are advised to establish partnerships with parents and keep them informed of progress.

Lack of communication clearly fosters mistrust between learners, teachers and parents. School principals are important in brokering and mediating good parent, teacher and

learner relations. Chapman and Burchfield (1994: 401) agree that principals play an important role in shaping school policy. They argued that particularly in Third World countries, principals are powerful gatekeepers, mediating the impact of central policies on their school, shaping the educational and social transactions within the school, and interpreting school priorities and activities to the local communities. Developing optimal parent-teacher relations means working with teachers who are usually not well prepared to deal with parents. It is, therefore, imperative that the principals ensure that the parents receive information that is unambiguous, relevant and that the right medium is used.

The thrust of the argument here is that communication facilities are at its lowest stage in most Eritrean schools. Most secondary schools that are outside Asmara suffer from lack of communication facilities such as telephone, fax, computer, internet and so on. Due to the lack of these facilities there is a communication gap between central or regional offices and School A. Most stakeholders concur on ways and means of promoting and motivating parents towards parental involvement in decision-making on school activities. Thus, communication is vital for the PTA movement to be effective and for the central office to ensure that the policies are in place. It seems that the Eritrean MOE has a long way to go in this regard.

5.2.5. Capacity building

It is argued in the literature (section 2.3) that parental involvement in the school hinges to a great extent on the principal and teachers in the school. Principals and teachers, however, are often not trained in such matters and, additionally, they may be hampered in their efforts by lack of experience in engaging parents successfully. Moreover, the principal is faced with the mammoth task of managing a complex school while teachers are fully engaged in their teaching duties. This places great demands on their time and therefore limits their respective energies to engage parents successfully. Thus, the attitude of principals and teachers creates an uninviting atmosphere, which discourages parents from taking an active role in school activities.

Educators at School A were concerned about the lack of insight parents have with regard to school related issues as a result of the lack of commitment, interest, skill and capacity they have. Knowledge and competencies of the parents are of the utmost importance to enable them to be effectively involved (Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1993:

56). The parents can be involved at different levels, according to their skills and knowledge. These levels can range from motivation and assistance with homework to the management of the school. If parents are illiterate they cannot understand the PTA guidelines that have been enforced since 1998. Thus, the capacity building programmes to train parents in involvement have a slim chance of succeeding. The literature confirms that parental illiteracy and lack of knowledge about what a school is meant for, cause parents to stay away from school activities.

It is important to note that some of the participants in this research indicated that schools were really going through a learning and maturing process in their journey towards greater parent, teacher and learner involvement in decision-making in schools. Learners, teachers and parents acknowledge they needed skills development as part of this process. It behoves schools and policymakers to continue to monitor this journey if ongoing meaningful involvement is to be achieved that impacts positively on the learning of students. In order for PTA members to function effectively, they need to be fully conversant with the relevant regulations and thoroughly trained in the performance of their duties. In-service training and professional development courses that focus on ways to exchange information with parents can help to foster a positive approach to school accountability.

5.3. Summary of research findings

From the data presentation and data analysis sections of Chapter Four, major research findings are identified. The following research findings are highlighted here as a summary.

- Even though there is a decentralization policy in the Eritrean educational system, at present there is a centralized school system, which heavily relies on the centre for planning, budgeting and financing, training and provision of policies, etc. Thus, in practice there is rather a highly centralized system of education.

- The bottlenecks for implementation of decentralization in the Eritrean educational system at present are mainly;
  - ➢ Lack of institutional capacity at all levels
  - ➢ Lack of professional capacity
  - ➢ Lack of managerial and leadership skills

- ➢ Lack of resources and training for decentralization and capacity building

- The Eritrean MOEs continuing strategy in school governance is to maintain the mix between centralization and decentralization. For the foreseeable future the MOE policy would be a mix of central authority and local authority with a means of devolving more authority in decision-making of school governance gradually to the local levels.

- The research revealed that PTAs are involved in fund-raising and disciplinary issues but that they are not involved much in academic matters at schools, such as decision-making regarding curriculum and the improvement of learning and teaching. The majority of parents have minimal involvement.

