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EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

A JOURNAL DEDICATED TO PLANNING, CHANGE, REFORM, AND
THE IMPROVEMENT OF EDUCATION

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FROM THE EDITORS

This issue of Educational Planning includes significant planning topics such as artificial intelligence, mission sustainability, program reviews and accommodations of disability students in higher education, and the roles and participation of school management committees in public schools.

In the first article, Mike Douse addresses how those who plan education will be profoundly affected by Artificial Intelligence and suggests ways in which the potential benefits may be optimized.

In the second article, Graves and Moffett explore the potential for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to further engage with Africa as a sustainability strategy, with an eye toward sustaining their missions and enhancing their global impact.

In the third article, Hoare, Wagner and Hondzel describe an approach involving secondary research and thematic document analysis that can be leveraged to enhance institutional decision-making processes by uncovering institutional themes evident across external reviews. The approach could help other higher education institutions to make sense of program review recommendations.

The fourth article by Alyass highlights the definitions of meaningful access and reasonable accommodations provided by disabled students in Canadian higher education. The negative and positive experiences encountered by the students are reported.

Lastly, Agbi, Nudzor and Agbevanu report that the roles of school management committees (SMCs) are crucial in the smooth, unfettered administration, development and provision of quality basic education. Their study surveyed school management chairpersons in Ghana to investigate their knowledge and participation in SMCs.

The unique planning ideas presented by the authors of this issue broaden our international horizon. This is the evidence indicating that Educational Planning serves as a significant platform for international exchange of educational planning experiences through which we all learn together as a planning family.

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April, 2024.

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Mike Douse has been involved in international education since 1964, having worked in and for over sixty countries, including, most recently, Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, Bangladesh, India and South Africa. Based in Wales, his assignments have been predominantly related to the European Union’s educational development support programme although he has also been involved in World Bank, UNICEF and ILO missions. Mike has been an education professor in Ghana; sometime Headmaster of Kings School, Cardiff; foundation principal of a flagship science secondary school in Nigeria; and was the first Director of Australia’s Disadvantaged Schools Programme. In addition to professional documents related to specific education programmes, his published work, with Professor Philip Uys, includes One World One School. As well as many articles and conference presentations on issues educational, Mike has published three collections of his poems.

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Shannon Wagner joined Thompson Rivers University as Associate Vice President Academic in 2021 and accepted the position of Vice President of Research in 2023. Prior to coming to TRU, Wagner served as Dean of the Faculty of Human and Health Sciences and Interim Dean of the College of Arts, Social and Health Sciences at the University of Northern British Columbia. Her research program includes topics related to occupational and organizational mental health, emergency services, and human rights in the workplace. Her teaching has focused on occupational health, psychological assessment, statistics, epidemiology and health promotion.

EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses how those who plan education will be profoundly affected by Artificial Intelligence and suggests ways in which the potential benefits may be optimised. UNESCO's contributions to the AI debate are recognised and applauded, despite AI having, as yet, no direct voice in its discussions. Most significantly, there is a widespread unwillingness – manifest in both UNESCO's publications and by contributors to its recent Digital Learning conference – to accept that education is undergoing a fundamental transformation and that contemporary technology, including AI, will continue to impact upon, and necessarily react with, that evolving situation. In a similar manner, the fourth Sustainable Development Goal is now acting as a straitjacket, constraining the actions and aspirations of those seeking to confront education's worldwide challenges through the sensitive and ingenious application of contemporary technology including Artificial Intelligence.

Educational planners and decision-makers are urged to keep abreast of the Education and AI debate, including the UNESCO-led discussions and UNESCO-authored publications, while applying grounded common sense, rejecting technological determinism, and maintaining a healthy scepticism throughout. It is vital that they too acknowledge that education is, along with society generally, evolving and, accordingly, recognise the limitations of reports and products which ignore that fundamental transformation. It is recommended that they start with the challenges and opportunities offered by AI and – collectively – demand AI support for what needs to be achieved, no matter how radical. This might extend to a shared super-goal of optimising the nature, delivery, and effectiveness of education, carefully and creatively applying AI, in order to help create a better, happier and more equitable world community.

INTRODUCTION

Formal definitions of Artificial Intelligence (AI) abound. For example, the Oxford Dictionary defines it as "the theory and development of computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages" (Oxford Languages, 2021, p.13). United Nations publications describe AI as, simply, "human intelligence or behaviour demonstrated by machines" (Unite, 2023, p.1). Or, as a poet puts it, "AI is a carefully crafted mirror for humans, getting better each year at showing us not only a version of what we are, but what we value in ourselves as a species" (Brown, 2022, p.1).

For present purposes it may be regarded as the ability of a machine (or a computer or a robot) to act and/or to think in what may reasonably be regarded as a 'human' manner, drawing information from its surroundings, and determining its responses based upon what it understands or senses, ever learning as it goes (present author's working definition).

AI is profoundly changing our society, our economy, our culture, our leisure, our work, our self-image, our aspirations and – in some ways – our very selves, as we adapt to the evolving AI world. Inevitably, it has major implications for education and, as is explained in this paper, that educational transformation – rather than being focussed upon in sectoral isolation – is best addressed with the broader context of society at large and AI's impact upon it.

The UNESCO-sanctioned definition of the other element being addressed – educational planning – is “the process of making arrangements or preparations to facilitate the training, instruction or study that leads to the acquisition of skills or knowledge, or the development of reasoning and judgment” (Coombs, 1970, p.3). We learn also, from that same source, that “educational planning strives to research, develop, implement and advance policies, programs and reforms within educational institutions (*ibid*). The present author (with Professor Uys) described ‘the basic educational planning task’ as “mobilising available resources in order to achieve the agreed (or implied) objectives in a pleasurable and stimulating setting” (Douse & Uys, 2020, p. 1).

A more proactive way forward than exchanging definitions, however, is to obtain an operational understanding of what educational planning is, and what educational planners do and reflect upon. This may best be achieved by studying the contents of this distinguished journal since its inception. That has been done by the author, selecting a set of five articles that, to him, demonstrate a representative variety of educational planning activities, and this procedure is taken forward below. This exploration highlighted that the original title of this article, ‘Artificial Intelligence and Educational Planning’, placed these two entities in an erroneous order: this has been rectified[1].

UNESCO – AN HOMAGE AND A CRITIQUE

UNESCO is performing its allotted leadership and coordination role in relation to AI and education [their order]; its Guidance for Policymakers (UNESCO, 2021) may be regarded as the fundamental and essential text. That document recommends, with clear explanations, justifications and examples, the following procedure:

- Define a system-wide vision of AI and education policies;
- Assess system-wide readiness and choose strategic priorities;
- Adopt a humanistic approach as an overarching principle for AI and humanistic policies;
- Mobilise interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder expertise to inform policy planning and build the capacities of policy-makers;
- Set out cross-cutting strategic objectives, and plan regulations and programmes, to ensure the equitable and inclusive use of AI in education;
- Plan the use of AI to support lifelong learning across all ages, locations and backgrounds;
- Ensure that AI is being used to empower teachers;
- Build a trusted evidence base to support the use of AI in education;
- Strengthen research and evaluation in the field of AI and education; and
- Promote the local development of AI technologies for education (p.17).

Much of this is entirely admirable and utterly in tune with UNESCO’s mandate and humanistic vision – these are sensible steps that should surely be taken by those seeking an optimal alliance of people and machines in the service of human fulfilment and well-being. Some decision-makers and planners may carp at, for instance, the omission of the need to spread information across the wider community and to generate enthusiasm along with understanding. Others may point to a failure in these principles to address the dangers – some real, many more perceived, most exaggerated – of applying AI in our schools and colleges, although these matters are touched upon in the text and certainly addressed in subsequent UNESCO publications and activities[2].

1 Virtually all of the documents sighted, including UNESCO’s, place ‘AI’ before ‘education’ in their titles, signifying, conceivably subconsciously, their authors’ propensity to address the relationship from the wrong perspective.

2 A vast and admirable body of work in this area (research, international fora, publications et cetera) is being engendered by, for and through UNESCO and is readily available at www.unesco.org

But the truly significant and somewhat surprising omission relates to the starting-point. Defining a 'system-wide vision of AI and education policies' should surely come after something along the lines of '*gain clarity and consensus on the nature and purposes of education in the context of contemporary technology*'. It makes no sense to start discussing AI on the basis that the education system will in all other respects remain unchanged, just as it would have been foolish to attempt to achieve a 'vision' of the early automobiles (circa 1860) on the assumption that the bridleways, byways and cart tracks would remain unaltered.

And this is no transitory oversight. For example, a recent UNESCO conference[3] focussed on "regulations or policies that have been adopted and released, projects that have been implemented at scale, or platforms or AI tools that have been developed and put in use" (UNESCO, 2023) and concentrated upon "governance, norms and standards, as well as pedagogical innovation… while cultivating collaborative partnerships to achieve greater impact" (*ibid*). This present author attended the conference, at which there were 190 speakers[4], most maintaining, in some way or another, that there are '*incredible opportunities along with incalculable dangers*'. None of those presenting (at least in those sessions attended by the present author) seemed at all aware that education itself will change dramatically – the general approach was one of exploring how AI would operate within systems and schools virtually unchanged from those around us currently.

Taking account of that UNESCO conference organiser's closing remarks, a consensus of the following three-fold nature appears (as perceived and summarised here by the present author) to have emerged:

- We must strive for **inclusion**; the global digital divide remains vast; two-thirds of children cannot connect; 95% of the world's languages are excluded; AI should be for everyone worldwide – we have yet to make it so;
- In relation to teachers and students, there should be equilibrium between protecting and **empowering** but, if forced to choose, the latter is favoured; and
- In relation to government policies, **regulating** is preferred to banning, taking action favoured over reacting.

While these approaches make good sense, here again we see that unwillingness to address education's forthcoming and fundamental transformation, made both necessary and possible through ICT and now AI, which omission – in a digital learning conference – is as damaging as it is puzzling.

This desire to begin the story with Chapter 2 is apparent in sectors other than education. For example, a recent study of AI in healthcare (Daly, 2023) gives "39 examples improving the future of medicine", much as a catalogue at an art exhibition might list the paintings for sale, each with their individual special qualities and selling points. Similarly, a review of how AI in has revolutionised the finance industry (Schroer, 2023) presents 29 examples, proceeding from company to company and platform to platform. What we see here verges upon technological determinism, solutions in search of problems, AI applications readily available, at a cost, at the marketplace, much as the 'AI tools that have been developed and put in use' were on show at that UNESCO symposium *cum* forum.

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3 UNESCO's Digital Learning Week, 4th-7th September 2023, comprised an International Symposium on Digital Learning Platforms and a Policy Forum on Artificial Intelligence in Education. For details and the conference programme, see:
https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/08/2023-digital-learning-week-programme-en_0.pdf

4 All apparently human – not a self-aware reflecting machine in sight; rather more North than South, assorted excellencies, sundry salespeople, profusions of professors, many government ministers, much jargon, several mentions of Bloom's taxonomy…

UNESCO is the United Nations' specialised agency for education, and it, in common with some 40 UN (and World Bank) agencies, are exploring AI in their respective sectors[5]. So that there is synchronicity across silos, so that, say, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change may exchange ideas, remain consistent, and learn from one another, and, above all, so that each agency's efforts explicitly contribute to a higher goal, an overall and UN-wide agency would appear essential. At first glance, UN Secretary-General António Guterres' call for a new United Nations international body "to help govern the use of artificial intelligence as the technology increasingly reveals its potential risks and benefits" (United Nations, 2023, p 1), responds to that requirement. However, its apparent focus will be on "potentially catastrophic and existential risks… without action to address (them), we are derelict in our responsibilities to present and future generations" (*ibid*). Other than the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, which are fast approaching the status of sacred text, there is no binding energy, no inspirational statement on how AI should best serve humanity, no common goal, and no means of ensuring shared strategies across those assorted sectoral efforts.

CONTEXT AND CURRICULUM

UNESCO's entirely admirable mandate "calls inherently for a human-centred approach to AI, including addressing current inequalities regarding access to knowledge, research and the diversity of cultural expressions… to ensure AI does not widen the technological divides within and between countries" (UNESCO, 2021 p. 7-8). It talks also of harnessing AI to achieve the fourth Sustainable Development Goal: 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. The SDGs were born at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 and their final wording, and the preamble and declaration that accompanied them, were agreed by UN member states in August 2015.

They are very much a product of their time. For example, SDG4 has 10 targets for 2030 encompassing many different aspects of education such as:

- ensuring that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education;
- ensuring that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy;
- building and upgrading education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all; and
- substantially increasing the supply of qualified teachers.

Even on their own terms, actual advancement towards these well-intentioned albeit outdated objectives has been unimpressive. A recent UN report (United Nations, 2023a) noted that

> *"progress towards quality education was already slower than required before the pandemic, but COVID-19 has had devastating impacts on education, causing learning losses in four out of five of the 104 countries studied… only one in six countries will achieve the universal secondary school completion target by 2030, an estimated 84 million children and young people will still be out of school, and approximately 300 million students will lack the basic numeracy and literacy skills necessary for success in life… to deliver on goal 4, education*

5 To save space (and to challenge readers), those agencies are listed here as abbreviations: CTBTO, FAO, ICAO, ILO, IMO, IOM, ITU, UNAIDS, UNCTAD, UNDESA, UNDPPA, UNECE, UNEP, UNESCO, UNDP, UNFCCC, UNFPA, UNGP, UN Habitat, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNICRI, UNIDIR, UNIDO, UNDRR, UNITAR, UNODA, UNODC, UNOOSA, UNRISD, UNU, UN Women, UN WTO, WFP, WHO, WIPO, WMO, and the WB Group.

financing must become a national investment priority. Furthermore, measures such as making education free and compulsory, increasing the number of teachers, improving basic school infrastructure and embracing digital transformation are essential" (p.2-3).

Only in those final four words are the glimmerings of the overall solution vaguely detected. Few economies are capable of making education a national investment priority, even were the political leaders or the electorates willing to. Expenditure necessary to significantly upgrade infrastructure or employ sufficient well-qualified teachers – and pay them properly – will not be forthcoming. The futile chase in pursuit of ancient and unattainable dreams is a superfluous and damaging distraction.

Even in 2015, as SDG4 was being ratified, it was becoming clear to many educational planners, decision-makers, analysts and commentators, that contemporary technology was making both necessary and possible a fundamental transformation of education. With a growing and widespread recognition of AI's potential, continuing to assess educational progress and pitfalls from a 2015 perspective is as absurd as it is dysfunctional. Let it be recognised that the fourth Sustainable Development Goal is now acting as a straitjacket, constraining the actions and aspirations of those seeking to confront education's worldwide challenges through the sensitive and ingenious application of contemporary technology and Artificial Intelligence. Some of the possibilities based upon the sensible and sensitive application of AI – alongside enthusiastic teachers, in convivial settings, and in harmony with post-digital society – are explored in the discussion that follows.

Linkages between school and work certainly lend themselves to AI-guided envisaging, enlightening, encouraging, evaluating and even enforcing. It is easy to visualise each of educational planning, teaching and learning being geared to present and forthcoming labour market requirements and desirable workplace attitudes. However, the present author has long argued that "the work that most adults are likely to be doing a decade or so hence will, as now and as ever has been, be despicable and dehumanising drudgery… all the more reason to ensure that the time spent in school should be extensive, exhilarating and entertaining and entirely un-work-related" (Douse, 2005, p. 8). He further recognised that "bringing the marketplace into education and the workplace into the schoolroom devalues the invaluable, transforming a wonderful universal right into a mundane tradable commodity" (Douse, 2013, p. 4) and that "discontinuities between education and work are vital to preserving the former's integrity" (Douse & Uys, 2023a, p. 3). Given all of that, he is hardly likely to turn to AI for support in "the colonisation of the schoolroom by the workplace" (*ibid*).

UNESCO recommends planning the use of AI to support lifelong learning across ages, locations and backgrounds… leveraging AI to become more dynamic, serving higher numbers of non-traditional learners, and provide lifelong learning across formal, non-formal and informal settings" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 4). Across the world, we are isolating people who are digitally excluded, the technically less adept, and at a very high cost; the older, the poorer and the more vulnerable are increasing cut off, in rich western nations as well as in the developing world. Indeed, the phenomenon of the 'proud digital illiterate' (claiming that "one of the most interesting things about me is that I cannot use a computer") is all too commonplace: these too should be within the target population, For, if lifelong education is meant to be for all, it should certainly be extended to those presently excluded, involving the provision of local in-person support alongside digital transformation strategies.

