

Availability of Learner Support System and Its Management In Secondary Schools Of Sidama Zone, Ethiopia

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Abstract: This study aimed at assessing availability of learner support mechanisms, their management strategy, factors affecting their effectiveness and the strategies that can be used to enhance learner support services. The study employed qualitative case study design and participants of the study were purposefully selected. Education office experts, supervisors, PTA members, principals, department heads, teachers and students participated in the study. Data was gathered through interviews, FGDs, observation and document analysis. The findings indicated that training programmes to guide principals, school supervisors, department heads and education experts on how to design and manage the learner support mechanisms are required. There is also a need to avail appropriate facilities such as laboratories and school libraries as part of the learner support system in a more advanced way. From the study it can be also said that learners with special needs to be identified and special support mechanisms need to be devised. For so doing it is recommended that materials for learner support should be developed and distributed to all stakeholders, before the beginning of the academic year, capacity building programmes for principals and teachers should be planned and monitored to enable them to implement and monitor the learner support systems in schools. Besides, it is suggested that a course of action on the management of the learner support system should be prepared and be made obligatory in all schools.

Keywords: Learner support, management strategy, secondary schools, student support

Date of Submission: 29-01-2018

Date of acceptance: 17-02-2018

I. INTRODUCTION

The quality of public education in Ethiopia has become increasingly under the spotlight over the past decade due to political, social, economic and technological developments that have taken place. Despite the increased financial resources in education, in the country in general and in Sidama Zone (the research site) in particular, the expected improvement in learner performance in Grade 10 and 12 level has been problematic in terms of quality (Sidama Zone Education Department Report, 2007 EC). The search to find an answer to sustaining school improvement in terms of the quality of Grade 10 and 12 pass rate in Ethiopian schools has recently focused on the regional, zonal, woreda, school and individual Grade 10 and 12 learners.

Trends of last decades from African context indicate that poor examination results draw attention to the critical need for learner support systems that can enhance the achievement levels (Shrand, Jacobson and Christensen 1999). The Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate Examination and the University Entrance Examination at the end of Grade 10 and 12 respectively are the first significant checks on the performance of our school system and the low level results require some action from all stakeholders and interested parties, namely, the Regional Education Bureaus, Zonal Education Department, Woreda Education offices, and Schools (i.e. Principals, Supervisors, student councils, Education and Training Boards and parents).

It is also to be noted that those who complete a certain school level become job seekers or enter higher education with severe gaps in basic knowledge, reasoning skills, and methods of study which result in inadequate performance at tertiary level (Asmal, 1999). Poor learning is associated with poverty, poor and inappropriate facilities, ineffective teachers, lack of learning resources, lack of a clearly defined learner support system, and a poor culture of learning and teaching (Asmal 1999; Van der Westhuizen, et al, 2002). The possibility of minimizing the effect of such challenges/problems will be higher if there are proper learner support mechanisms and their management strategies.

Hawassa University has launched a learner support mechanism for students at school level which is very similar to the one introduced by University of Cape Town (Cranfield, 2002) which focuses on “strategies that can increase knowledge and skills of students in science subjects to bring up the declining results in the Natural Sciences” (STEM center report of Hawassa University). This is also supposed to contribute to

maximizing number of students who join the natural sciences in higher education institutions. Though, Hawassa University has embarked on a long-term intervention endeavor aimed at addressing the imbalance of access into higher education by identifying learners from various schools groups in different Grades and is providing them with structured opportunities to improve their chances of university entrance and success, there is also a lot to be done in relation to learners' support at school level.

An investigation into causes of poor performance of students in Grade 10 and 12 in Sidama Zone (Sidama Zone Education Department Report, 2007 EC) revealed the major causes of poor student performance as being lack of resources, lack of discipline, poor morale, problems concerning implementation of policies and inadequate parental involvement. To these causes, one may safely add lack of a learner support system. It has also been reported that the learner support mechanisms are weak for which low teacher morale is considered as the main cause among other variables (MoE, 2008: 7).