- Learners and parents felt that lack of understanding and lack of interest were hampering participation of all stakeholders. Teachers generally have responded positively to the opportunities for greater involvement. Many educators fear, however, that parental involvement, if not controlled, can undermine their professional status and erode the internal sovereignty of the schools. There was also an attitude that " the principal knows what is best for the school" and should take charge. Principals tended to maintain a final say over major issues at the school.

- Mitigating factors for PTA members against involvement at School A;

  - ➢ Lack of skills and comprehensive understanding of some school issues (policies, regulations, etc.)
  - ➢ Pressure of time resulting from involvement versus work / home commitments.
  - ➢ General reluctance through lack of confidence (parents think that they are less qualified than teachers) to become involved
  - ➢ The commitment and motivation of PTA members is lowest in poor socio-economic conditions
  - ➢ Socio-economic reasons (transportation problems and financial constraints)
  - ➢ Parents not being empowered and the resulting limited participation.

- Reasons for high levels of participation among PTA members at School B.

  - ➢ Parents are predominantly professionals and familiar with governance issues
  - ➢ Spirit of openness and desire to bring about change
  - ➢ High level of interest and commitment on the part of PTA members and improved socio-economic background of the community

➢ Realization that the children's future is at stake.

The major differences between School A and School B can be attributed mainly to the socio-economic status of the school community. School A was influenced negatively and hit hard by lower socio-economic background. It serves a poor community with less skilled, less motivated and less committed PTA members in a semi-urban area. In School B the parents were mostly of a middle-class background. Most of the executive PTA members of School B are professional parents since many of them have come from overseas and they have rich PTA experiences of different countries. Thus, the PTA members' background of School B and their level of education significantly differed from that of School A.

5.4. Recommendations

By involving parents in their children's education, parents build up a much deeper understanding of the methods of the school and what the schools are trying to achieve. Schools and the Eritrean MOE must take specific action to improve the involvement of parents in school activities. Improved academic achievements and a healthy school community can be achieved by improved parental involvement.

All the stakeholders in the schools and their communities must work towards rectifying the problems that inhibit parents to be actively involved in school activities. Improved communication will ensure that the parents will know why and how they can be involved. This may change their negative attitude. Schools must initiate the process for parents to be involved. Every school must identify their needs and then provide the opportunities and structures for the parents to be positively involved. It is the principal's role to orchestrate activities that will help the staff study and understand parental involvement, and to select or design, evaluate, and revise programmes for parental involvement (Perumal, 1995: 162). The principal plays a very influential role in determining the extent and nature of parental involvement in schools. The principal is the initial and prime mover towards maximizing parental involvement in education. He or she must motivate the parents to this end.

The following recommendations are made in order to help PTAs in particular and parents in general meet changing demands of school governance, and operate effectively

and efficiently. Likewise, the recommendations are put forward in the hope that policy makers, supervisors, principals and teachers find them useful for decision-making regarding parental involvement in school governance.

- It is of utmost importance that parents are kept informed not only of the progress of their own children but also about the various other aspects of the school, such as school educational policies, school rules and regulations (PTA guidelines, student discipline policy, school organization and regulation policy etc.) pertaining to such issues as school uniforms, admission and dropout cases. This can be done through written communication where parents get an important form of tangible evidence about the whole picture of school activities. These can be projected in the form of newsletters, brochures and letters. Principals should improve the way they communicate with parents. It is necessary, within the constraint of large learner populations, to use newspapers, radios and television to announce projects and pass pertinent information to parents. The radio specially can reach parents in remote areas. In addition, schools need to address parents in a language that parents understand because illiteracy may hamper understanding.

- The Eritrean MOE with the help of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other financial institutions must train learners, teachers, principals and parents on how to involve parents to take their part in school activities. The Eritrean Institute of Management (EIM) gives basic training in public administration, financial management, project management, personnel management, accounting and other related short duration courses for upgrading the public services (Mussie, 1998: 37). Every ministry sends candidates to be trained after a training needs assessment. It will be of great help if learners, teachers, principals and parents can also be given short courses on how to work together to optimize parental involvement in the decision-making on school activities. In a nutshell, most of PTA members are in considerable need of the capacity building programmes. Such training should aim at eliminating ignorance of the rights and responsibilities of parents. They need to acquire training that will give them a wide range of knowledge and skills. Moreover, an incentive must be arranged for them in order to uplift their morale and give service with commitment and dedication.