And if education is really about equity – as is widely claimed – and not in actuality an inequitable selection and sorting out process, then this too must be actively and creatively pursued. Over half a century ago, several societies (those of Cuba and Ghana for instance) mobilised secondary school students to bring literacy and numeracy to the disadvantaged and the remotely located. Perhaps something of this kind might be designed and delivered by all countries across the world, using the young to enable the old (and all categories of the digitally excluded) to possess and enjoy exploring the possibilities and present-day necessities of contemporary networking. So here is an especial challenge to those who plan for lifelong learning: how to use AI alongside able users to achieve equitable access to and benefit from machines and systems across all social groups. Not merely addressing exclusion but ensuring that citizens of all ages, economic levels and geographical locations tend equally to benefit from and enjoy contemporary technology.

As prominent environmentalist George Monbiot emphasises "it is not enough to build learning around a single societal shift: students should be trained to handle a rapidly changing world" (Monbiot, 2023 p.1). Were the notion of an externally imposed curriculum still to apply, a strong case could be made for a focus on meta-skills, such as self-development, social intelligence, empathy, openness, resilience, empathy and creativity, so that all may happily acquire the fresh competencies that will undoubtedly and suddenly be demanded by this exciting and sometimes terrifying evolving post-digital world. Similarly, covering prompt engineering – effectively communicating with generative AI models such as ChatGPT, Bard and Dall-E – will enable users to formulate the prompts that are most likely to produce the outputs that most closely match their expectations. Much as the Sergeant will not bark "For inspection, port arms" when he wants the squad to bring their rifles to the ground.

Just as any curriculum worthy of its time would need to cover the principles of complex systems, as

> *"everything of importance to us (the brain, body, society, ecosystems, the atmosphere, oceans, finance, the economy…) is a complex system… the two existential threats I would place at the top of my list, ranked by a combination of likelihood, impact and imminence, are environmental breakdown and global food system collapse… both involve complex systems being pushed beyond their critical thresholds"* (Monbiot, 2023, p. 1).

Which leads on to metacognition which, argues Natasha Robson, may and should be taught. It involves understanding how thinking works,

> *"from neuroscience to cultural conditioning… how to observe and interrogate one's thought processes… and how and why one might become vulnerable to disinformation and exploitation"* (Robson, 2016, p. 2-4).

But all of that is set in the fading context of curriculum being imposed upon learners. Certainly, meta skills, metacognition, prompt engineering and an understanding of complex systems are key competencies for their thriving in their anticipated AI-nurtured lives. But the very idea of there being a set of subjects, a body of knowledge and an array of skills that all teachers must deliver, and that all learners must acquire, is as outdated as buttoned boots and facsimile machines. This present author has long advocated that self-directed and self-regulated learning, encompassing learner-determined curricula, should and will become the

> *"prevalent educational mode, from early-secondary onwards throughout life… (with) optimum advantage being derived from universal connectivity, (as) in the context of the duality (tangible and virtual) of contemporary consciousness… letting the learners lead should characterise education's forthcoming, fundamental (and COVID-19 hastened) transformation"* (Douse & Uys, 2021, p.7).

In other words, by all means make the acquisition of those highly relevant proficiencies available but allow them to be assimilated if, and only if, and when a learner desires them. [See also Douse & Uys 2023b on the curricular implications of letting the learners lead.]

LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE TIME OF AI

As a fairly recent McKinsey report emphasises, “the teaching profession is under siege (Bryant et al, 2020, p. 9) with

> *“burnout and high attrition… 81 percent of UK teachers considering leaving teaching altogether because of their workloads... further disheartening to teachers is the news that some education professors have even gone so far as to suggest that teachers can be replaced by robots, computers, and AI”* (p. 9-10).

The report concludes that

> *“teachers spend an average of 11 hours a week in preparation activities… effective use of technology could cut the time to just six hours… implementing technology in the classroom at scale is hard. Just providing hardware is easy… much of the time saved, however, can be ploughed back into improving education through more personalized learning and more direct coaching and mentoring… additional time can also help support social–emotional learning and the development of the 21st-century skills that will be necessary to thrive in an increasingly automated workplace*” (*ibid* p.11).

While many of those findings and recommendations still stand, it must be recognised that, over the four years since the McKinsey survey was conducted, much (including Covid) has happened, AI has risen to the top of agendas, and its potential to radically transform education (and all else) has been increasingly recognised.

Much of the discussion of AI in relation to education over those four years has focussed upon the threats and dangers. While addressing these in thoughtful detail, Professor Stuart Russell, one of the world’s leading experts on AI, recognised that personalised ChatGPT-style systems could feasibly deliver “most material through to the end of high school… two to three more times effectively than traditional classroom lessons” (Devlin, 2023 p. 6). While “human involvement would still be essential, (that) could be drastically different from the traditional role of a teacher… facilitating more complex collective activities and delivering civic and moral education” (*ibid*). Professor Russell concludes that “recent advances in AI are likely to spell the end of the traditional school classroom… fewer teachers being employed – possibly even none…” (*ibid* p. 8).

Which is some distance away from that positive UNESCO principle of ensuring that AI is used to empower teachers. The UNESCO model involves

> *“...protecting the rights of teachers and the value of their practices… analysing and reviewing teachers’ roles defining the skill sets that teachers need to apply AI… delivering training and continuous support… planning ahead to enable teachers to apply new AI technologies to their current practices and transition to new ways of working… encouraging the formation of communities of educators who share AI experiences… (and) providing simplified guidelines to update teachers on the latest findings”* (UNESCO, 2021, p. 1) .

Which is both convincing and humane – apart from one obvious flaw. UNESCO’s approach, along with that of UN agencies across most of the sectors explored to date by this author, assumes that the superstructure will remain more or less the same – virtually the late-20th century model – while processes within it, including those embodying AI, would proceed without affecting, let alone shattering, the overall setting.

Clearly, if Professor Russell's prognostications are at all close to the evolving actuality, UNESCO's guidance would be unworkable: empowering teachers depend upon their continuing existence. The present author's own predictions are that there would be "far fewer (teachers) but much more effective and substantially better rewarded" (Douse, 2022, p. 7) and that it is necessary to recognise 'The School' not as a "tangible location but as a dispersed (and ever more global) community of learners – a process of individually-driven teacher-buttressed self-fulfilment as opposed to a physical-located exercise in regimented enforcement" (Douse & Uys, 2019, p. 7). AI could undoubtedly enable highly effective learning, teaching and continuous professional development in the fundamentally transformed educational situation (which AI makes both necessary and feasible) but, though safe and reassuring, the assumption that the teacher's role will gradually evolve from the current set of tasks is misleading and dangerous.

The present author has also envisaged the 'Artificial Intelligence University' where "only the students are people. All other roles and responsibilities at the AIU… are effectively delivered by and entirely embody AI" (Douse, 2023, p. 1). One noteworthy feature is that "with its ever-increasing income accruing from its research and development activities… there is no longer any requirement for fees… full-time on-campus students are now receiving not only generous living allowances but compensation for their not working during their years of study" (*ibid* p.2). Apart from its other insinuations, this model vividly illustrates that the potential of AI and student (and university) financing are inter-linked, with the former potentially riding to the rescue of the latter.

SIX CHALLENGES IN SEARCH OF AN AI SOLUTION

Let us return, then, to the earlier observation on the nature of challenges faced by those engaged in various educational planning areas. Drawing from past editions of this Educational Planning Journal, the author identified five examples of issues of particular interest to educational planners. These comprised:

- Educational Wastage, described as a "canker worm that has eaten deep into the fabric of our educational system" (Akinsolu, 2017);
- Differentiated Instruction, necessitated by the "changing cultural and linguistic landscape of today's classrooms… transforming classroom practices" (Hersi & Ball, 2021);
- Classroom Design, in that the "changing nature of education has forced educators to rethink the role of classrooms in student learning" (Duncanson & Curry, 2020);
- Teacher Retention and Attrition, "thinking strategically about ways to improve teacher retention rates" (Kim et al, 2020); and
- Inclusion in STEM Education, "barriers for students with disabilities accessing Science, Technology, Mathematics and Technology programmes (Klimaitis *et al*, 2021).

To those five, the author added one of his own, based upon six decades of educational planning in developing countries, being fully aware that, once an international advisor helps put together a programme, supported by an agency such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the USA's Development arm USAID, or the European Union, establishing, assessing and reporting upon what is actually happening depends upon local personnel supplemented by periodic visits by donor representatives. So there is a need for:

- Objective monitoring of externally-supported educational developing projects, based upon actual achievement against the agreed input, output, outcome, impact and sustainability goals.

The author searched for existing AI applications in these six areas. In addition to an internet-based literature search, he discussed them with participants at UNESCO's recent Digital Learning Week (see above), following this up in correspondence with three of them. He also communicated with two major AI educational providers. Based upon those investigations, it may be concluded that (a) everyone contacted agreed that AI could make a significant positive contribution in each of these areas; (b) in the majority of instances, no entirely suitable AI application could be identified[6]; and (c) while there was a general feeling that "if approached, some company might be prepared to work with you to come up with an AI solution", there was also a sense that "we don't usually operate like that". [The likelihood of creative cooperation might well have been higher had the requests been made on behalf of a known organisation with significant resources, rather than by a lone and aged researcher[7].]

The objective was to locate AI applications that would, hopefully, go beyond merely recording and analysing situations to responding creatively to them: applying intelligence and enabling the challenges, as described by those EPJ authors to be met. Area by area, the findings were as follows:

- <u>Educational wastage:</u> no applications of direct relevance was identified but there were several whose makers claim to make education more interesting and/or relevant, thus possibly reducing wastage indirectly were located – none of those was really convincing.
- <u>Differentiated instruction:</u> this is the success story – AI adaptive learning tools with real-time feedback, and adaptive learning systems offering individualised instruction, are readily available; work at the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University is cited; effective use of ChatGPT in creating differentiated materials, within the Universal Design for Learning framework, using prompts such as "Can you give me multiple resources to introduce chemical reactions?" certainly exist. The resources, which include "videos, websites, simulations, games, or infographics" are described; making a connection to learners' personal experiences and interests, such as their background or hobbies, building a bridge between a skill and the student's interests.
- <u>Classroom design:</u> [Note – 'Classroom AI', while interesting, is about something else.] Interesting considerations of "a design framework to support educators and learners' discussions about design for learning in an AI world… (with) the active engagement of educators and learners in co-designing a future they desire, to help shape learning and living in an AI world" (Carvalho, 2022, p. 7) are available; it is not yet a specialised branch of architecture but clearly there is a growing interest.
- <u>Teacher retention and attrition:</u> no applications of direct relevance to teachers, or to the issues raised in the EPJ article, were located. Some practices applied outside teaching, including "using AI to monitor employee messages for indicators that an employee is about to quit… identify attrition risks, enabling leadership to discuss retention strategies, or put succession plans in place before the employees actually leave" verge, in the present author's opinion, upon the sinister.
- <u>Inclusion in STEM education:</u> a great deal of good work is being done in this area but, while there is an abundance of AI related to each of (a) learners with disabilities, and (b) STEM subjects, no AI package could be found bringing the two together, although this possibility was something that, for instance, the Disabled Students Commission and the UK's Royal Society, were very ready to discuss.
- <u>Educational project monitoring:</u> of the several hundred donor-funded programmes and projects

6 The author's failure to locate a relevant AI package does not mean that no such specific solution exists, simply that none of the people contacted, nor any of the sources explored, led the author to it. Moreover, this is an exponentially expanding field – if there really was no such solution in September 2023, there might well be a whole range of them come December.
7 'This is no county for old men', W B Yeats, Sailing to Byzantium, 1933.

currently active across the developing world, none is currently monitored using AI. Even those involved in the European Commission's International Outreach for human-centric Artificial Intelligence initiative, or in designing, delivering and evaluating contemporary technology interventions, remained tied to traditional ways of monitoring and evaluating actual against planned achievement.

Finally, having looked at AI in relation to particular activities, let us return to the overall educational planning task, as indicated in the definitions offered at the outset. Perhaps we see ourselves as 'facilitating the acquisition of skills, reasoning and judgment', and/or advancing 'reforms within educational institutions' and/or 'mobilising resources to achieve agreed objectives'. But surely our shared purpose is to optimise the nature, delivery and effectiveness of education in order to help create a better, happier and more equitable world community. Exactly what that comprises will continue to be debated but, to this present author, there is a mission of that magnitude to which we may all (educational planners and decision-makers collectively) aspire. And, for the first time in human history, with the careful and creative application of Artificial Intelligence, in concert with human dedication and imagination, that goal is within humankind's reach.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO EDUCATIONAL PLANNERS

UNESCO's contributions, both as a leader and a medium of the exchanges of information and ideas, are recognised and admired. It is noted that Artificial Intelligence has, as yet, no voice in its conferences and discussions. Most significantly, there is a worrying unwillingness to recognise that education is undergoing a fundamental transformation and that contemporary technology, including AI, will continue to impact upon, and necessarily react with, that evolving situation. Aspects of that transformation include (secondary onwards) learners leading, in terms of determining what, how, where and when to learn, and roles of teachers altering dramatically in order to support those learners in their lifelong education.

There are also indications that the ever-increasing array of AI applications is less responsive to educational planners' requirements and more reflective of commercial considerations. Not only are there few to zero available packages addressing most of the issues raised by the present author-selected sample of earlier contributors to this Educational Planning journal, there is none as yet that relates to 'Letting the Learners Lead' – and perhaps that is understandable. Nevertheless, the work of those who plan education – the administrators as well as the decision-makers – will be profoundly affected by AI and it is essential that all of us in that profession, broadly-defined, perform our evolving roles with confidence and enthusiasm. With that in mind, the following approaches are recommended:

1. Keep abreast (if not ahead) of the Education and AI debate, including the UNESCO-led discussions and UNESCO-authored publications, while applying grounded common sense and maintaining a healthy scepticism throughout.
2. Acknowledge that education is, along with society generally, evolving and, accordingly, recognise the limitations of reports and products which ignore that fundamental transformation, and which assume that education in 2040 will be much as it is now.
3. Start with the challenges and opportunities (rather than commencing with the solutions) and – with your colleagues – demand AI support for what you believe needs to be achieved.
4. Have no fear of radical solutions. Take, for instance, the challenge of enabling the entire community to enjoy and benefit from digital connection and capacity – how may AI enable this to occur? How may AI help enable the learners to lead, and to do so effectively? How may AI

support teachers in their challenging new role?

5. Consider our shared super-goal of optimising the nature, delivery and effectiveness of education, carefully and creatively applying AI, in order to help create a better, happier and more equitable world community. How may educational planners and decision-makers come together to make that come to pass?

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EXPLORING HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY SUSTAINABILITY AND INTERNATIONALIZATION WITH AFRICA: A STUDY OF SELECTED HBCU LEADERS PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

A former United States government senior policy advisor recommended that each university ought to formulate an Africa strategy within its long-term strategic objectives. This study explored the potential for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to further engage with Africa as a sustainability strategy, with an eye toward sustaining their missions and enhancing their global impact. The study utilized AutoHBCUology™, a multi-phase originally constructed mixed methodological design. The findings shed light on the multifaceted landscape of sustainability pathways and leadership commitment to internationalization with Africa among senior-level leaders at HBCUs. The emphasis on institutional leadership, stability, connectivity, and repositioning as pathways to sustainability underscores the multifaceted approach required to ensure the long-term viability of HBCUs in an ever-evolving educational landscape. The specific examination of leadership commitment to internationalization with Africa reveals a strong inclination toward professional high-level engagement, particularly through conferences and discussions with African Ministries of Education and institutions. However, fiscal resource allocation for internationalization with Africa may not be a high priority compared to other considerations. Nevertheless, the commitment to student-related activities, such as encouraging faculty, staff, and students to engage in educational exchanges, signifies a proactive stance toward fostering international experiences with Africa. Despite constraints, targeted Africa engagement may promote HBCU sustainability. Overall, this study aimed to initiate critical dialogue on typically unexplored sustainability dimensions for HBCUs in partnership with African nations.

INTRODUCTION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played a vital role in providing higher education opportunities for African Americans in the United States. Established in the 19th century, HBCUs were founded with the mission of educating freed slaves and their descendants. Over the past 150 years, these institutions have endured numerous challenges, but remain critically important centers of culture and learning. As we look ahead to the future, questions arise regarding the sustainability and continued relevance of HBCUs in a changing social landscape. One potential opportunity that holds much promise is for HBCUs to build stronger relationships with Africa.