A major challenge facing secondary schools in the Sidama Zone is producing quality Grades 10 and 12 results every year. There are qualitative declines in Grades 10 and 12 National Examination results. To reverse this trend will require bold strategic interventions, institutional reforms, learner support systems and parental involvement. Learners will be able to use the opportunity to study and meet the accelerating changes in science and technology (Everard & Morris, 1996). Leaders in education are also concerned about the poor quality of learning in large parts of the Sidama Zone. The number of Grades 10 and 12 learners who study and do well in Mathematics, and other Science subjects has declined when it should have increased, given the quantitative growth in enrolment at Grades 10 and 12 levels. Thus, this study intends to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are learner support mechanisms that are practiced in schools of Sidama Zone?
2. How is learner support managed in schools of Sidama Zone?
3. What are specific factors affecting learner support in the selected schools?
4. How can learner support be enhanced in schools of Sidama Zone?

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The study employed qualitative case study design and participants of the study were purposefully selected. Four education office experts, 4 supervisors, 10 PTA members, 4 principals, 4 department heads, 10 teachers and 10 students participated in the study. Data was gathered through interviews, FGDs, observation and document analysis. We conducted one-to-one interviews with education office experts of quality assurance core process, the principals and the supervisors of the schools and the head teachers in the selected schools. We used focus-group discussions to triangulate the data we obtained through interviews and to make the interview data rich by additional insights (Alvesson, 2011; Coleman 2012). Letters and the students' examination results were analyzed as they reflect issues related to the learner support systems of the selected schools (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015). During the analysis, we made our focus on categorizing and identifying themes (Simons 2009) based on our research questions. We had an open mind to include emergent themes (Chilisa & Preece, 2005) in our analysis as the data-collection and the analysis proceeds. The data obtained from each instrument were placed under the relevant category, yet leaving space for emergent issues (Barbour 2014; Roulston, 2014).

III. RESULTS

The presentation of the results is preceded by assigning codes to schools. The following codes were assigned to sample schools and participants of the study so as to ensure confidentiality while presenting the results.

Accordingly,

1. Sample Schools: SS1, SS2, SS3, and SS4 for the respective woredas;
2. Principals: PP1, PP2, PP3, and PP4 based on schools from where they are selected;
3. Cluster school supervisors: CS1, CS2, CS3 and CS4
4. Teachers: T1, T2, T3, and T4
5. Department Heads: H1, H2, H3, and H4
6. Students: S1, S2, S3, and S4

Before, seeking the answers to the main research questions participants were asked to reflect on what exists as learner support system policy in their respective schools so as to understand what they know is there in the schools as a policy. One of the Principals (PP2) reflected:

Even though there is no written policy document on learner support, there are agreed upon procedures to provide support to students to help them become effective in their studies. These include providing tutorial classes/sessions, promoting cooperative learning, conducting make-up classes, providing support to students based on identified problems affecting them, etc.

Similarly, another participant (CS1) reacted:

There are learners' support mechanisms in the schools which focus on guidance and counselling of students, providing supervisory support, engaging students in peer-learning so that they can learn from each other, and monitoring activities related to teaching and learning so that students can get best experience out of what is going on in the schools.

It is based on these premises that the study attempted to find out details related to learners support mechanisms in Sidama Zone schools as various support mechanisms are available. The following sections present the results of different sources of data in relation to the research questions using the themes in the questions as sub-headings.

3.1. Learner Support Mechanisms Practiced in Sidama Zone Schools

The different support mechanisms practiced in the schools of the zone are diverse and the data is presented as follows.

One of the supervisors (CS4) reflected:

There are diverse student support mechanisms in the schools which I supervise. Among these are enhancing active learning methodology, strengthening the school leadership so as to focus on students learning, enhancing commitment of stakeholders to facilitate teaching-learning and making various facilities available for teaching -learning purpose.

These broad views of the supervisor indicate there are learner support mechanisms available in the schools. One can easily say that if schools are working on strengthening the leadership and devising strategies to promote active learning approaches, engaging the school community with commitment to promote students' learning, and supervising and monitoring of the activities, students would become better achievers.

In addition, one of the students (S2) commented:

The school is making tutorial arrangements to help us improve our results. We are also working in one to five groups, and this is helping us to learn better with our friends.

These statements show that support services are available for students in the form of tutorials and making them work together with each other to help them learn from each other.