- The study has confirmed that there is confusion and an overlap between the roles and responsibilities of the PTA and the school management. From the South African Department of Education (DOE) manuals consulted on "First Steps"- School governance starter pack: A resource for school governing body members is an excellent and a useful and educative lessons for the Eritrean situation (DOE, 1997: 44). To this end, the Eritrean MOE must design a training and other PTA guidance manuals that reflect the culture and realities of the Eritrean specific situation. Specifically, the guidelines need to specify the delineation between the roles and responsibilities of the PTA and school management.

- Empowering governing bodies (PTAs) to establish a national association of school governing bodies. Such an organization can provide advice and support to individual PTAs. It can participate in improving capacity building programmes, and provide a collective voice for the concerns of its member PTAs. Strong and competent PTAs can act as advocacy agents and can put pressure on the government and other institutions to find solutions for the local schools development.

- PTA members need to be elected on the basis of their interest, ability and skills of governance so as to serve the community with commitment and determination. Sipamla (1995: 115) and Qonde (2000: 93) argue that, having a child at a school should not be made a qualification for parents to be a member of the governing body. Often interested and committed parents could enhance the success of the PTAs. The parent sector might miss out capable parents who do not have children in that particular school. It should rather be community representatives than parent representatives with open elections from a wider choice of candidates. Sayed and Carrim (1998: 32), for example, hold that despite representation from parents, teachers and students, school governing bodies are still not representative enough. They argue that there are several competing notions of participation in educational policy discourse but they all limit inclusion in some way. To further strengthen their argument, Sayed and Carrim conclude as follows:

  Whilst democracy and participation remain noble ideals, without the engagement with and concretization of them in actual settings where they are expected to be in effect, it is possible, we contend, that they have the opposite effect of promoting privilege and exclusion, rather than democratizing the educational system or facilitating more

inclusiveness or empowering the disadvantaged (Sayed and Carrim, 1998: 35).

The disqualifying of parents from serving in the governing body (PTA) because of not having a child currently in a particular school is limiting the wider representation of the community members. Thus, PTA members need to be elected on the basis of their interest, motivation, skills and time they have to participate fully with commitment.

- The university and tertiary institutions should include parental involvement in schools as a course in the training of principals and teachers. Moreover, the teacher training colleges should introduce community-oriented courses that can assist teachers to understand the role of PTAs in schools.

- In rural areas principals should organize school meetings at appropriate times in consultation with the local administration and request cooperation of some employers or the local government administrator to provide transport for the parents. Often parents fail to come to school due to distances they have to travel to school. That is also exacerbated by financial constraints and lack of transport. Parents who stay far from school regard getting to school as an extra burden on their already depleted finances. For them it becomes difficult to pay for transport to school when they already experience difficulties with their cost of living. To this end, the provision of transport to the PTAs for school meetings can be regarded as an incentive for the poor communities.

- Parents need to be educated as to the importance of their role in education. Many parents need to be disabused of the idea that the school is the domain of the teachers and that school is the place for education. Learning is an experience which happens both at school and at home.

- The training of teachers in specific techniques to invite parents to participate their children's education is necessary at both the pre-service level as well as during in-service training sessions.

- The development of parental involvement programmes will need to be funded by the community. Community involvement in school governance must be encouraged. This could be done by giving incentives to the active participants.

- If the parents have some special expertise that is relevant to other parents and which can be used in improving the lot of their children, then the principal can play a vital role in getting such parents to share their expertise with other parents.

- Parents' anxiety can be lessened through school-sponsored parent education programmes. These programmes can take the form of educational films, guest speakers and panel discussions.

- There is a need for the principals and teachers to work out mechanisms for more involvement of parents in school activities and giving them more information regarding their children and the school policies as a whole.

- Research is still needed to determine whether the contributions that learners make are realized and to what extent principals actually experience the contribution of the learners as positive.

5.5. Conclusions

This study was conducted in two secondary schools in two regions in Eritrea. Hence, the findings and the comments apply only to the secondary schools in the two regions. It is necessary to conduct similar research in the other regions before any generalizations can be made. The study was meant to be illuminative and emancipative. Conclusions arrived at in this study cannot be generalized as the study did not necessarily capture the full range of views and perspectives.