The African Century: Looking Towards Africa

The future is African. Africa's rapidly growing youth population represents a significant opportunity for mutually beneficial engagement in view of looming enrollment challenges in the United States. Over the next century, while populations in Europe, Asia, and Northern America grow older, sub-Saharan Africa will thrive as the world's fountain of youth (Sow, 2018; United Nations, 2019). Europe, Asia, and Northern America have the oldest populations worldwide

(United Nations, 2019). In Europe, the median age across EU member states is 43 (European Union, 2019). In Northern America, the median age is 39 (Ausubel, 2020). Representing the youngest age distribution in the world, the median age in Africa is 19 (United Nations, 2019; Walsh, 2023).

This massive youth boom positions Africa's higher education sector for massive growth to meet the need for advanced skills and training. The continent is positioned to reap a substantial economic dividend from its “youthquake” if this burgeoning workforce is educated and employed productively.

Tertiary education remains an urgent human capital development investment priority on the continent. The AU’s Agenda 2063 (2015) and the World Bank’s (n.d., 2018, 2019) Human Capital Plan prioritize the need for expanded, enhanced, and increased access to education in the region. Although sub-Saharan Africa saw the fastest growth in its “tertiary gross enrollment ratio (GER) during 1970-2013 at 4.3 percent annually, faster than the global average of 2.8 percent,” (Gandhi, 2018), the region’s total tertiary gross enrollment ratio is still significantly below the world average (Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2019, p. 30).

Africa's youth boom presents timely opportunities for collaborative partnerships between HBCUs and African nations that can mutually advance their educational missions. By working together to connect with Africa's aspiring students seeking education, HBCUs and African nations can facilitate two-way exchanges, bolster capacity, and share valuable expertise in areas of strength.

Jointly tapping into Africa's surging youth demographics provides prospects to boost HBCU enrollment sustainability while expanding access to quality education for African youth. African partners stand to gain from HBCUs' long track record in culturally competent teaching, leadership development, and building institutions to serve marginalized communities. HBCUs can benefit from cooperation with Africa's emerging/existing public and private sectors and expanding pools of prospective students seeking advancement and social mobility.

Through proactive collaboration, HBCUs and African nations have an incentive to maximize, harness, and cultivate the potential of the continent's youth. Strategic partnerships can further shared goals of inclusive, relevant education and training for underserved populations. By joining forces, HBCUs can sustain their historic missions while contributing to prosperity for new generations across Mother Africa and the African diaspora. The potential for mutually fulfilling cooperation makes this an auspicious moment for invigorated HBCU-Africa linkages.

Collaborating to cultivate Africa's youth advances HBCUs' service missions for new generations while sustaining their institutions into the future. This study synthesized current scholarship and historic understanding to inform practical recommendations for sustaining HBCUs in their next century of service and supporting African nations in their aspirations to realize the African century.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The higher education sector writ large faces an existential threat. The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2020) reported that “higher education institutions of all types are facing sustainability issues from liberal arts colleges to research universities” (p. 1). Declining enrollment is the most immediate existential threat to the sustainability of colleges/universities in general, but HBCUs are disproportionately vulnerable due to their small share (about 3%) of the overall U.S. higher education landscape. The college enrollment bust is predicted to impact U.S. colleges/universities beginning in 2025/2026 (Conley, 2019; Fain, n.d.; Fox, 2019; Grawe, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). The declining birth rates in the U.S. since the 2007 economic recession have contributed to the looming crisis. According to Grawe (2018), the U.S. fertility rate has “plummeted by more than 12 percent” since 2007 (p. 6). It is projected that by 2026 the number of native-born children reaching college-age will start to decline rapidly. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (2023), “total postsecondary enrollment remains well-below pre-pandemic levels” (p. 1). However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, overall undergraduate enrollment was declining. From fall 2010 to fall 2021, “total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting institutions decreased by 15 percent (from 18.1 million to 15.4 million students),” (Irwin, et al., 2023, p. 2).

Given the projected enrollment drop after 2025, innovative strategies are needed to sustain HBCUs. Engagement with African nations presents a timely opportunity.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explored the potential for HBCUs to engage with Africa as a strategy for sustaining their institutions. Drawing from Graves’s award-winning dissertation study (under the dissertation advisement of Moffett), the selected research questions for this iteration of the study examined the perspectives of HBCU senior-level leaders on pathways to sustainability and their level of commitment to internationalization with Africa at the time of the data collection.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature review summarizes key selected research on three relevant areas: (1) the development of HBCUs and their enduring significance in providing educational opportunities for African Americans; (2) the historic role of religious organizations in connecting black institutions to Africa; and (3) the advocacy for HBCU-Africa engagement by historic university presidents and early Black education leaders. This foundation sets the stage for discussing current opportunities and strategies to sustain HBCUs through enhanced collaboration with African nations.

Theme 1: The Historical Development of HBCUs, Selected Legislation, and Their Enduring Significance

HBCUs were historically founded to provide higher education access for African Americans, with most of them founded after the Civil War. Today, over one hundred accredited HBCUs remain (inclusive of 2-year and 4-year institutions), though black schools once numbered around 800 in the 19th century (Lovett, 2015). Early schools for African Americans emerged through black grit and determination, white philanthropic societies, the Freedmen's Bureau, and black and white religious organizations (Anderson, 1988).

Key legislation in HBCU history includes the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1890, establishing black land-grant colleges, and the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case, which cemented legal segregation, making black institutions the largely exclusive option for Black students pre-Brown v. Board in 1954 (C.L. Jackson & Nunn, 2003; Roebuck & Murty, 1993). While the Brown decision expanded choices for Black students, it contributed to a "brain drain" from HBCUs (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Recent federal initiatives through presidential executive orders and Congressional acts have aimed to strengthen HBCUs. Jimmy Carter was the first president to issue an executive order on strengthening HBCUs (Historical Overview, n.d.).

Advocates herald HBCUs as vital incubators where Black students can thrive culturally and academically while nurturing deep confidence and purpose (Favors, 2020). Thereto, others contend their significance may be declining due to wider options for Black students (Vedder, 2019). HBCU advocacy organizations like the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), the Thurgood Marshall College

Fund (TMCF), the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), and the Higher Education Leadership Foundation (HELF) advocate for the sustainability and relevance of HBCUs. In 2014, HBCUs “accounted for 17 percent of the bachelor’s degrees earned by African Americans and 24 percent of the degrees earned by African Americans in ‘STEM’ fields: science, technology, engineering, and math” (Humphreys, 2017. p.3). Williams & Palmer (2019) report that HBCU enrollment and applications increased, anecdotally tied to the “political climate under the Trump administration” and race-based challenges at predominantly white institutions. More recently, the U.S. Supreme Court’s striking down of affirmative action may have an unanticipated impact on HBCU admissions, driving interest among underrepresented students seeking inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Quantitatively, HBCUs have an economic impact of $14.8 billion annually and enable $130 billion in lifetime earnings on graduates, demonstrating their value (Humphreys, 2017). Overall, while facing ongoing trials, HBCUs remain essential to providing educational opportunities and advancing social mobility for Black communities.

Theme 2: Missionary Ties: The Historic Role of Religious Organizations in Connecting HBCUs with Africa

From their earliest days, HBCUs demonstrated international dimensions through their religious affiliations with Black and White denominations. As Blyden (2019) notes, African Americans found "a path to connecting with Africa through missionary, humanitarian, and philanthropic work" (p. 114). Driven by the Great Commission, organizations like the Freedmen’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Home Mission Society, the Board of Missions for the Freedmen of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, the National Baptist Convention, the A.M.E. Church, the A.M.E.Z. Church, and the C.M.E. Church positioned black institutions as breeding grounds for missionaries. These mission activities positioned Black colleges as transnational institutions (Anderson, 1988; Campbell, 1995; Dworkin, 2017; Martin, 1989).

This missions-based outreach also facilitated a pipeline of African students to HBCUs. Campbell’s (1995) seminal work on the A.M.E. Church in South Africa highlighted the transformative role of America’s oldest Black church as a transatlantic institution that prioritized Africa from the beginning and simultaneously positioned institutions like Wilberforce as welcoming destinations for African students. Likewise, the National Baptist Convention sponsored African students to various Black colleges and matched them with adoptive mentors (National Baptist Convention, 1899). For example, two young female African students were “put in charge of Miss [Nannie Helen] Burroughs” who was serving as Corresponding Secretary of “women’s work” in 1899 (p. 140). Also, Prof. Byrd Pillerman, president of West Virginia Institute, adopted a young African student until he completed his studies.

Among the earliest HBCUs engaging Africa, Lincoln University's founding mission was to train "colored" ministers and teachers for work in Africa and America (Duffield, 1978). Lincoln enrolled the first groups of African students in 1873 (Brooks & Starks, 2011). Spelman College also had a strong early presence in Africa through its alumnae establishing schools and missions, often supported by groups like the Women’s Baptist Foreign Mission Society (Read, 1961; Collier-Thomas, 2010).

In summary, missionary affiliations drove early HBCU connections with Africa and positioned these institutions as welcoming destinations for African students, laying foundations for future engagement.

Theme 3: Selected Historic African American Leaders and Africa

During the late 19th and 20th centuries, Black college presidents and institutional leaders were actively engaged in international development projects, with a particular focus on Africa. These leaders extolled Africa as their ancestral home and sought to strengthen connections with the continent.

Booker T. Washington - President of Tuskegee University, 1881-1915. Washington's work extended beyond Tuskegee, aiming to export the Tuskegee educational model to Africa. His approach included hosting African students at Tuskegee, sending American Tuskegee graduates abroad to implement agricultural and industrial methods, and introducing variations of the industrial model in Africa through African nationals (Wright, 2015). The first documented African student arrived at Tuskegee from the Dahomey Empire in 1896.

Nannie Helen Burroughs - Founder/Principal of the National Training School for Women and Girls, 1909-1961. Burroughs played a pivotal role in educating Black women and girls, with an emphasis on Black history and fostering global connections. Her school accepted international students and had a profound influence on Africa through its alumnae, some of whom became missionaries and replicated her educational model on the continent (Graves, 2019).

Rembert Stokes - President of Wilberforce University, 1956-1976. Historically, Wilberforce thrived as a priority destination point and training ground for generations of African students. In keeping with this tradition, Stokes increased the institution's reach to Africa. During his tenure, recruitment strategies drew students not only from the U.S., but also internationally, and particularly from Africa. African countries from which Black international students were recruited included: Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, Liberia, Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Tanganyika (Tanzania). International students were also recruited from the broader African Atlantic Diaspora in the Caribbean. These countries included Bermuda, British Guiana (on the mainland of South America), Trinidad, and Jamaica. Under his leadership enrollment to the institution increased exponentially (Omolewu, 2000, 2009).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for this study are:

1. What do HBCU senior-level leaders perceive as pathways to institutional sustainability?
2. To what extent does a leadership commitment to internationalization with Africa exist among HBCU senior-level leaders?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to make an important contribution to the literature on HBCUs by exploring the potential for greater engagement with Africa. The findings may shed light on pathways for HBCUs to enhance sustainability and reinvigorate their historic missions in the 21st century context through expanded internationalization with Africa. By summarizing current scholarship on the historic connections between HBCUs and Africa, as well as illuminating perspectives from contemporary HBCU senior-level leaders, this research aimed to provide a foundation for future initiatives to build stronger institutional relationships. Given the financial and demographic challenges facing many HBCUs, this study presents a timely analysis of how strategic international partnerships—especially given the growing demand for higher education in Africa—can open new opportunities for student recruitment, faculty exchanges, innovative program development, and diversified funding sources. The study also aimed to give voice to selected HBCU senior-level leaders regarding their views on engagement with Africa, providing insight to inform outreach efforts by partners on the continent. Overall, this study makes a case for why strengthening HBCU-Africa ties represents a promising opportunity with mutual benefits, allowing HBCUs to sustain their noble legacies while contributing to development priorities across Africa.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a mixed methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data to explore perspectives on HBCU-Africa engagement among HBCU senior-level leaders. This mixed methods approach was coined as AutoHBCUologyTM. The term, coined by Dr. Noran L. Moffett, speaks to an in vivo culturalogical design that is culturally rooted and social-justice oriented. It focuses on telling the story of the race specifically germane to the HBCU higher education context from the perspective of the people with that live(d) experience. It intends to name an empirical research brand that authentically examines HBCU phenomena. It is the interpretation of the HBCU world using the premises provided by that particular cultural context as offered by those who reside in the experience, thus making the investigations culturally relevant to the actual lives of the people and the institutions.

Participants

The participants for this study were senior-level HBCU leaders (specifically presidents, provosts, and board leaders) from 4-year public and 4-year private HBCUs.

Data Collection and Analysis

A questionnaire was developed and administered to measure HBCU leaders' perspectives, priorities, and prospective actions related to HBCU sustainability and internationalization with Africa. The instrument used to collect the data reported in this article was the **HBCU Sustainability Survey for Institutional Leaders™**. The instrument included Likert-scale questions about leadership intentionality, actions, and engagement and networking priorities. The survey also included open-ended qualitative questions from which the qualitative data reported in this iteration of the study were derived. Validity and reliability were established for this instrument. Face validity was obtained, and the instrument's reliability was tested using Cronbach's coefficient alpha, a measure of internal scale consistency. In this study, the survey measured affective constructs. The alpha test was run to measure the overall consistency of the instrument, which included approximately 42 items. The researchers were looking for an alpha greater than 0.600. Alpha scores in the range of 0.600-0.800 are considered reliable. Alpha scores in the range of 0.800-1.00 are considered highly or very reliable (Ahdika, 2017). The instrument had a high reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.969$).

Table 1.

Cronbach Alpha Results for Survey Instrument

	Number of items	α
Survey Items	42	0.969

The quantitative data were analyzed statistically in SPSS. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to generate insights about sustainability opportunities, challenges, and strategies. Key findings from the quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated to develop a comprehensive synthesis of how HBCU institutional leaders view engagement with Africa.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1 explored the perspectives of HBCU senior-level leaders on pathways to institutional sustainability.

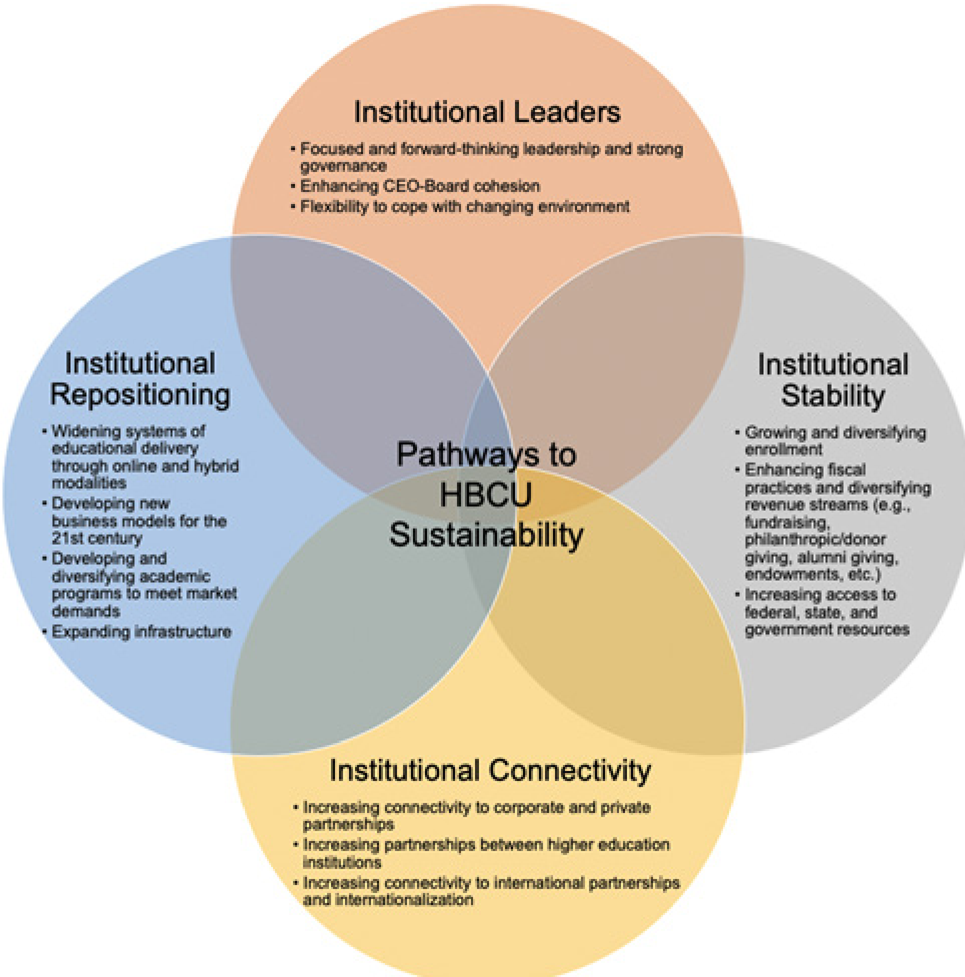
As shown in Figure 1, four key target areas emerged as pathways to sustainability for HBCUs based on participant responses.