One of the principals (PP1) responses to the item begins by indicating the main reason behind providing additional support for learners of his school and possibly other similar schools too is to enhance the achievement of students and to boost the status of the school in terms of performance so as to be among the leading schools in the Zone. He mentioned the types of support provided for the learners as:

- *Tutorial classes particularly for females and low achieving learners;*
- *Assigning (allocating) additional time (periods) for compulsory subjects (Maths, English, and Physical sciences (Physics and chemistry);*
- *Providing high achieving students with rewards (incentives) as a means of motivating all students to achieve better;*
- *Promoting cooperative learning (group study);*
- *Posting photos of high achieving students to inspire others, and*
- *Making library regularly open for service throughout working hours during the school days and during weekends (until 4:00 O'clock (evening) local time).*

From the responses of other principals, the researchers came to know that ideas are similar to what has been reflected by PP1's responses with slight differences in the way they explained the same idea. It is important to point out that PP2 emphasized the orientation program given to all students during flag ceremony in the morning shift as the most important student support mechanism that makes students to be focused on their study the whole school day and throughout the week. He went on explaining:

Tutorial program as a student support system become one of the regular programs, and each teacher is ready to support students through the tutorial program.

In support of this idea, cluster school supervisor (CS1) emphasized:

Schools in the cluster have made the tutorial program to be part of their actual yearly plan of instruction and the schedules for the tutorial programs were designed based on consultation with the students, teachers (who are selected by students' preference/choice and the school management who play a major role in arranging classrooms class rooms for instruction and in facilitating schools in the cluster have improved students' achievement in national examinations as a result of implementing sustained student support system in terms of providing tutorial program and making the library functional during weekends and evening hours (until 4 O'clock local time) during school days.

The availability of student support mechanism is declared by the other participants (teachers, students and PTA members) of the research too.

Regarding the available learner support mechanisms, one of the department heads in school one (H1) reflected:

In our school, conducting make-up classes is used not only to cover missed periods during school days but also to cover all the contents of the curriculum/textbooks within the assigned time limit properly. As a result, make-up classes are given due consideration as one mechanism to support and promote students. Support mechanisms as a whole are used to make students be better in their academic achievement.

According to this participant, make-up classes are equally important as that of the tutorial program as a means to support students and to improve their academic performance. The importance of make-up classes is also underlined by principals, supervisors, teachers and students who took part in the study.

Other components of learner support system reported by participants of the study are:

- *Assigning additional periods(sessions) for some subjects such as Maths and English Language as they are being compulsory subjects and physical sciences(chemistry and Physics)*
- *Additional support for learners who are low achievers (i.e., for those students who achieve low in examinations) in terms of providing them separate tutorial program*
- *Provision of instructional media such as reference books, review questions of different subjects, books with compilation of national exams of the previous years of all subjects given at secondary level education*
- *Making library regularly open throughout the who schools days and on weekends*
- *Financial support as well as support in kind (exercise books, uniforms, etc) for some students who were not able to support themselves economically (i.e., economic support is also there for students as a mechanism of student support system. In addition, material support is available for female students.*
- *Providing students with frequent counseling and advising service at different occasions (during flag ceremonies, at the beginning and end of the academic year, Women's Day and Nations and Nationalities Day Celebrations, Parents Day, etc)*
- *Engaging students in different clubs and committees so as to enhance their involvement in co-curricular activities;*
- *Providing reward for high achieving students as this inspires both high achievers and other students who may be designated as medium and low achievers;*
- *Implementation of continuous assessment and other programs through involvement of parents in school affairs; ICT availability, CPD for teachers to support students learning, commitment among the management and leadership of schools for smooth running of teaching-learning process, use of active teaching-learning strategy, peer teaching and learning, enhancing inbuilt supervision, promoting cooperative learning, avoiding shift system (or implementing full day teaching-learning), posting photos of high achieving students for the whole academic year so as to motivate other students for high achievement;*
- *Facilitating schooling during summer time (Making summer classes available), and*
- *Arrangement of separate library for female students.*

From the data above, it can be easily noted that there are diverse student support mechanisms in the schools even though the effectiveness of these mechanisms is to be judged in relation to performance of students in national examinations.