The major findings in this study show that, according to respondents, decisions have not as yet devolved to the parents and are still taken at the highest level of MOE in spite of what the new PTA guidelines prescribe. An important finding that may be related to the above is that parents still do not understand their roles and responsibilities in the school. Thus even if decision-making powers are devolved to them, they would still be largely ineffective in their involvement. It appears that, despite its manifest successes, the PTAs

have since their inception in 1998 been hampered by poor infrastructure, a lack of resources and training, lack of communication and empowerment and low levels of understanding.

Another major finding is that socio-economic constraints further deter parents from involvement in school activities. In this respect, it was found that parents do not find time to attend to school activities because of work commitments and that they lack transport because they are often far away from the school. Moreover, communication from school is hampered by lack of amenities such as telephones, computers and internet facilities. Indeed, it may be concluded that socio-economic constraints cumulatively compound the problem of parental involvement.

Similar studies have been undertaken by Samson (1993), Sipamla (1995), Perumal (1995), Magabane (1999) and Qonde (2000) regarding parental involvement. In almost all the research findings, there are some commonalities with slight variation in depth and approach. Accordingly, my research findings show certain similarities to their findings, too. Parental involvement in low-income and in rural areas is very limited due to lack of skill and capacity. In light of this, the lower socio-economic condition of illiteracy, poverty, lack of education and lack of resources cumulatively compound the problems.

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APPENDIX A

PARENTS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you indicate to me your educational background?

2. Do you enjoy being a PTA member and to what extent is the PTA contributing to school governance?

3. Are you aware of the PTA guidelines on school governance? If you do to what extent do you think it is put in practice?

4. How frequent do the PTA members hold meetings?

5. How is your relationship with the principal? What role does the principal play in the PTA meetings?

6. Do PTA members participate in discipline matters of the school?

7. Do you involve yourself in academic matters of the school governance? If so to what extent? If no, what do you think the impediments?

8. Have the PTA members got any training to promote and enhance their duties? If no, do you need it?

9. What problems do you face in discharging your duties in respect of students, teachers, or principals?

10. To what extent do the socio-economic constraints affect you from participating in school activities?

11. How do you feel about the possible decentralization of school governance so as to have more participative decision-making?

12. What do you think are the problems that impede you from actively being involved in secondary schools?

13. In what ways can parents get involved in key school functions so as to promote and enhance community participation?

14. What do you recommend to improve school governance in Eritrea?

15. Are there any other issues or questions you wish to raise with me on the broad topics discussed?

APPENDIX B

PRINCIPALS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How is the attendance of parents generally at PTA meetings?
2. Do you see parents playing a meaningful role as PTA members?
3. Principals and teachers are often not trained on how to handle parents and may be hampered in their efforts by lack of experience in successfully engaging parents. How do you respond to this situation?
4. Do PTA members participate in discipline matters of the school?
5. To what extent do the socio-economic constraints deter parents from involvement in school activities?
6. Does lack of effective communication foster mistrust between learners, teachers and parents?
7. What is your opinion about decentralization of school governance in order to have more participative decision-making?
8. Do you have any problem with learners being members of the PTA?
9. What do you think are the problems that impede parents from actively involving themselves in activities of secondary schools?
10. What mechanisms can you suggest for optimizing for the parental participation in decision-making of local school governance?
11. How can parents be motivated to participate in key school functions and expand their participation?
12. What other recommendations can you make to improve school governance in Eritrea?
13. Are there any other issues or questions you wish to raise with me on the broad topics discussed?

APPENDIX C

TEACHERS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What role does the principal play in the PTA meetings?
2. Are teachers represented in the PTA? Do they have power and a say in the decision-making?
3. What are the roles and responsibilities of teachers in a governing body (PTA)?
4. Do you think decentralization is the appropriate strategy, i.e., to devolve the power of decision-making to local levels? What kind of strategy centralization or decentralization is practiced in the Eritrean schools thusfar in your estimation?
5. The rhetoric of decentralization permits parents to hold and exercise the power of decision-making over schools. Do you think teachers are intimidated about possibly losing their power over the learners?
6. Do the attitudes of principals sometimes create an uninviting atmosphere, which may discourage parents from taking an active role in school activities?
7. To what extent do the socio-economic constraints deter parents from involvement in the school activities?
8. Does lack of effective communication foster mistrust between learners, teachers and parents?
9. Do you discuss professional and academic issues in the meetings of PTA? Do you feel comfortable about the representation of learners in the PTA? How does the PTA handle disciplinary problems of your school?
10. What do you think are the problems that impede parents from actively involving themselves in the appropriate activities of secondary schools?
11. How can the parents be motivated to participate in key school functions so as to promote and enhance community participation?
12. What other recommendations can you make to improve school governance in Eritrea?
13. Are there any other issues or questions you wish to raise with me on the broad topics discussed?