1. Institutional leadership - Specifically, focused and forward-thinking leadership, and strong governance; enhancing alignment between the CEO and Board; flexibility to adapt to a changing environment.
2. Institutional stability - Growing and diversifying enrollment; improving fiscal practices and revenue diversification through fundraising, philanthropy, alumni giving, endowments, etc.; increasing access to federal, state, and government resources.
3. Institutional connectivity - Increasing partnerships with corporations and private entities; forging more partnerships between higher education institutions; building international partnerships and enhancing internationalization.
4. Institutional repositioning - Expanding educational delivery through online and hybrid modalities; developing new business models suited for the 21st century; diversifying academic programs to meet market demands; expanding infrastructure.

Only one respondent specifically listed in their written qualitative response internationalization with Africa through institutional partnerships and student recruitment specifically as a pathway to sustainability.

Figure 1.

Selected HBCU Senior-Level Leaders Perspectives on Pathways to Sustainability



Research Question 2 explored the extent to which leadership commitment to internationalization with Africa existed among HBCU senior-level leaders at the time of the study. Leadership commitment was operationalized to mean a leader's current beliefs/attitudes and future behaviors/actions.

As shown in Figure 2, four factors emerged through exploring leadership commitment to internationalization with Africa. The following factors will be discussed based upon the respondents who completed the instrument: (a) professional high-level engagement; (b) adding language to macro-level mission, vision, and strategy; (c) administrative priorities for planning and fiscal resource allocation; and, (d) educational exchange-related and student-related activities.

(a) Professional high-level engagement

Approximately 91.7% of respondents indicated that they were either "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to attend and/or participate in a conference or event that brings together HBCU senior-level leaders and Ministries of education, higher education institutions, agencies, and/or policymakers in Africa. Approximately 91.5% of respondents indicated that they were either "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to engage in discussions with Ministries of Education, higher education institutions, agencies, and/or policymakers in Africa. Approximately 91.7% of respondents indicated that they were either "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to invite to their campus or engage in a virtual meeting with Ministries of Education, higher education institutions, agencies, and/or policymakers in Africa.

(b) Adding language to macro-level mission, vision, and strategy

While 54.9% of survey respondents indicated that they believed internationalization with Africa was important to the sustainability of their institution, most survey respondents indicated that they did not believe that incorporating an explicitly articulated commitment to internationalization with Africa in the mission statement or vision statement was important to the sustainability of their institution. Approximately 49% indicated that they believed incorporating strategies in the strategic plan to pursue and/or maintain internationalization with Africa was important to the sustainability of their institution.

(c) Administrative priorities for planning and fiscal resource allocation;

Approximately 56.9% of survey respondents indicated that allocating fiscal resources to support internationalization with Africa was not an administrative priority. These statistics comports with qualitative information obtained from the open-ended survey items wherein financial stability was identified as a primary sustainability priority among HBCU senior-level leaders. Approximately 72% of respondents indicated that recruiting students from Africa was either "somewhat of a priority" or a "high priority."

(d) Educational exchange-related and student-related activities.

Approximately 93.6% of respondents indicated that they were "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to encourage educational exchange among faculty/staff and administration with Ministries of Education, higher education institutions, agencies, and/or policymakers in Africa. Approximately 95.8% of respondents indicated that they were either "somewhat" or "very likely" to encourage students from the HBCU at which they served to study abroad in Africa.

Figure 2. *Factors related to selected HBCU senior-level leaders commitment to internationalization with Africa*

DISCUSSION

The findings shed light on the multifaceted landscape of sustainability pathways and leadership commitment to internationalization with Africa among respondents. The emphasis on institutional leadership, stability, connectivity, and repositioning as pathways to sustainability underscores the multifaceted approach required to ensure the long-term viability of HBCUs in an ever-evolving educational landscape. It is noteworthy that while internationalization is recognized as a strategy for sustainability, specific mention of internationalization with Africa appeared to be limited in the written qualitative responses of survey respondents, indicating potential room for increased awareness-building and prioritization of such initiatives among HBCU leaders.

The examination of leadership commitment to internationalization with Africa reveals a strong inclination toward professional high-level engagement, particularly through conferences and discussions with African Ministries of Education, higher education institutions, and other stakeholders. The significance of this finding may suggest a genuine interest among respondents in fostering partnerships and collaborations with Africa. This commitment to professional high-level engagement can serve as a strong foundation for the advancement of internationalization initiatives between HBCUs and African nations and institutions, potentially leading to mutually beneficial outcomes and the realization of shared goals. This finding also strongly suggests that opportunities need to be intentionally created to harness the high level of enthusiasm and willingness demonstrated by respondents for professional high-level engagement with African counterparts. The data show a clear appetite for collaboration, dialogue, and partnership, but it also highlights the need for proactive steps to translate this willingness into tangible actions and outcomes.

As a brand strategy, the incorporation of language into the institutional mission and vision statements that highlighted internationalization with Africa specifically did not appear to be widely important among respondents. This finding reveals an interesting discrepancy in the perspectives of survey respondents. On the one hand, more than half of respondents acknowledged the significance of internationalization with Africa in contributing to their institution's sustainability, indicating a general awareness of its potential benefits. However, the majority of respondents did not see the need for explicitly articulating a commitment to internationalization with Africa in their institution's mission or vision statements. This suggests that while respondents recognize the importance of internationalization with Africa, they may not view it as a central aspect of the institution's overall brand identity. This variance between intellectually recognizing the importance of Africa and formally articulating linguistic commitment to Africa in the institution's brand headline (i.e., the mission and vision statement) may reflect varying institutional priorities. One possible explanation for why respondents may not explicitly include "Africa" in their mission and vision statements when considering internationalization efforts is the desire to maintain a broadly inclusive and globally oriented approach. While the survey revealed that more than half of the respondents recognized the importance of internationalization with Africa, the results suggest that the institutional leaders who responded to this survey may strive for a broader and more inclusive international outlook in their headline branding. In other words, by specifying the region of Africa specifically in the mission and vision statements, there may be a concern that institutions could inadvertently send a message that their focus is limited to a particular region, potentially excluding opportunities for collaboration and engagement with other parts of the world. Universities generally aspire to be seen as open to partnerships and collaborations with countries and regions around the globe, and there may be a concern about appearing too regionally focused.

At the strategic planning level, the findings highlight that just less than half (or approximately 49%) of respondents did believe that incorporating strategies specifically related to internationalization with Africa in their strategic plans was important for institutional sustainability. This implies that respondents may see the value in integrating concrete plans and initiatives into their long-term strategies to ensure the successful pursuit and maintenance of internationalization efforts with Africa. Understanding these variations in perception may aid institutions in developing effective strategies for internationalization with Africa, aligning their actions with the overarching goal of global engagement that many universities may aspire to achieve.

Moreover, allocating fiscal resources toward internationalization with Africa did not appear to be a high priority for more than half of the respondents. This outcome suggests that, within the surveyed group, there might be competing priorities or budgetary constraints that have led to internationalization with Africa not being the foremost concern in the institutional budget. It is important to note that this lower prioritization in terms of fiscal resources may not necessarily imply a lack of interest in internationalization with Africa, but rather it suggests a recognition that other immediate needs or objectives may be taking precedence in the allocation of fiscal resources, especially in view of the historic underfunding of HBCUs to the sum of billions of dollars. Understanding the reasons behind this lower fiscal prioritization can offer valuable insights for HBCUs seeking to promote internationalization efforts with Africa and help them address potential barriers or challenges. Nevertheless, the commitment to promoting student-related activities, and encouraging faculty, staff, and students to engage in educational exchanges, signifies a proactive stance toward fostering international experiences with Africa.

In conclusion, these findings as an aggregate underscore the dynamic and evolving nature of HBCUs' strategies for sustainability and their commitment to internationalization with Africa. As HBCUs navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, a nuanced and comprehensive approach to leadership commitment, strategy alignment, and resource allocation will be crucial to realizing the potential benefits of internationalization with Africa and ensuring the long-term sustainability of both HBCUs and African nations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

Enhanced engagement between HBCUs and Africa should be founded on mutual benefit, not approached as a one-sided sustainability strategy. There is tremendous potential for two-way exchanges that allow both HBCU institutions and African nations to learn from each other, build capacity, and work collaboratively to uplift underserved populations. A spirit of true partnership, rather than paternalistic one-way aid, should shape collaborations. HBCUs and African nations and institutions can leverage their complementary strengths while upholding shared commitments to inclusive, relevant education.

The findings from this study point to several important implications for HBCUs and other stakeholders to consider regarding educational planning:

1. HBCU leaders may consider prioritizing strategic enrollment management plans to diversify their student portfolio, including fostering intentional recruitment pipelines in Africa. This necessitates allocation of institutional resources and staffing capacity devoted to international recruitment and enrollment.
2. HBCUs may consider pursuing partnerships with African universities and governments to enable bilateral exchanges, collaborative degree programs, shared research projects, and other mutually beneficial activities. This requires dedicated personnel and infrastructure.
3. Policymakers and funders should support initiatives that foster HBCU linkages with Africa through providing targeted grants, exchange fellowships, and funding streams that incentivize these partnerships.

4. HBCU leaders may advocate for inclusion of Africa engagement in their institutional strategic plans and overall brand strategy to signal high-level commitment to prospective partners on the continent. But rhetoric must be matched with resource allocation.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminated perspectives from select institutional leaders on engagement between HBCUs and Africa. The findings point to interest in enhanced collaborations among respondents, but also barriers like resource constraints. Key opportunities include student and faculty exchanges, joint research, and strategic partnerships to bolster HBCUs' sustainability while contributing expertise to Africa's higher education capacity needs and development priorities. Realizing this potential will require dedicated financial resources, administrative buy-in, and planning guided by the values of equality, justice, and reciprocity. With concerted effort on both sides, there is much promise for HBCUs and African nations to collaborate innovatively along shared missions of inclusive, relevant education. This begins with a paradigm shift to approach partnerships as mutual cross-cultural learning, rather than one-way aid. By coming together, HBCUs and African nations have much to gain - both furthering symbiotic sustainability and leaving a meaningful legacy for future generations.

On a macro level, the inauguration of the President's Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement in the United States (PAC-ADE) (announced by Vice President Kamala Harris on behalf of the Biden-Harris administration during the 2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in D.C.) demonstrates renewed attention to strengthening linkages between the United States and peoples of African descent worldwide. As this study showed, there is a long legacy of engagement between HBCUs and Africa that can be revitalized and expanded. The Council presents opportunities for industry leaders to advise the administration on policies that support institutional partnerships, student and faculty exchanges, and other collaborations with African nations. With representation from leaders across industries, the Council could also help fundraise and marshal resources from public and private sectors to catalyze HBCU-Africa ties. Overall, by shining a spotlight and providing high-level coordination, the Advisory Council has potential to take HBCU-Africa relations to new heights, unleashing untapped possibilities for mutual learning and advancement. This continues the historic quest for shared excellence and shared value. This study is offered to catalyze a transformative journey toward the realization of grand possibilities between HBCUs and Africa.

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DESCRIPTION OF AN APPROACH FOR ANALYZING EXTERNAL PROGRAM REVIEWS TO INFORM EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

Post-secondary institutions are required to complete a variety of quality assurance activities including external program review, a process of inviting external reviewers from outside the institution to provide constructive feedback on all aspects of an academic program. While external program reviews have been completed for decades, there has been little work to ensure that meaningful change occurs as a result. Assessment of outcomes at the department level are limited and research specifically considering external academic program review as a primary quality assurance activity is scant. Each of these limitations is even more significant when considered at the institutional level. From our experience, there is minimal consideration in research or practice to ensure that external review recommendations have an impact on educational planning at the institutional level. To help address this concern, in this paper we describe an approach involving secondary research and thematic document analysis that can be leveraged to enhance institutional decision-making processes by uncovering institutional themes evident across external reviews. We suggest that our approach may be helpful for other higher education institutions striving to make sense of program review recommendations from an institutional perspective.

INTRODUCTION

External program review, sometimes referred to as curricular review, is a requirement of publicly funded higher education institutions, programmatic regulatory bodies, and regional accreditors in North America. Program review is a "critical, evidence-based examination of an academic program (and/or department) for the purpose of optimizing student learning and student experience" (DiPietro et al., 2022). Yet, scholars have noted a disconnect between program review findings, strategic planning (Conrad & Wilson, 1985; Coombs, 2017), and academic development (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001; Harvey, 2022; Lucander & Christersson, 2020). As Lemoine and Richardson (2020) noted, higher education institutions are in a state characterized by chaos and confusion regarding institutional goals and competing priorities have led to fragmented planning efforts and resource allocation; therefore, they argued, "higher education institutions need to seize this opportunity to strengthen their evidence-based practices, including planning" (p. 51). This is particularly important, they predicted, as stakeholders are increasingly calling for institutional flexibility, innovation, and responsiveness, which could inevitably lead to reduced quality assurance activities.

Current and Historic Practices in the Sector

External academic program review at the department level is a resource intensive process that requires substantial commitment in terms of both human and financial resources, from the requesting institution and from the external reviewers who temporarily vacate their academic obligations at their home institutions to participate in program review as a service activity. Unfortunately, despite the substantial cost and energy required to complete academic program review, these reviews are often perceived as having limited impact, especially with respect to outcomes experienced at the institutional level. While some scholars have penned recommendations for improving the effect of reviews and assessment at the department level, it appears the conversation has failed to reach the institutional level. Consequently, although external program reviews provide significant, high quality, and meaningful data for the institution, they are seldom accessed as a source of information to inform educational planning. Instead of accessing this readily available existing data, higher education institutions regularly design new data collection mechanisms intended to inform educational planning, which is a significant, and unnecessary, drain on institutional resources.

The lack of impact for external program review at the institutional level has made little progress, despite having been discussed as a potential source of strong institutional data many decades ago (Mets, 1995). There is ample literature on program evaluation and quality assurance, yet there is minimal literature on external academic program review, and scant documentation of the innovations occurring in this space. Where literature does exist, it is predominantly opinion-based, conceptual models, or process papers with a strong emphasis on collaborative, participatory approaches to program review (e.g., Groen, 2017; Hoare et al., 2022) or literature reviews (e.g., McGowan, 2019). Notably, there is an abundance of gray literature within this space as higher education institutions and quality assurance practitioners reflect on and share best practices to support faculty and academic chairs with what can often seem like a mysterious, cumbersome, and convoluted process.

Some scholars have conducted meta-reviews to evaluate the effectiveness of their program review processes through single case studies (e.g., Harlan, 2012; Lock et al., 2018; Scheuer Senter et. Al., 2021). However, the landscape is sparse in terms of the availability of methodology papers introducing research methods for analyzing program review findings or research articles evidencing the ability of program review to inform educational planning and impact resource allocation. Jayachandran et al. (2019) attempted to address this gap by identifying practical measures for program reviews that could be used for institutional decision-making processes; however, they experienced challenges with their proposed measures and reliability of the available data. Similarly, Early et al. (2000) proposed a theoretical evaluation framework based on principles of performance measurement and a matrix of measures and effectiveness and efficiency ratios; however, their framework was designed for evaluating continuing education programs, which are primarily focused on revenue generation. Bresciani (2010) advocated for institutions to systematically and strategically gather learning outcomes assessment data to inform educational planning. Bresciani Ludvik (2019) proposed a process for embedding learning outcomes assessment into program review. However, this research evidence does not elaborate on the use of this data to inform educational planning nor its impact on resource allocation.

Barriers to Leveraging Program Level Data for Educational Planning

The observed lack of research and practical impact for program review begs the question as to what factors are preventing the understanding and implementation of external review recommendations at both the department and institutional level. We suggest that there are several potential reasons why this lack of impact may continue to persist, including level of recommendation and ability to influence the outcome (i.e., whether the recommendation is within the control of departmental faculty), presumed value, as well as lack of described approaches to make the most use of the data. Specifically, while many external review recommendations are within departmental control and can be implemented through active effort at the department level, recommendations commonly refer to changes that require leadership decisions far beyond the control of the particular department under review (e.g., Dean, Provost, President). Consequently, faculty are frustrated when they are advised to make changes in areas over which they have limited or no control. Additionally, trust can be lost if significant institutional shifts proposed by reviewers receive little consideration for action by senior administration because they are presumed to be a review primarily for the value of the department, rather than the whole institution. Similarly, senior administrators may have few tools to understand the full impact of program reviews across the institution and are thus unable to use this ample source of institutional data in a meaningful way.