3.2. Management of Learner Support

Management is roughly about the process of planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling a work of organization members and of using all available organizational resources to attain the goals. Accordingly, managing learner support system of schools as instructional organizations refers to planning, organizing, directing controlling, staffing, evaluating and setting criteria and performing other management functions around the major components that form parts of the learner support system.

Regarding management of learner support in the schools, PP1 reflected:

There is managing/coordinating the tutorial program in the school as student support mechanism and it has its own separate schedule (plan) which is known and acknowledged by the teachers, students, PTA, department heads, and vice principals of the school. Therefore, everybody works toward realizing the major objective of the tutorial program as a support mechanism. Its major objective is to improve/enhance students' academic achievement.

Concerning, management of learner support system, PP2 explained:

We strictly focus on motivating teachers and students so as to make the tutorial program keep going without any stoppage. There are incentives for teachers who participate in the tutorial program. Besides, agreements have been reached through discussion between students and teachers on when, where and how to proceed with the tutorial program. Students also choose teachers for tutorials from teachers within the schools

or from teachers of other schools, or even other sector offices, as students have full autonomy on selecting teachers for their own tutorials. Here, the school administration plays a role of facilitating the situation.

One of the supervisors (CS4) had to say the following in relation to tutorial programs in the schools:

Tutorial program is the major component that forms the student support system in the schools, and properly managing it needs to be given due consideration. Accordingly as part of managing the tutorial program, all compulsory subjects (such as English and Maths) are given more tutorial sessions than the rest of the subjects (both natural and social science subjects). The allocation of periods for other subjects is based on the national exam result analysis of the previous years...and more time is allotted for subjects at which students' achievement was low.

The management of student support mechanism for other components rather than the tutorial program, as indicated by different participants of the study, is related with providing incentives for high achieving students in general and female students in particular. Recognizing high achieving students and incentives given to female students may inspire and motivate not only those students who get the incentives but also others to be the best performer in the future.

3.3. Factors affecting learner support in the selected schools

Data indicated that the availability and management of student support mechanisms in the school under study have been affected by various factors. One of the principals (PP3) reported:

A number of significant factors are affecting the learners support services in my school. One is related to teachers' lack of commitment, and interest, and their poor handling of tutorial classes. Besides, some teachers are not giving adequate advisory support and feedback on students' work. On the other hand, students themselves are not using their time effectively are becoming absent from schools for different reasons.

It is believed that teachers are the core personnel of the school system. However, if teachers are becoming less committed and negligent about their duties that will significantly affect students achievement as well as performance of the schools. Besides, if students are not giving attention to what they are learning, their performance remains below expected level. In the same school, however, one of the participants (T3) argued:

Parents of children coming to schools are not giving attention to schooling of their children, and they are not facilitating matters related to teaching-learning for their children...Also the school does not have organized tutorial provision program, and there is no strong monitoring and evaluation of support mechanism.

Even when teachers are committed, if parents are not supporting the efforts of teachers and schools by facilitating an environment of learning for their children, the efforts of teachers and schools will not result in much improvement. Moreover, if schools are not creating a planned move to support their students, and monitor the activities, their efforts will be fragmented and it will be difficult to realize their goals of improvement. Concerning factors affecting learner support system, all the participants of the study (principals, supervisors, PTA, department heads, teachers and students) in all sample schools have forwarded more or less similar responses as listed below. These are:

- *Lack of collaborative work;*
- *Lack of commitment of leadership (skill gap on the part of leaders);*
- *Lack of adequate input (ICT, plasma, laboratory, computers, reference books, textbooks, particularly social science students (Geography, History, Economics for grades 11&12);*
- *Inadequacy in terms of financial resources;*
- *Poor quality of teachers (low content and methodology awareness among teachers);*
- *Student absenteeism due the prevailing expansion of construction of roads, telecom and industries that created some work opportunities and made students not give attention for education;*
- *Technological influence(use of mobile phone, students preference to drive bajaji instead of attending schools and support services and studying lessons during their spare time);*
- *Not implementing student support services as per plan. This holds true of implementing the overall plan of the school, and*
- *Cheating during exams.*

In school environment where the leadership lacks critical skills, there is no culture of working together (collaboratively), resources needed are meager, students interest of learning is low, and cheating in examinations is rampant/widespread, the schools cannot realize effectiveness in provision of expected learner support services.