APPENDIX D

LEARNERS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you think are the main functions of PTA members?
2. Do you feel intimidated by the presence of the principal, teachers and parents in the PTA meetings?
3. Do you get any training concerning participation in PTA?
4. How are the PTA meetings conducted? Is there dominance by the principal of the school or any other parties?
5. Do you sometimes feel that you are treated too much as children in PTA meetings?
6. Do you consult learners about what is discussed in meetings of PTA?
7. To what extent do the socio-economic constraints deter parents from involvement in the school activities?
8. Do the attitudes of teachers, principals sometimes create an uninviting atmosphere, which may discourage learners from taking an active role in school activities?
9. What do you think are the problems that impede parents from actively involving themselves in activities of secondary schools?
10. Do you think decentralization is the appropriate strategy, i.e., to devolve the power of decision-making to local levels? What kind of strategy centralization or decentralization is practiced in the Eritrean schools thusfar in your estimation?
11. How can parents be motivated to participate in key school functions so as to promote and enhance community participation?
12. What other recommendations can you make to improve school governance in Eritrea?
13. Are there any other issues or questions you wish to raise with me on the broad topics discussed?

APPENDIX E

ERITREAN MOE OFFICIALS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the policy of the Ministry of Education regarding centralization or decentralization education policy of school governance?
2. What do you think are the main challenges and opportunities for the decentralization of school governance in Eritrea?
3. Is the ultimate goal of the Eritrean MOE to devolve the power of decision-making to the local levels (schools) or to maintain the balance of centralization / decentralization (have the mix of the two)?
4. To what extent do the socio-economic constraints deter parents from involvement in school activities?
5. What do you think are the problems that impede parents from actively involving themselves in appropriate activities of secondary schools?
6. How do you evaluate the communication of secondary schools with the different stakeholders? Do you think there is transparency and accountability in the decision-making of school governance? How is the power of decision-making delegated to the lower levels?
7. How can the parents be motivated to participate in key school functions so as to promote and enhance community participation?
8. Does the Eritrean MOE have a plan to develop the skills and capacites of PTAs?
9. How do you evaluate the triangular relationship of the PTA?
10. What mechanisms can you suggest for optimizing for the parental participation in decision-making in local school governance?
11. In general what other recommendations can you make to improve school governance in Eritrea?
12. Are there any other issues or questions you wish to raise with me on the broad topics discussed?

APPENDIX F

UNIVERSITY OF ASMARA
ERITREAN HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT PROJECT (EHRD)
PROJECT COORDINATING UNIT (PCU)

PERMISSION LETTERS

Ref. No. HRD\4/4840/02.   DATE: **16 DEC 2002**
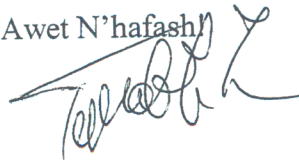
Dear Sir/Madam,

The bearer of this letter, **Ato Kidanemariam Menghistu Sebhat,** is one of the students placed by the EHRD Office at the **University of Western Cape** to do his Masters degree in **Education**.

Ato Kidanemariam is presently back in Asmara to collect data/information for his thesis work titled: *"Parental Involvement in the Governance of Secondary Schools in Eritrea: Current Trends and Future Possibilities".* We have come to learn that, to complete his research project successfully, he would definitely need to have access to your organization's data/information base.

I take this opportunity to request you to assist him in his research endeavour.

I thank you for your time and kind consideration.

Awet N'hafash!

Tewelde Zerom, PhD.
Manager, EHRD-PCU
University of Asmara

cc.: Mehari Tewolde
       Monotoring & Evaluation Officer, EHRD Project
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