Proposed Solution for Linking Program Reviews and Educational Planning

While completing a sort of meta-analysis of external reviews to provide institutional data from individual program reviews seemed cognitively intuitive for increasing institutional value and impact of program reviews, we were unable to find any previous articles (beyond Met, 1995) that provided support or advice for this type of approach. As a result of our failed attempts to find an approach described in the literature, we sought to design a method that served our purposes, while being transferable to other higher education institutions. In this paper, we outline steps that one could follow to make sense of program review data for meaningful consumption at the institutional level. Our goal in outlining an approach is to increase uptake and impact for program review as a means of informing educational planning and resource allocation. In this paper, we do not intend to provide specifics of our institutional data; rather, we detail methods that one can follow to increase institutional impact related to program review that could be adapted and applied in other higher education contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The approach that we describe in this paper can be used to create a report with accessible and actionable recommendations for leaders, faculty, and practitioners within higher education institutions. We argue that a pragmatic approach which combines the precision of quantitative methods and the descriptive richness of qualitative thematic analysis can be used to elevate the findings from program reviews to support educational planning. To achieve this end, "qualitative pragmatism" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 335), which has been applied in social policy research, was viewed as an appropriate framework. At the heart of this theoretical framework is a philosophy of *action*, in fact, as Biesta and Burble (2013) noted, "a philosophy that takes action as its *most basic* category" (p. 9). From a qualitative pragmatic viewpoint, social inquiry and team-based approaches to analyzing, interrogating, discerning, and collectively making sense of the data are prioritized. From a qualitative frame, the researchers and their theoretical and experiential knowledge are an integral part of the process; the researchers' subjectivity is valued as an "analytic resource" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 330).

When considering research in the context of program review and higher education institutions more broadly, we do not claim that this type of analysis is value-free but rather it is informed by the researchers' own experience as members of the university community. Furthermore, the external reviewers bring with them their own experiences and biases to each program review, which is influenced by the broader social discourse and the dominant assumptions of their discipline. Therefore, the resulting recommendations and commendations produced by the external reviewers are not void of subjectivity, nor are the recommendations that can result from the approach we describe in this paper to inform educational planning. Therefore, when engaging in an analysis and interpretation of program review findings, we suggest that the approach incorporate contextual factors and engage multiple researchers in collaborative sense-making.

AN APPROACH FOR ANALYZING EXTERNAL PROGRAM REVIEWS

Our institution recently revised its program review process to incorporate more team-based approaches and opportunities for faculty learning and development. The new process for program review follows a cohort model based on principles of an academic program review learning community (Hoare et al., 2022) and is embedded within the reliable infrastructure of a program review course (Hoare et al., 2024). Since adopting this revised model for program review, we have seen significant improvement both in the quality and quantity of external program reviews completed annually. Given the quantity of reviews, we saw significant potential in mining this readily available, high-quality data for the purpose of understanding and setting institutional priorities. In reviewing program review data holistically by compiling and combining external reviewer reports from departments across the institution, one could see if patterns surfaced, regardless of discipline, that could inform institutional change. In this sense, each program review is treated as a study participant for analysis.

Given the focus at the institutional level (as opposed to the program level), the approach we describe aims to identify terms, concepts, and themes which occur frequently across the external program review reports. The suggested approach aims to identify *what* reviewers were talking about and *how often* reviewers spoke about a concept. One can mine the data to determine how often external reviewers referenced concepts (i.e., Did a theme appear anywhere in each of the external reviews?) using quantitative methods of weighted counts, rankings, and disciplinary representation. One can also identify areas of high-risk and high need by paying attention to intriguing or alarming concepts that surface regardless of how often reviewers mention a topic. By applying an adapted version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis, one can home in on the "keyness of a theme" (p. 82). We argue that the importance of a theme is not always quantifiable (i.e., the number of times a term appears in the dataset), but rather whether it captures something important in relation to the research questions.

We suggest that others consider applying a hybrid deductive/inductive approach using thematic analysis, which has been identified as offering significant opportunities for researchers (Proudfoot, 2023) and is commonly applied across multiple disciplines, particularly in educational research (Nowell et al., 2017). If an institution uses a standardized template for external reviewer reports with pre-determined categories, one could apply a deductive framework. For example, at our institution, our external reviewer report template is based on four categories: 1) curriculum and assurance of learning, 2) student achievement, 3) governance and resources, and 4) planning and sustainability. The development of these four categories was informed by best practices identified in the literature (e.g., Bresciani Ludvik, 2019; Dickeson, 2010; Massy, 2003), as well as concepts relevant to the local context. Then, we recommend following an inductive approach through the generation of themes from the external reviewers' recommendations and commendations.

Data Source

We suggest that each program review be treated as a study participant for quantitative and qualitative analysis. We also recommend establishing a timeframe for inclusion of reports (i.e., reviews completed in the past three years; reviews completed after the introduction of a new strategic plan). Additionally, we advise that a breadth of disciplines and credential-types be included in the analysis (i.e., certificates to graduate degrees, vocational and trades, to professional and academic programs). At our institution, external reviews are conducted by a combination of external disciplinary and industry experts, with a minimum of three reviewers for each degree program and two reviewers for each non-degree program. External reviewers receive a report template to guide their evaluation of the program and their recommendations and commendations are based on a two-day site visit and program self-study report. Thus, the external reviewer reports are based on an extensive portfolio of indicators and diverse data sets.

To discover key institutional insights, we encourage others to focus specifically on the reviewers' recommendations and commendations. At our institution, this information is made available via public Senate documents as part of requirements for our internal process, as well as provincial expectations within Canada. We suggest that using publicly available information will reduce the burden of conducting this type of analysis as data are easily accessible.

Steps for Analyzing Program Review Data

If your institution uses a standardized template, then our suggested approach begins with a preliminary analysis of the data based on the conceptual categories used in the sections of the external reviewer report template (e.g., Curriculum and Assurance of Learning) followed by inductive coding to capture insights from the narratives. This deductive approach will facilitate the organization of the data and resultant themes by conceptual category. Once the data have been organized into broad categories, we recommend following an inductive approach to identify themes through multiple phases of analysis that result in institutional recommendations and actionable steps to improve educational programming (Table 1).

Table 1 *Phases of Analyses*

Phase of Analysis
1. Familiarization
2. Determination of appropriate method of analysis given the available data
3. Collaborative coding
4. Identification of themes
5. Weighted counts, rankings, and representation
6. Descriptive analysis and recommendations
7. Production of the report

1. Familiarization. To ease the process of familiarization, we recommend using qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) and uploading publicly available information from the program review external reviewer reports. During this phase, we encourage you to engage multiple people (two or three analysts) with a broad view of the institution, including faculty members, as a range of theoretical and experiential knowledge is viewed as an asset. During this phase, analysts should independently read and re-read the external reviewer recommendations and commendations and note initial thoughts, terms, and concepts. Once each person has individually reviewed the reports, meet to discuss initial thoughts and interpretations of the data. At this point, we anticipate that considerable debate and discussion will occur regarding the meaning of phrases and we encourage you to lean into these difficult conversations as peer debriefing can improve the quality of the interpretation of the data. Familiarization with the data is seen as one of the most pivotal and time-consuming phases of thematic analysis; however, as Braun and Clarke (2006) asserted, "this phase provides the bedrock for the rest of the analysis" (p. 87). Therefore, we encourage others to invest the time to carefully read and re-read the data before coding.

2. Determination of Method. Once you have familiarized yourself with the data, we encourage you to reflect deeply on the appropriate method for understanding the data based on your institutional context, methodological expertise, and available resources as engaging in this kind of analysis can be time-consuming. Given our institutional context and research backgrounds, we agreed that a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was important to understand how often external reviewers were talking about a particular theme and to tell the overall story relevant to the local context. Decisions made in research based on qualitative pragmatism are not standardized; therefore, please take great care in describing and documenting your rationale for your selected analytic strategies by taking detailed memos throughout the process. Pragmatists are focused on the goals and potential impact of the project, so describing the *why* is just as important as describing the how.

Combining both quantitative and qualitative methods can illuminate useful points of connection between the data. Using the "big picture" (i.e., rankings and disciplinary representation) from the quantitative information and complementing it with the qualitative descriptions can better position you to identify actionable recommendations regarding your institution's strengths, opportunities, and areas of risk or high need. Finally, when thinking about the preferred approach, we suggest that it might be helpful, and more manageable, to conduct the analysis one broad category at a time.

3. Collaborative Coding. To facilitate ranking of the themes, which can be used as one avenue to identify potential institutional strengths and areas for improvement, we suggest coding in which the unit of analysis is an individual sentence weighted by the number of sentences provided by the respective external review team. Analysts should make adjustments in cases where a single idea in a sentence cannot be coded due to obvious grammatical error and, where appropriate, apply a typical sentence structure. For example, "This may make the planning and scheduling difficult. But it is doable" should be interpreted as one sentence. Additionally, consider making adjustments where two distinct concepts in a sentence are given equal weight yet do not fit within the same code. For example, "<u>Standardize course evaluation</u> and <u>approaches to academic dishonesty</u> for each course" (underline added) could be coded as "assessment" and "academic integrity". Our suggested approach involves coding that is mutually exclusive and exhaustive, where the analysts search for the primary idea/concept within a single sentence and only allow a sentence to be assigned to one code. If applying a deductive framework, we caution against creating codes that mirror the categories in the External Reviewer Report template (e.g., Curriculum and Assurance of Learning).

Based on our experience, we advise that at least two coders collaborate to ensure quality of coding. A highly collaborative coding process where analysts continually discuss and work towards consensus can increase the quality of the results. In determining the codes, we encourage analysts to use their prior experience to aid in articulating and defining complex constructs in accessible terms that can be translated into actionable recommendations. Discussion and learning from one another is a significant contribution to the analysis. While we advocate for others to code primarily collaboratively, we suggest that frequent individual coding and subsequent negotiation, calibration, and consensus-building can prevent potential dominant voice or drift. Analysts can conduct a coding comparison query using Nvivo (or other qualitative software) and should aim to achieve a Cohen's Kappa index of agreement of 0.8. Reviewing by Kappa can contribute to collective sense-making as discrepancies and misalignment between coders will inform your conversations.

We suggest that the coding begin by focusing on the external reviewer recommendations under one category (e.g., Curriculum and Assurance of Learning). We recommend that analysts collectively develop a list of codes for a specific set of recommendations (i.e., five sets of program reviews), then separately code one set of recommendations using the list of codes, followed by a reliability coding comparison. Then, discuss discrepancies, calibrate responses, and update the source file based on agreement of codes. This process of collective and individual coding with reliability comparisons should be completed until all sets of program reviews have been coded. Throughout this process, we anticipate that the list of codes will frequently be refined, for example, codes with a large volume of sentences may be parsed into more specific codes, where appropriate. It is important that you take detailed memos to document the decision-making process throughout this phase.

Based on our experience, we suggest that the recommendations and commendations be analyzed separately rather than being combined into one analysis given that the intent is to identify areas of institutional strength and opportunities for improvement. The natural separation of recommendations and commendations in the external reviewer reports will facilitate the ability to use the data to improve institutional impact. However, it should be noted that, in some instances, reviewers may hide within a commendation a pseudo-recommendation. For example, the following quote from one set of reviewers demonstrates a common tendency to weave recommendations into commendations: "We do temper this commendation with the caution that generosity of this sort if it extends past normal working hours can lead to expectations that create a burden on people who are not in a position to be so generous with their time, particularly members of equity-deserving groups." Given this example, we suggest that during the descriptive analysis, it is important to note these types of inconsistencies to ensure that a sentence is contextualized within the larger body of text.

4. Identification of Themes. Once the recommendations and commendations have been coded, we suggest that one analyst conducts a sorting activity by reviewing the codes and corresponding sentences and collapsing or merging codes into potential themes, gathering all data that was relevant to each theme. For example, "service courses", "institutional learning outcomes, and "breadth" could be collapsed into one theme: Breadth. It is helpful to develop a visual data structure to depict this sorting activity process. Then, a second analyst should review the themes to ensure coherency, consistency, and distinctiveness of the themes.

5. Weighted Counts, Rankings, and Representation. To adjust for the different writing styles of the external reviewers and to facilitate ranking of themes, we suggest treating the data by applying weighted counts. This technique has been used in social science research (e.g., Beaumont & Wagner, 2004) to adjust for length of speech. This involves weighting all counts for each theme by number of sentences within the respective external reviewer report to accommodate for reviewers who are more long-winded in their responses and those who are more succinct. Weighting is the method of adjusting the number of sentences rather than treating them each equally. Weighting provides the ability to compare codes within programs (e.g., Physics to History) and to determine the degree of importance between codes (i.e., primary concepts). We see this as a necessary step given the variability between external reviewers' writing styles (i.e., long-winded versus succinct), where one team of reviewers may use a paragraph with several sentences to capture an idea resulting in multiple sentences attached to a single code, and another team may use a single sentence resulting in one sentence attached to one code.

Additionally, counts should be reviewed to determine which disciplines are represented in the theme. In other words, identify how often external reviewers mention a theme across the disciplines. Determining representation across disciplines is an important step for elevating program-level data to the institutional level and for identifying institutional priorities. Disciplinary representation and weighted counts also facilitate quantitative ranking, which reflects the number of times a particular theme is mentioned in the external reviewer statements. It is important to note that ranking merely reflects the number of times a theme is discussed and may not be a reflection of the importance of a theme, theoretically or to the institution; theoretical and practical importance to the institution should be seen as more complex than a count can represent on its own.

6. Descriptive Analysis and Recommendations. We suggest that the qualitative analysis begin by assigning two themes to each analyst who will individually read every statement under the theme, make notes about the overall story that they believe the analysis tells, identify relevant quotes, and draft recommendations for the university to action. Each theme should be framed within the context of the number of disciplines represented in the theme, for example: "Research was mentioned as a primary area of focus to improve curriculum and advance student learning by three teams of external reviewers." Then, we recommend that the analysts meet to share their interpretation of the results. Collectively, they will refine the overall story for each theme and finalize the recommendations through negotiation and consensus-making. Once complete, we encourage you to review each theme in the context of institutional strengths, areas for growth, and areas of high risk. This process of individually and collectively reviewing the themes, interpreting the results, and drafting recommendations should be repeated until all of the themes are debriefed and analyzed.

7. Producing the Report. The final phase involves writing the report and presenting the findings to the university community. Through the process of collaboratively writing the report, the two analysts will clarify the relationship between themes and recommendations. In practice, this includes the final analysis of the selected quotes, and connecting the analysis back to the research questions and literature. Attention should be given to rankings and representation. Specifically, recommendations resulting from themes with a greater representation of disciplines (i.e., >50%) may be given greater priority on the list of recommendations to senior leaders, if appropriate. Rankings and representation should also be considered in terms of identifying areas of high risk that require more immediate attention.

During this phase, the team of analysts should strive to write a report that is accessible to practitioners, keeping in mind the individuals and committees responsible for educational planning and resource allocation as the primary audience. We encourage you to prepare the results and recommendations as both a written document and a presentation so they can be more accessible to university committee members and senior administration.

DISCUSSION

As program review becomes increasingly recognized as an important quality assurance process in higher education (McGowan, 2019), it is imperative that the products of these efforts yield meaningful and useful results. To be accepted by academics as a valued activity that leads to evidence-based decision making, the methods of analysis of data gathered during reviews must be trusted and conducted in a precise and systematic manner that is replicable. Therefore, scholars and higher education leaders engaging in this work must carefully describe and document their analytic strategies by clearly creating a path for other researchers to follow. Although there are examples of how to conduct thematic analyses in the field of teaching and learning (e.g., Nowell et al., 2017), there is no step-by-step approach for conducting a thematic document analysis of an accumulation of external reviewer recommendations from an action-oriented frame to guide quality assurance practitioners and higher education leaders in educational planning pursuits. In this paper, we present an approach that is designed to fill this gap.

The suggested approach for analyzing an accumulation of external reviewer recommendations was strengthened by combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Our suggested approach is informed by our aspiration to identify strengths, opportunities, and areas of high risk at the university in terms of educational programming. The method we describe allows scholar practitioners to identify prominent themes through weighted counts, rankings, and representation where areas of high risk may surface in the data. The approach includes steps to explore interconnected concepts through qualitative descriptions.