From the documents of students' national exam results of Grades 10 and 12 national examination results, it was found that students of the schools achieved below expected as only 24.9% of those who took grade 10 national examination were able to join the preparatory level and only 27.7 % of those who took University entrance examination were able to join university in 2008 E.C. academic year. In addition, the 2009 entrance examination result indicates that, only 24.5% of the students who took national examination were able to join public universities. This might show that the above factors have negatively affected the performance of students in the schools.

3.4. Strategies to enhance learner support in Sidama Zone schools

The study sought some ideas that can serve as a means to enhance learners support services in the schools. One of the supervisors (CS2) suggested:

First of all schools should develop a sound plan on their student support to effect real change through which they can realize improved results of grade 10 and 12 learners. If the changes are not genuine, they cannot improve performance of their students, and they have to make stakeholders aware of their plan and available student services, and they must use effective leadership and administration of the learner support systems.

These straight forward words of the supervisor reflect that effective planning of learner support mechanisms, awareness created on the support services and the effectiveness of the leadership can help improve the learner support services in the schools.

In addition, similar expression has been forwarded by one of the principals (P4) in a slightly different way:

I believe that giving adequate tutorial classes in a planned way, working collaboratively with stakeholders, providing adequate counseling services to students, motivating teachers and students regarding importance of education and learner support mechanisms in particular, and monitoring of learner support activities can help to realize improvement in students' result.

Participants of the study suggested the following strategies to enhance learners support services in Sidama Zone schools.

- *Having proper school improvement plan and implementing it effectively and efficiently;*
- *Encouraging effective implementation of CPD of teachers;*
- *Providing instructional feedbacks for students, parents and teachers especially on the national examination results of the previous years.*
- *The schools need to be transparent;*
- *Assessing problems specific to the school as well as to the education system as a whole;*
- *Creating awareness about the current motto and focus of education among stakeholders;*
- *Maximizing budget allocation;*
- *Creating conducive learning environment, and*
- *Arranging make-up classes*

Finally, participants of the study commented that all teachers should be committed and motivated to support learners; students should be encouraged to learn and achieve their goals; school principals, supervisors and other concerned bodies through collaboration and team work should follow-up and evaluate the activities of schools in general and teachers in particular.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study indicated that various forms of learner support mechanisms are available in the selected schools. Among these are tutorial programs, peer-learning opportunities, make-up classes, financial and material support for needy students, and making facilities available for the teaching-learning process are some of them. Managing learner support system of schools as instructional organizations, refers to planning, organizing, directing controlling, staffing, evaluating and setting criteria and performing other management functions around the major components that form parts of the learner support system. The data indicated that lack of parents' involvement in their children's education, poor quality of teachers and the school leadership, poor culture of working collaboratively...have negatively affected the effective implementation of learner support services, and this is also reflected in poor performance of students in national examinations of grades 10 and 12. Taking into account factors affecting effectiveness of learner support services, the participants of the study suggested effective planning and implementation of school improvement, making necessary resources available, creating collaborative working environment, creating awareness among the stakeholders as strategies.

The findings indicated that training programmes to guide principals, school supervisors, department heads and education experts on how to design and manage the learner support mechanisms are required. There is also a need to avail appropriate facilities such as laboratories and school libraries as part of the learner support

system in a more advanced way. From the study it can be also said that learners with special needs to be identified and special support mechanisms need to be devised.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

In as far as the Management of the Learner Support System for Grade 10 and 12 learners is concerned, there are areas of concern that need to be addressed. Based on the report of the findings, there is a need for a well managed learner Support System in Sidama Zone Schools. It is also recommended that materials for learner support should be developed and delivered to all stakeholders, before the beginning of the academic year, capacity building programmes for principals and teachers should be planned and monitored to enable them to implement and monitor the learner support systems in schools. Besides, it is suggested that a policy on the management of the learner support system should be prepared and be made compulsory in all schools.

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Adinew Ontoro Kedo "Availability of Learner Support System and Its Management In Secondary Schools Of Sidama Zone, Ethiopia." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. vol. 23 no. 2, 2018, pp. 31-37