This paper provides a valuable contribution to the literature by articulating a structured approach to thematic document analysis that has the potential to elevate program-level data to inform educational planning. A review of the literature highlighted several calls to meet this need (e.g., Conrad & Wilson, 1985; Coombs, 2017) and a handful of attempts (e.g., Jayachandran & Neufeldt, 2019; Mets, 1995); however, little documented progress has been made to use this data for the purposes other than for which it was collected. We hope that our method of aggregating the results of multiple program reviews can facilitate the practical use of program review findings and promote sustainable quality assurance practices.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

Higher education institutions engage in educational planning endeavors on regular cycles or when new leadership and societal changes require shifts in institutional priorities. Yet, the collegial structures and academic nature of these organizations naturally promote skepticism and resistance to these kinds of processes when they lack transparency and necessary academic rigor. As Rosenberg (2023) chastised, even when institutions face serious financial challenges and non-responsive educational models, cultural norms of higher education institutions impede progress. Furthermore, academics typically view themselves as members of a discipline, as opposed to members of an institution and are critical of decisions made by senior leadership. By providing an analytical approach for analyzing program level data and identifying institutional themes, our approach provides necessary evidence and transparency for educational planning at the institutional level. Planning processes designed to leverage and value disciplinary expertise have the potential to increase academics' buy-in and trust in the resulting decisions made by senior leadership. When you can see yourself in the data and the related decisions, you are more likely to trust the results (Dziminska et al., 2018).

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The process that we have described here is focused on the use of external peer reviewer recommendations and commendations regarding their assessment of a program. However, we see value in potentially expanding this approach and triangulating the external peer review documents with other sources of data collected during the program review, such as student surveys. We also see value in conducting a longitudinal meta-synthesis once every five to seven years. During such a meta-synthesis, institutions may be able to pull data from a significant number of program reviews, thus offering opportunities to illuminate important and time-dependent patterns and trends across the institution. However, while the value of such a comprehensive analysis could be wide-ranging, we recognize the significant draw on resources and level of expertise required to engage in such a research project. Therefore, we encourage higher education institutions that are considering engaging in such research to partner with faculty members or others who have interest and expertise regarding quality assurance and educational planning.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of our work was to identify priority areas for the university based on concepts raised by external peer reviewers and to recommend actionable steps that could lead to improved educational programming and student experience. As scholarly quality assurance practitioners and higher education leaders, we are also driven by a desire to draw attention to the practical utility of program review findings and contribute to the scholarship educational planning more broadly. We provide our approach in detail here as an invitation to other institutions to also consider attempting to make sense of program review for the purpose of educational planning and strategic priority setting. We make this invitation recognizing that our approach is merely a framework by which others may wish to begin their own internal process toward increasing institutional impact from academic program review.

We have received inquiries from colleges, polytechnics, and universities across Canada that have been introduced to our approach via conference presentation and other knowledge translation activities. From these inquiries we have been requested to share our approach so that others can build and develop their own tactic for increasing impact of program review. This paper represents our response to those requests, and we hope that the described approach we have provided in this paper can support institutions in developing meaningful quality assurance processes that go beyond the norm by upcycling program-level data for educational planning.

We encourage others to try our approach and to adapt it to meet their local context, and further encourage sharing of related discussion and results as we collectively build a growing body of literature and innovation regarding academic program review. As we provide this description, we too are working on completing our first round of results using the approach, details of which we will share in future publications. We offer our approach as a starting point and look forward to upcoming contributions to the literature that advance our initial approach as well as build research on external review generally.

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A REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION? MEANINGFUL ACCESS? FOR WHOM? A CRITIQUE OF ACCOMMODATION APPROACHES IN CANADIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Institutional practices related to providing academic accommodations and access have long been ableist and bureaucratic and remain that way. This paper will focus on these practices in the post-secondary education context. The central question of this paper is: What do meaningful access and reasonable accommodation mean to post-secondary students with disabilities? Proceeding from the premise that students with disabilities do not currently define meaningful access and reasonable accommodations, this paper will argue that accommodations and access as defined within policy are not adequately serving the needs of post-secondary students with disabilities. This paper then highlights the definitions of meaningful access and reasonable accommodations provided by eight students who participated in a recent study. Finally, this paper will highlight the negative and positive encounters with accommodations experienced by many post-secondary students in the province of Ontario who follow the Policy on Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities (2018) as a policy that guides educational practices.

BACKGROUND

The Policy on Accessible Education for Students with disabilities (2018) in Ontario, Canada, includes meaningful access and reasonable accommodation. These two terms are situated in a bureaucratic way. This policy implies that institutions are to provide meaningful access to education for students with disabilities to the point of undue hardship. The point of undue hardship shows that meaningful access as a practice and as a term within the policy is politicized. According to the Policy on Accessible Education for Students with disabilities (2018), “the *code* prescribes three considerations when assessing whether an accommodation would cause undue hardship. [these include] cost, outside funding resources, if any, health and safety requirements, if any” (The Ontario Human Rights Code, 2018, p. 84). The central question of this paper is: What do meaningful access and reasonable accommodation mean to post-secondary students with disabilities?

This paper will discuss how reasonable accommodations and meaningful access as terms included within the policy and institutional practices are bureaucratic and how their current definitions and implementation do not meet the needs of post-secondary students with disabilities and instead place more barriers. This discussion will be illustrated by mapping out definitions of meaningful access and reasonable accommodation highlighted by Dolmage (2017), Titchkosky (2011), Ahmad et al., (2019), and Steele and Nind (2009). Another crucial step that has been taken in this paper is including interviews with post-secondary students with disabilities who participated in the study discussed in this paper. Before mapping out the definitions through the authors and including the students' definitions, this paper will define bureaucracy to set the stage and make later implications about reasonable accommodations and meaningful access. Finally, this paper will highlight the negative and positive encounters with accommodations experienced by many post-secondary students in Ontario.

“Meaningful access” and “reasonable accommodation” were first encountered during the first stage of a research project at the University of Timothy’s. This project was entitled *Disability Studies: What is Going on?* In this project, searches were conducted through the websites of various departments at the University of Timothy's to find policies related to accommodations, mental health, and health and safety. This project aimed to locate where disability is mentioned on the University of Timothy's website and, if so, how. Finally, how do federal and or provincial policies influence the university's policies? During this time, it was discovered that in these policies, disability is either absent or its existence is medicalized. One of the policies reviewed is a provincial policy in Ontario known as the *Policy on Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities (2018)*. The terms "meaningful access" and "reasonable accommodations" were included in this policy. After carefully examining these terms, it was concluded that there is a disconnect between the implied intentions of this policy and the reality experienced by students with disabilities and the meaning embedded within statements within the policy. This discovery began a two-year-long study that questioned: "What do meaningful access and reasonable accommodation mean to post-secondary students with disabilities?" As the examination of the policy was in progress, it resulted in skepticism and what Rankin (2017) refers to as a moment of "disquiet" (Rankin, 2017, p.4). Through this statement, the study moved to its second stage of research, which involved reviewing the literature to locate scholars to trace current conversations about disability and accommodation policy. The third stage in the study was to interview nine university students with disabilities to find out how they define meaningful access and reasonable accommodations and, in doing so, discuss their experiences of the accommodation process. The plan for this project was to recruit nine students, three students per participating campus.

A Note about Terminologies

Throughout this paper, various ways of framing disability will be used. "Students with disabilities" refers to those who prefer to reference their role first as part of their identity. This means these individuals prefer focusing on themselves as students rather than highlighting their disability. "Disabled students" refers to those who view their disability as an identity. The phrase "students with D/disabilities" is used to reference those who sometimes refer to their disability as an identity and other times as a label. Based on engagement in Disability Studies through formal and informal discussions with other accommodation recipients, it is vital to note that accessing accommodations is not barrier-free or "a walk in the park process." This paper aims to illustrate this through the literature and data collected in this study. In the latter part of this paper, particularly in the methodology section, words such as phase and stage will be mentioned. Stage refers to the significant step in the research, and phase refers to a sub-stage within that stage. For instance, the recruitment stage involved two phases. Phase one was sending emails to various departments through which students were found and recruited. The second phase in the recruitment stage was to obtain consent from the research participants to begin interviewing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As previously stated, meaningful access and reasonable accommodation are terms that label institutional practices that are bureaucratic and not defined by the students whom these practices are meant to serve. According to Walker (2012),

> [the purpose of the Canadian Human Rights Act] includes the principle that all individuals should have opportunities equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have and to have their needs accommodated…without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices (Walker, 2012, p.2).

Furthermore, Slee (2018) writes about inclusive education by saying, "Inclusive education isn't dead; it just smells funny" (Slee, 2018, p.1). This fundamental statement emphasizes the persistent issues of inclusive education despite its existence. Titchkosky (2011) defines bureaucracy as a rationalized form of power accomplished and enforced through procedural requirements seemingly impervious to the particularity of unique or individual desires. Thus, a bureaucratic structure governs itself and others by using established protocols and procedures – these are usually put into text as rules and regulations implemented by an office in a supposedly predictable fashion (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 8).

Titchkosky (2011) contextualizes bureaucracy within higher education by outlining the accommodation process. The author explains that this process "aims to regularize the management of all members of an organization" (Titchkosky, 2011, p.8). The accommodation process involves the institution facilitating "rule-guided procedures" (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 8). When examining Walker's (2012) points, Titchkosky (2011) exposes the harmful policy-led practices. Furthermore, Copfer Terreberry (2017) comments on the bureaucracy of access to accommodations by citing Wolsworth (2012), who states, " Most institutions require students to submit formal documentation of their disability from qualified professionals and disability specialists prior to consideration of various accommodations and supports" (Copfer Terreberry, 2017, p. 10). Dolmage (2017) writes about providing accommodations within higher education, particularly within American higher education. Though Dolmage writes about American policy, his work was still relevant to this study, given some overlaps in the Canadian and American education systems regarding students with disabilities and how they are accommodated within academia. Dolmage (2017) illustrates the definition of bureaucracy outlined by Titchkosky (2011) by explaining that

> The "reason" of the medical and legal establishment, then, finally decides upon which accommodations are to be made. What this means in practice is that, in higher education, we witness a large industry of lawyers and HR managers, and administrators paid to determine what exactly can be gotten away with under the rubric of "undue hardship" or the "undue burden" of accommodations (Dolmage, 2017, p. 77).

Similar to reasonable accommodation, meaningful access is also a bureaucratic process. According to Seale and Nind (2009), "access also captures elements of entitlement" (Seale & Nind, 2009, p. 5). (Ahmed et al., 2019) Comment on educational practices in a global context and, in doing so, shed light on the bureaucracy involved in providing meaningful access to education. Where Seale and Nind (2009) discuss the bureaucracy of access to education, Ahmed et al. (2019) comment on the importance of access to education and how it is not currently facilitated, thus making it bureaucratic. Ahmed et al. (2019) highlight that "access to quality education cannot be limited to urban or wealthy students. All students should not only have access to secondary education, their opportunity to learn and achieve success should be equitably distributed" (Ahmed, 2019, et al. p. 557).

Seale and Nind (2009) discuss an element of control and gatekeeping of accommodations and resources within academic institutions, commenting, "access captures elements of entitlement" (Seale & Nind, 2009, p. 5). Speaking against bureaucracy, these authors provide insight into what education should look like. They continue by saying, "Not only must they want it, but they should have it too" (Seale & Nind, 2009, p. 5).

Like Seale and Nind (2009), Ahmed et al. (2019) discuss access to education and the importance of equitable access. Though they speak of it in a secondary education context, their definition was still significant to this study. Ahmed et al. (2019) expose that access to education is currently only given to certain people. Moreover, the quality of education is given based on how wealthy someone is and if someone lives in an urban area because it is assumed that people in urban areas are wealthier than those in rural areas.

It is also assumed that wealth or lack thereof determines meaningful access to education and success in educational pursuits. The authors are against that practice and argue that access should be given to all and distributed equitably. The study's findings will illustrate how access and accommodations are to be distributed equitably and how students' needs should be approached individually.

According to Ahmed et al. (2019), access is "the politicization of who gets what" (Ahmed et al., 2019, p.557). Regarding this study, Seale and Nind (2009) confront that reality and conclude that access for students with disabilities is not easily granted as policy implies. Instead, it is bureaucratic. Understanding this politicization and contextualizing the words of Seale et al. (2009) lead to questioning the true intentions of policy and who policy favours. To understand policy and institutional intentions clearly, this research has taken a critical step toward understanding the negative and positive impacts of current accommodation practices within the University of Timothy's on students with disabilities pursuing their education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

During the fourth stage of this study, online interviews were conducted with students with disabilities/D/disabled students at the University of Timothy's. These interviews were conducted through the Zoom Conferencing Platform, given that this study took place during the global pandemic. Restrictions were placed on in-person interactions.

Research Criteria

Students in this study are accommodation recipients registered with the Accessibility Services Office. The only requirement for participation in this study was that students must have one year or more experience receiving accommodations. This allows students to provide in-depth responses to the interview questions. This study is framed on the belief that to advocate for policy change involving accommodations for students with disabilities, their voices and opinions must be the center of this change process. The guiding principle in this argument is a statement that has been used as a slogan in several movements throughout history. Charlton (1993) "Nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1993, p.3). One of the key takeaways from the participants in this master's research project is that access and accommodations are interconnected.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research has centred on the experiences of post-secondary students with disabilities based on the belief that they "lead storied lives" (Clandinin & Connelley,1990, p. 2). As Bynes (2017) writes, one quality that sets Narrative Inquiry apart from other methodologies is that it relies on "meaning making" (Bynes, 2017, p. 49). This allows the researcher to make meaning and draw conclusions from ordinary conversations. These conversations can be scattered and unorganized, but Narrative Inquiry allows for organizing the discussions, making them whole. This approach was applied in this study, where individual questions were asked during the interviews, which were then used to write complete narratives. After careful examination, Narrative Inquiry was selected as a methodology for this study, given that it focuses on individuals "living storied lives" (Clandinin & Connelley, 1990, p. 44). This methodology enables the researcher to analyze the data as it is told and make it into a story. Another reason that Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelley, 1990) was chosen for this study is because it enabled the researcher to center and narrate the experiences of the participants involved. This methodology contributed to this research project because it included restorying (Thomas, 2016) as a method of analysis under the umbrella of Narrative Inquiry.

The data collected during interviews were analyzed using Thomas's (2016) restorying to highlight participants' experiences within academia and discuss their experiences when accessing accommodations. Some of the highlighted narratives were policy-related, which supported the writing of a policy narrative. Moreover, using restorying (Thomas, 2016), data analysis began by retelling the overall education experience of participants, which led to selecting parts of their responses that could influence policy, which supported the writing of a policy narrative.

Recruitment

The third stage of the study began with recruiting participants in June 2022. This process involved composing a list of on-campus organizations and advocacy groups that existed to advocate for the rights to accessibility for students with disabilities at the University of Timothy's. Examples include The Center for Global Disability Studies, Student Barrier-Free Access, and several student groups within academic departments. After composing the contact list, emails with the recruitment flyer and a written invitation were written while compiling the various pieces for the ethics application. After the email was sent, participants began to express interest. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the study sought to recruit nine students for this study, three students per participating campus. The final number of participants was eight selected students due to the time constraints of one month to complete data collection and move forward to analysis.

Consent

The second recruitment phase was to obtain consent from students interested in participating in the study. Some participants preferred to provide consent through written means, while others preferred verbal consent. The verbal consent process involved reading the study description and terms and conditions of participation and verbally confirming that consent was given before proceeding. Verbal consent was tracked using a chart that included the student's name and the interview date, noting that the form of consent was verbal. With the written consent process, electronic forms were created and sent through DocuSign, allowing participants to provide electronic signatures that were then delivered electronically. This approach was taken given the circumstances of the global pandemic (Covid-19) that impacted this entire study, including the recruitment phase and continued to impact especially the lives of people with disabilities, Disabled people, disabled people/ D/disabled people, which resulted in interviews being conducted virtually.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH ACCOMMODATIONS

At the beginning of the interview, Christine experienced difficulties recalling helpful accommodations, given that Christine was among "the least consulted" (Simon, 2022, 0:09-0:10). After some guidance, Christine mentioned having an FM system as an assistive device that she gave her professors to wear so she could hear them during lectures. Other helpful accommodations included note-takers and exam accommodations, extra time on tests and exams, and a laptop to take notes.

Similarly to Christine, Sarah mentioned positive experiences with accessing accommodations and what accommodations were helpful. Extensions on assignments are a helpful accommodation as they allow work to be completed and for Sarah to demonstrate learning like Christine and Sarah. Martin found examination accommodations helpful. One unique accommodation Martin was given during tests and examinations was permission to bring "his favourite picture" to keep calm. Another response to the helpful accommodation question that was found significant to this study was one provided by Elvis, who called sound-cancelling headphones and an ADHD coach a "breath of fresh air." Andrea discussed having extra time on tests and examinations and a quiet writing space. Andrea's impressions, particularly in college, were, "I say jump, they say how high?" The discussion with Ana also focused on accommodations similar to those mentioned by the other participants. The conversation with Ana, a Ph.D. student, was particularly unique. A unique accommodation Ana mentioned was being permitted to be late. Ana's words were thought-provoking, highlighting, "It was suddenly okay for me to be late because it was written on my accommodation form." This then led to the final two discussions that covered helpful accommodations. First, the question, "Tell me about an experience where the accommodations you were given were helpful," was posed to Jasmine. Her helpful accommodations were also the general accommodations, such as extra time and extensions. Finally, in this research, Jackie outlined her helpful accommodations. Aside from mentioning the standard accommodations of the previous participants above, Jackie stated that all the accommodations in higher education were helpful. It was only the lack of accommodations during the early school years resulted in her dropping out of high school.

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES WITH ACCOMMODATIONS

Christine was asked to discuss negative experiences with accommodations. However, her response was surprisingly positive, although what was being discussed was a negative experience. Christine explained that accessing accommodations was easier after the pandemic that began in March 2020. Before the pandemic, the only issues that Christine had with accommodations were having to remind professors to turn on captions for digital content, such as in-class videos and having to show professors and teaching assistants how to turn the FM system on and off multiple times, having to look for tutors and only given the funding without guidance on how to manage it. One of her negative experiences was with examination. Christine talked about being infected with Covid-19, which caused a delay in being able to complete her examination. After Christine recovered, she was notified by her professor and the Accessibility Advisor that she could take the examination by typing on a computer. The professor and advisor asked Christine to provide a signed doctor's note to access this accommodation. This process involved going to the family practitioner when it was challenging to be seen by a doctor. Christine mentioned getting a doctor's note and giving it to the Accessibility Advisor, yet she was still expected to work on the examination by free handwriting.

Although extensions on assignments are commonly found helpful by post-secondary students with disabilities as a requested accommodation, they can cause inconvenience to the students when students have to request an extension each time it is required. Like Christine, Sarah shared that this was an inconvenient practice applied by higher education institutions. Sarah struggled to complete her work during the pandemic and was required to constantly ask for extensions because the work was not completed by the expected deadline. This added task created more barriers. Like Sarah, Elvis also commented on adding tasks to access an accommodation. He recalled an experience in a course where the professor changed frequently. Elvis had to disclose and explain his accommodation to a new person every time. Jackie outlined an experience with an accommodation that was needed. However, the institution gave this accommodation based on what was found convenient for them, when Jackie requested to work on an examination in a quiet space and was instead put in a room with other accommodation recipients.

Andrea's experience of unhelpful accommodation was a significant one. Andrea talked about asking to record lectures in graduate school, and the request was denied. Instead, she was offered either a note-taker or the option of meeting with professors during office hours to review lecture material. Andrea did not find this helpful as an auditory learner. As a doctoral student, Ana's case is unique, and the standard accommodations were inadequate for this level of education. Where the others commented on a specific accommodation that was unhelpful to them, Ana made a significant point about the lack of awareness and understanding amongst professors about why an accommodation is needed. Lastly, Martin talked about having difficulty with a specific assignment and not having all the materials required to complete this assignment, in addition to confronting the situation of undergoing surgery. During this critical period, Martin needed support from the professor in the form of a concrete example of the assignment completed in previous years. Instead, like Andrea and Jackie's experiences, Martin was given an alternative option of meeting with the professor virtually to discuss the assignment. This was inconvenient because Martin was recovering from surgery and unable to attend this meeting, even virtually. Finally, Jasmine's experience was another significant experience to draw on in this research. Jasmine talked about requesting to change a classroom for a course, given that it was located far from the main campus, and due to Jasmine's medical condition, this location was inconvenient. This request was denied, claiming this was a difficult change. Furthermore, the approach in which the Accessibility Office responded was deeply ableist, stating that Jasmine may "just be too tired and should slow down when making her way to the classroom location, or could also miss class if needed."

HOW DO STUDENTS DEFINE MEANINGFUL ACCESS AND REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION?

According to Simon (2022), "Students and teachers are the most impacted by policy and curriculum, but ironically, they're the least consulted" (Simon, 2022, 0:05-0:10). This study has taken Simon's words into perspective to address this issue in seeking the input of students on meaningful access and reasonable accommodations. As mentioned earlier, this research aims to critique and think critically about how accommodations and access are facilitated and deemed meaningful and reasonable, yet they are highly bureaucratic. Throughout the interview with Christine, some responses elicited how meaningful access and reasonable accommodation are bureaucratic. According to Christine,

> Meaningful access means just me being able to do my work. I do all my assignments and participate in class without worrying about whether I will get my accommodations.

Christine was also asked to discuss what a reasonable accommodation means. According to Christine,

> A reasonable accommodation is dictated and given by the Accessibility Services, who asks the student, "Is this the accommodation you need?"

In Christine's definition of meaningful access, examples were given to illustrate how the accommodation process was bureaucratic and was immensely influenced by policy. It delivered the message that it is critical to continue to critique current policy and move beyond bureaucracy in institutional practices involving the provision of accommodations and meaningful access to education. Sarah also defined a reasonable accommodation as,

> an accommodation that is individualized based on the person's individual needs.

Sarah's response to what reasonable accommodation means to her follows a pattern similar to Catherine's response of communicating the importance of individualism. What was found distinct in the first two participants is, in Christine's definition of reasonable accommodation, there is more focus on the accommodation that enables the student to reach their potential. Christine also more directly points to the current accommodation model being one that causes the students to be uncertain whether their needs will be met through the accommodations they are provided. This current model takes away from the student learning given that they have to navigate the logistics of seeking accommodations that continue to be bureaucratic and limited. Sarah's definition of meaningful access was thought-provoking and again follows the pattern of individualism that Christine's definition discussed. Another aspect that Sarah's definition highlights is the importance of consulting the student to ensure that it is "individualized based on the person's individual needs."

Sarah defines meaningful access as,

> Something that enables a disabled person to make something a part of their lives sustainably.

By highlighting sustainability as a significant component of meaningful access, Sarah provides essential recommendations for policymakers. Through such a component, policymakers are called to action to make changes to the current system, given that it does not allow for learning to be made part of a disabled person's life sustainable.

Martin, a history major at the University of Timothy's, was interviewed following the same pattern as the two previous interviews, beginning with the interviewees' and interviewer's introductions to achieve familiarity and gain entrance into one's world as per Narrative Inquiry. After discussing helpful and unhelpful accommodations, Martin discussed what meaningful access and reasonable accommodation mean to him. According to Martin, a reasonable accommodation is,

> What adjustments can be made to keep the integrity of the academic standards but allow the student to participate in the course in a way that does not compromise their health?

The definition of reasonable accommodation provided by Martin aligns with the previous definitions provided by Christine and Sarah. All the definitions highlight the importance of individualized accommodation, which enables the student to learn and thrive, and Martin adds another vital component to a reasonable accommodation. He points out that "a reasonable accommodation "does not compromise a student's health."

From participants' responses, this paper also aims to show that reasonable accommodations and meaningful access are interconnected, which means one leads to the other. With this in mind, this research now highlights Martin's definition of meaningful access. Martin defines meaningful access as

> being given the tools and flexibility to provide meaningful work/participation in courses that can be adjusted to a student's difficulties. Meaningful access to me means feeling welcomed and included in the classroom and when I am made to feel that I have the same potential as everyone else.

The next interview was with Elvis, who followed a pattern similar to the earlier participants. According to Elvis, a reasonable accommodation is,

> Walking into an academic institution and expressing the desire to be a student and the institution makes it possible by providing you with what you need and removing barriers.

As stated earlier in this section, reasonable accommodation and meaningful access are interconnected. When and if students are provided with the accommodation they need, they will achieve meaningful access to their education. This research continues to explore this as Elvis outlines what meaningful access means to them. According to Elvis, meaningful access is,

> When the provision of accommodations is unquestionable because the institution should already be prepared and use a universal design approach.

Another definition that was vital and returns to the importance of treating accommodations as individual to each student is a definition provided by Andrea, who states that,

> A reasonable accommodation depends on each individual circumstance.

As Andrea began to define meaningful access, the beginning of that response led to reflection on Simon (2022), who notes that " students and teachers are the most impacted by policy and curriculum, but ironically they're the least consulted."(Simon, 2022, 0:05-0:10). When Andrea was asked what meaningful access means to her, she expressed that such a question was complicated and asked if she could return to this question later in the interview. This illustrates how Andrea was amongst the least consulted. Such a question was difficult for her because when she was consulted, it must be a new occurrence. After stating that she has never heard of the term meaningful access, Andrea defines meaningful access as,

> When I am being given what I need.

Ana's interview was unique and highlighted the importance of being attentive to the standardization of accommodations and how they can be narrow and inadequate in meeting the needs of students pursuing doctoral degree programs with very different requirements. According to Ana,

> A reasonable accommodation is letting the student define their academic experience on their own. A reasonable accommodation is less about setting up the student to perform and more about setting the student up to learn.

In line with reasonable accommodation, Ana defines meaningful access as,

> Being able to succeed in an academic setting without personal harm or sacrifice being required.

The final interviewees who provided their insight on the meaning of meaningful access and reasonable accommodation were Jasmine and Jackie. According to Jasmine, reasonable accommodations

> Are ones that both meet the student's needs and academic requirements.

Jasmine defined meaningful access as

> Access that allows you to be successful and not go through hardship to ask for an accommodation multiple times.

Finally, Jackie's definition of reasonable accommodation was found significant in this study and one that policymakers and those working to provide students with accommodations must remember. Jackie defined a reasonable accommodation as,

> An accommodation that I need and not what the institution has to offer me.

When Jackie was asked how she defined meaningful access, Jackie responded that meaningful access was,

> Access that works for me, not what their vision of access is.

As this section has shown, the way meaningful access and reasonable accommodations are currently defined needs to align with the needs of individual students. These terms need to be officially defined by policy and to be determined under the point of undue hardship.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

In this paper, bureaucratic definitions of meaningful access and reasonable accommodation were outlined, as well as what these terms mean to students and the positive and negative encounters students had with accommodations. One of the messages that arose was that more work needs to be done to achieve the fundamental goals of meaningful access and reasonable accommodation. This paper showed that current definitions of meaningful access and reasonable accommodations do not meet the needs of students with disabilities. Therefore, when viewing the current definitions of these terms, one must ask whom these definitions are serving. Concluding this study with the realization that more work is needed means that this has elicited implications for educators, administrators, and policymakers. How meaningful access and reasonable accommodations are defined is bureaucratic, and such definitions do not take in the perspectives of students with disabilities. In this study, students focused mainly on the role of educators within the classroom. Educators need to prioritize checking in with students to determine what students need and how their experiences and learning can translate to more meaningful ones within the classroom. In doing so, students' experiences will become more favourable within the classroom and the institution. Moreover, it must be noted that current definitions of meaningful access and reasonable accommodations serve the institution by taking power over students, controlling what accommodations they have access to, and determining the quality of education these students receive. Bureaucracy leads to an education they often do not deem as meaningful. To shift away from bureaucracy, educators and those involved in providing accommodations must attend to students' voices to ensure that students receive individualized accommodations.

DISCUSSION

The discussions in this paper include several vital points, including the discussion on equitable access. Throughout scholarship in disability studies, it can be argued that people mix equity and equality and either interpret them the same way or use them interchangeably. Titchkosky (2011) defines access in a way that has helped make sense of what participants have said about accommodations and access being connected because accommodations lead to access. “Access, in this sense, is an interpretive relation between bodies. In this conception, we can explore how people wonder about and act within social space and discover how we are enmeshed in the activity of making people and places meaningful to one another” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 20). The unfortunate reality is that society is constructed based on what Mingus (2010) calls the myth of independence. Mingus outlines her perception of independence and how it is a myth.

> It is from being disabled that I have learned about the dangerous and privileged “myth of independence” and embraced the power of interdependence. The myth of independence is that somehow, we can and should be able to do everything on our own without any help from anyone. This requires such a high level of privilege; even then, it is still a myth. Whose oppression and exploitation must exist for your independence (Mingus, 2010).

Here, Mingus addresses the myth of independence by pointing out that there is no such thing as a fully independent person. Mingus (2010) also highlights the neoliberal thinking held by society that believes that independence is only a level achieved by those with “high-level privilege.” To contextualize this with the practice of meaningful access to education, the two points made by Mingus (2010) are that the reason that people with disabilities/D/disabled people are currently not consistently achieving meaningful access to education is not because of their disability or inability to succeed, it is because of this misconception that leads to the belief that people with disabilities/ D/ disabled people are not able to achieve meaningful access to education due to disability. Because of this inequity and what Mingus (2010) calls a “high level of privilege” as being “able,” there are still limitations and disabled people must rely on something or someone. The participants' experiences in this research illustrate the findings of authors such as Dolmage (2017) and Titchkosky (2011), explaining the complexity of access and accommodation practices within higher education. These participants experience the bureaucracy Dolmage (2017) and Titchkosky (2011) discussed on the ground.

CONCLUSION

As this paper has shown, it is crucial to be critical when stating that post-secondary institutions are providing access to education that is meaningful and reasonable accommodations. As demonstrated through literature and the interviews, reasonable accommodations and meaningful access are not currently defined by the students receiving reasonable accommodations and meaningful access. The literature outlined in this paper has shown that meaningful access and reasonable accommodation are bureaucratized practices where the institution acts as the gatekeeper and controls the provision of accommodations that a “specific” office provides. Drawing from the data collected, this paper has argued that post-secondary institutions need to include students' perspectives when determining what is a reasonable accommodation and what makes meaningful access. This paper has concluded that current approaches to providing reasonable accommodations and meaningful access are inadequate because they do not take in the perspectives of students with disabilities, and, more importantly, the current policy is doing the opposite of what it implies it is doing.

Therefore, institutions need to change their current practices and create more student-oriented practices to establish reasonable accommodations deemed reasonable by students with disabilities and create an environment that fosters meaningful access to education and meaningful learning. This research has concluded that policy should be rewritten to include student perspectives on meaningful access and reasonable accommodations so that they will be the ones to define these terms. When this happens, policy will be accurate. In closing, it is vital to note two critical points; one is the point that this paper began with, which was that before jumping to conclusions that the statements made in policy about meaningful access and reasonable accommodation are favourable terms, it is necessary to think critically and view the practices that are coming out of them. In conclusion, Rankin (2017) guides the essential critical thinking by further noting “you need to get from “contradictions,""tensions," or" "unease " – to interrogating what is going on. You need to train yourself to see how informants’ everyday life is being organized through an institution’s ruling practices” (Rankin, 2017, p. 4 & 5).

These words by Rankin (2017) are robust and deliver a strong message. The author reiterates the main point in this paper that there is a need to take a step back and think about the meaning of words and, in this case, policy statements and true intentions before concluding that they are positive based on the claims of policy officials and those abiding by policy. It is necessary to be careful before believing that meaningful access and reasonable accommodations are positive practices. As noted in this paper, getting meaningful access to education and reasonable accommodation is “not a walk in the park.” These practices are bureaucratized and monitored by gatekeepers within institutions such as higher education institutions. One can argue that Rankin (2017) provides a formula for success that needs to be implemented by educators, policymakers, advocates, and even students who can apply this critical thinking before concluding that all policies have good intentions and serve the needs of “all” citizens. It is vital to be aware of the fact that students with disabilities are amongst the most historically marginalized people within society as a whole and within the education system. A question policymakers and educators need to consider is: What can we do better, and how can we build a better education system for students with disabilities in the future? In seeking to respond to this question, policymakers and educators working in education institutions need to step outside their roles' hierarchical and discriminatory demands and restructure their roles to enable them to take in the perspectives of the students whom they serve.

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SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES' KNOWLEDGE AND INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANS: IMPLICATIONS FOR QUALITY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

School management committees' (SMCs) roles are crucial in the smooth, unfettered administration, development and provision of quality basic education. However, the preponderance of research evidence available indicates that in sub-Saharan Africa SMCs are not adequately involved in preparing and implementing school performance improvement plans (SPIPs). This study surveyed 298 SMC chairpersons and members in the South Tongu District (STD) of Ghana to investigate their knowledge and participation in SPIPs. The results showed that SMC members' limited knowledge of and low involvement in SPIP preparation and implementation were lower than the Ghana Education Service required, which hindered success and contribution to high-quality teaching and learning in the schools. These results have implications for improving the quality of education for all by increasing their access to data, technical assistance, and financial resources at the basic school level. We recommend against this backdrop that the STD Education Directorate, in collaboration with the STD Assembly, conduct periodic training workshops, reward success, and provide clear guidelines and expectations to increase SMC members' knowledge and participation in successful SPIP preparation and implementation. Further research needs to focus on SMC members' capacity for sustained school improvement through education policy initiatives at the district and school levels.

INTRODUCTION

School Management Committees (SMCs) are an essential part of the education system in many countries, as they play a critical role in improving school performance. One of the key responsibilities of SMCs is to prepare and implement school performance improvement plans (SPIPs), which aim at enhancing the quality of education in schools (Abadzi, 2013; Abreh, 2017; Aryeh-Adjei, 2021; Avevor, 2022; Smith & Benavot, 2019). The available evidence suggests that SMCs' knowledge and participation in developing, implementing, and monitoring SPIPs are essential in promoting quality teaching and learning in schools. However, a limited amount of literature on the knowledge and participation of SMCs in preparing and implementing SPIPs exists. This paper focuses on the SMCs' knowledge level and involvement in SPIPs in the Ghanaian public basic education context. In Ghana, public basic education refers to the formal education system provided by the government for children aged 4 to 15 years. It includes two levels: the primary level (Kindergarten to Primary 6) and the junior high school level (Junior High School 1 to Junior High School 3). The goal of public basic education is to provide universal access to quality education and ensure that all children receive a solid foundation in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills (Balwanz & Darvas, 2014; The EducationUSA, 2019).

Research shows that knowing SPIP is crucial for developing effective strategies and plans that foster positive change and growth (Johnson et al., 2014; Schnautz, 2012). In this paper, we referred to the term ‘knowledge in SPIP’ as the ‘understanding, skills, and ability that stakeholders (i.e., SMCs) must develop, implement, and evaluate plans and strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Broadly, this knowledge involves areas such as governance practices and decision-making processes. It requires understanding the school community’s needs, including students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders, and finding the resources and support needed to achieve the desired goals. In Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa, SMCs are expected to be familiar with the following key areas: date determination, stakeholder meetings, issue solutions, action identification, input collation aid, budget allocation suggestions, and resource identification (Ghana Education Service [GES]/United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2005; Ghana Education Service, 2001a, 2010). However, there is no evidence about the extent of SMCs’ knowledge in these areas.

Additionally, our paper focuses on SMCs’ involvement in preparing and implementing SPIPs. As clearly said earlier in this paper, the goal of SPIP is to create a more effective and successful learning environment for students, and participation by all stakeholders (including SMCs) is critical to its success. In this paper, “participation in SPIP” refers to the involvement of various stakeholders (e.g., SMCs) in identifying areas of improvement for a school and developing a plan to address those areas. This process typically involves gathering and analysing data on student achievement, identifying areas where schools (head teachers, teachers and students) may be struggling or need improvement, and then developing strategies and interventions to address those areas of need.

Furthermore, we operationally define the term ‘planning’ (plan preparation) as setting goals and aims, finding strategies to achieve them, and developing a timeline for implementation. Successful plan preparation includes assessing current data and information, assessing available resources, and considering potential challenges and obstacles. The term ‘participation’ is the active involvement of individuals or groups in the decision-making and implementation processes related to a particular activity or initiative. In the context of schools, participation refers to the engagement of community members in activities such as SPIP development, curriculum development, fundraising, and school governance. ‘Implementation’ refers to putting a plan or strategy into action. Successfully implementing SPIPs requires attention to detail, clear communication, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation to ensure that goals are met and any necessary adjustments are made.

Research evidence across the globe provides insights into stakeholders’ knowledge of and participation in school improvement planning (Beach & Lindahl, 2004; Prew, 2009). Nicdao (2020), for example, found that stakeholders generally understood the SPIP process and were highly involved in its formulation and implementation. Similarly, Obiekwe et al. (2020) found that principals involved stakeholders in prioritising school needs and developing school plan outlines to a large extent. Additionally, Beach and Lindahl (2004) discussed the importance of externally developed reform models in school improvement, while Prew (2009) emphasized the need for full community involvement in school development. Thus, the research literature highlights the significance of stakeholder knowledge and participation in SPIP preparation and implementation (Kwaah & Ampiah, 2018; Kwaah & Nishimuko, 2023). This implies that SMCs are required to have some level of understanding of and commitment to school improvement planning and implementation to improve the quality of learning (Ministry of Education, 1994).

Committed to providing quality education with equitable resource distribution, the Ghanaian Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service implemented the Education Strategic Plan 2010-2020 (Ghana Education Service, 2001a). This plan decentralized district-level education and tasked SMCs with planning and implementing SPIPs. Despite this mandate, research suggests a lack of knowledge and enthusiasm among SMCs towards SPIPs (Kwaah & Ampiah, 2018; Mfum-Mensah & Friedson-Ridenour, 2014). This study contributes to the limited research on SMC knowledge and participation in SPIPs, aiming to understand their impact on school quality in the context of global educational challenges (United Nations, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires the commitment and expertise of all stakeholders, especially SMCs, in local education policy planning and implementation. This paper investigates the knowledge and participation of SMCs in SPIPs in one Ghanaian district, exploring their implications for school quality and informing future educational planning and practice. The paper is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the knowledge of SMCs of schools in STD regarding SPIPs preparation?
2. How do SMCs describe their involvement in preparing SPIPs of schools in STD?
3. How are SMCs involved in preparing and implementing SPIPs in schools in STD?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining School Management Committee

The School Management Committee (SMC) is a crucial structure mandated in every school (Adam, 2005; Adu, 2016; Chugh, 2021; Ghana Education Service, 2010; Shibuya, 2020). Comprised of diverse stakeholders, the SMC assists in managing the school, identifying development priorities, and mobilizing community support (Ghana Education Service, 2001b, 2010; Ministry of Education, 1994). A key responsibility is developing an annual School Performance Improvement Plan (SPIP) outlining strategies to enhance school management, learning environment, and teaching practices. The annual routine of SPIP involves preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, reporting and revision. The preparation involves the timeframe for setting goals, analyzing data, and identifying areas for improvement. This is followed by implementation where strategies and activities are undertaken to address identified areas for improvement. Next, is monitoring and evaluation where regular assessment of progress towards goals and adjustments are made as needed. Finally, the reporting and re-planning/revision require sharing progress and outcomes with stakeholders in a consulative meeting and revising the SPIP for the following year.

However, despite the importance of community participation, studies highlight challenges, including limited knowledge and capacity of community members, lack of political will, and socioeconomic barriers (Adu, 2016; Ghana Education Service, 2010; Mfum-Mensah & Friedson-Ridenour, 2014). Notably, these studies address these issues from an external perspective, neglecting the vital perspective of SMC members themselves. This research aims to address this gap by exploring SMC knowledge, capacity, and perspectives on participation in SPIP development and implementation.

School Performance Improvement Plan

School improvement planning (SPIP) is a collaborative process between schools and communities aimed at improving student outcomes (Thompson, 2018). These unique school-based plans, rooted within the district's annual education action plan (ADEAP), hold schools accountable for student success and track progress towards educational goals (Ghana Education Service [South Tongu], 2017a). In line with Ghana's Free, Compulsory, and Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) program, the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) encourages community participation in decision-making and resource management (Akyeampong, 2009; UNICEF, 2007). This national policy framework (2010-2020) guides all district action plans, including the District Education Strategic Plan (DESP), Annual District Education Operational Plan (ADEOP), and ADEAP, ensuring their interconnectedness and quality education delivery (Ghana Education Service, 2012; World University Service of Canada [WUSC] – Ghana, 2012). Importantly, the ESP decentralization process integrates community-based structures, including SMCs, parent-teacher associations

(PTAs), district assemblies, district education officers, and community and religious leaders, into the planning and implementation of various plans, including SPIPs (Ghana Education Service [South Tongu], 2017b; Ghana Education Service, 2012(Ghana Education Service, 2001b)).

The literature acknowledges that SPIP addresses key dimensions of school management, including education reforms and policies, access and participation, management efficiency, and quality of teaching and learning (International Labour Organisation, 2012; Ministry of Education, 1994). Specifically, SPIP is a cornerstone for successful school management because it serves as a comprehensive roadmap, guiding schools towards a shared vision and overcoming obstacles through systematic solutions. It defines clear timelines for projects, providing a structured framework for stakeholders to follow. By assigning responsibilities and outlining the necessary activities, SPIP ensures focused effort towards achieving objectives. Regular progress reviews and performance assessments based on established indicators allow for adjustments and course corrections. It also promotes financial accountability by facilitating the creation of activity-based budgets. Furthermore, it encourages self-reflection, prompting schools to assess their capabilities and identify available community resources, ultimately fostering collaboration and leveraging local support. Through its multifaceted approach, SPIP empowers schools to navigate challenges, achieve goals, and create thriving learning environments (Ministry of Education, 1994).

Knowledge of School Improvement Plan Preparation

School Management Committees (SMCs) serve as the backbone of public basic schools in Ghana, assuming the role of governing agencies at the local level. Mandated by law, SMCs oversee school operations, ensuring students receive quality education and fostering a sense of ownership in learning outcomes (Pre-Tertiary Education Act, 2020; Ministry of Education, 1994). These community-based committees aim to increase community involvement in education management for improved quality (Abadzi, 2013; Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011). Comprised of diverse stakeholders like the District Director of Education, headteacher, and representatives from the PTA, SMCs have a six-year term and are responsible for supporting headteachers, identifying development needs, and mobilizing community support (Abadzi, 2013; Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011; Ministry of Education, 1994).

To ensure accountability and enhance quality, schools and SMCs collaborate annually on SPIPs preparation. These plans not only link Ministry of Education activities to the budget but also empower communities to hold schools responsible for student success (Ghana Education Service [GES]/United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2005). In accordance with the Pre-Tertiary Education Act, 2020 (Act 1049), SMCs play a pivotal role in SPIP preparation and implementation, driving quality improvements through community engagement, resource mobilization, efficient school management, and contributions to instructional programs (Pre-Tertiary Education Act, 2020). Under the guidance of the District Education Oversight Committee (DEOC), SMCs collaborate with District Education Directorates (DEDs) and schools to prepare SPIPs, ultimately enabling the provision of essential teaching and learning materials and school maintenance (Avevor, 2022; Ghana Education Service, 2001b; Ministry of Education, 1994). Through this collaborative effort, SMCs go beyond fostering community involvement; they contribute significantly to school management, identify development priorities, and mobilize community support, ultimately holding schools accountable and driving continuous improvement in Ghana's education system (Ghana Education Service, 2010, 2012).

Involvement in Plan Preparation and Implementation

Several studies examined the involvement of SMCs in preparing and implementing SPIPs and found that some SMCs lacked the capacity or technical ability to develop and implement effective plans. School committees in Tanzania, for example, are involved in all aspects of Whole

School Development Planning (WSDP), including preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. However, obtaining qualified school committees, especially in rural areas, is a challenge. The Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT) must provide intensive ongoing training to school committees, particularly in rural primary schools, to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to prepare and implement WSDPs effectively (Nemes, 2013). Kwaah and Ampiah (2018) also found that head teachers involved various stakeholders, including the PTA/SMC and teachers, in SPIP preparation to ensure transparency in school management. According to the authors, the SPIP preparation process ensures that the school's budget for all required items. However, their study revealed several challenges, such as lukewarm attitudes from some SMC/PTA members and teachers towards the SPIP preparation, the bureaucratic process of accessing the Capitation Grant (CG), high fees charged by the Municipal Education Office, and some head teachers' lack of transparency in distributing the CG (Abreh, 2017; Ghana Education Service, 2012; Kwaah & Ampiah, 2018; Ministry of Education, 1994).

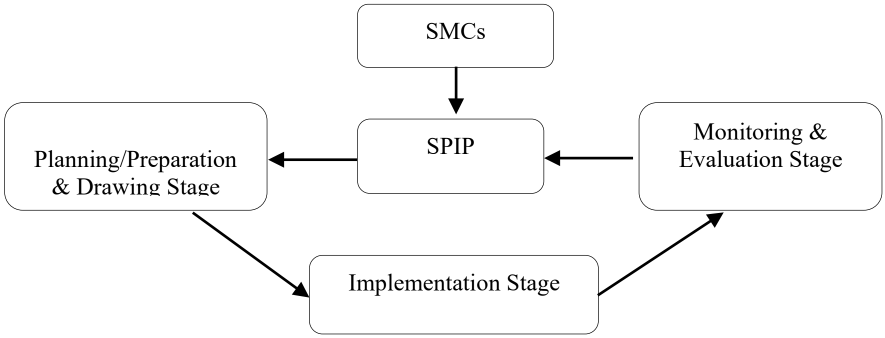
Additionally, Abreh (2017) investigated the extent of involvement and participation of school management committees in school-based management practices in two districts of Ghana. He found that the current level of stakeholder engagement in school-based management within the chosen communities of the two districts was inadequate and lacked coordination. According to him, the school governance structures were also not functioning optimally, with the responsibility of managing the SMCs falling on the committee chair or, in some cases, the parent-teacher association chair (Abreh, 2017). His study further highlighted the limited collaboration between the SMC membership and the schools they serve, with significant concerns about committee planning and implementation issues. The literature further revealed that the preparation of the SPIP by head teachers and teachers involves a degree of democratic input and relational trust (Shibuya, 2020). However, the accounts provided by these individuals did not mention the involvement of SMC members in the SPIP preparation process (Kwaah & Ampiah, 2018; Kwaah & Nishimuko, 2023). These researchers attributed this omission to the fact that some SMC members have limited education, which results in their inability to contribute meaningfully to school management decision-making. Consequently, certain SMC members may display apathy towards the SPIP preparation process (Kwaah & Ampiah, 2018).

Participatory Decision-Making Theory

This study investigates SMC knowledge and participation in SPIPs, drawing upon the UNCHS Habitat theory, which emphasizes stakeholder inclusion and participatory decision-making for transparency, accountability, and democratic involvement (UNCHS [Habitat], 1999). This theory aligns with the Ghana Education Service model for SMC participation in SPIPs, requiring their active engagement throughout the cyclical process of planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Ghana Education Service, 2001a, 2010; Ministry of Education, 1994). By investigating SMC knowledge and participation through the lens of the Habitat theory and its focus on local resource mobilization and consensus building, this study aims to inform policymakers on developing effective strategies for successful SPIP implementation, particularly in deprived districts (UNCHS [Habitat], 1999). The study's findings contribute to understanding the level of SMC knowledge and involvement in SPIPs, offering insights for improving policy and practice of decentralization and SPIP processes. Diagram 1 presents a conceptual model of SMC participation in decision-making in SPIP planning and implementation.

Diagram 1

Conceptual Model of SMCs Participation in SPIP in Ghana



Note. The decision-making model is adapted from GES (2001). It links role of SMCs in SPIP preparation, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Given the purpose of the study, we combined two research designs or approaches, namely the cross-sectional survey design and the concurrent mixed-methods approach (Babbie, 2005; Saunders et al., 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2018) to investigate the SMCs' knowledge of SPIPs and their involvement in the planning and implementation of SPIPs of schools in STD. The cross-sectional survey designs involved collecting data from SMCs at a single point, while the concurrent mixed-methods approach involved collecting and analysing qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously from SMC chairpersons and members (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). We collected and analysed both qualitative and quantitative data concurrently and descriptively. While the designs may not accurately reflect the population of SMCs over time (Babbie, 2005) and may be time-consuming, resource-intensive, and challenging to integrate the data (Cohen et al., 2007), combining them provided a snapshot and a more comprehensive understanding of SMCs members' views and validating findings.

Setting and Participants

The study included School Management Committee (SMC) chairpersons and members across all circuits in the South Tongu District (STD) of the Volta Region, Ghana. The target population consisted of 1150 individuals, including 115 chairpersons and 1035 members (Ghana Education Service [South Tongu], 2017b, 2017a). We chose chairpersons for their expertise in organizing, reporting, monitoring, and guiding the SMC. Their expected skills also encompass performance evaluation, fostering community-school relations, and maintaining focus on goals (Ghana Education Service, 2001b). SMC members were chosen for their direct involvement in planning and implementing SPIPs within schools.

A 95% confidence level and 0.05 margin of error yielded a minimum required sample size of 285 participants (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970; Saunders et al., 2007). We ultimately sampled a total of 298 participants using a combination of purposive, stratified, and simple random sampling techniques. For the qualitative study, eight SMC chairpersons were purposively chosen for their specialized knowledge of SPIP planning and implementation, their leadership roles, and their ability to provide valuable insights into the research. Their expertise and decision-making power make them key informants for understanding how SPIP shapes educational planning and management practices in basic schools. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were used to ensure that the remaining 290 SMC members were representative of different subgroups within the population.

Instruments

Individual semi-structured interview guide and questionnaires were developed and used for data collection. We used the SMC chairpersons' interview guide to seek detailed information on SMCs' knowledge level regarding SPIP development, involvement in SPIP preparation, and implementation of SPIPs in schools. Similarly, we designed the questionnaire to elicit responses to the three areas of the research questions. The items on SMCs' knowledge had 'yes' and 'no' response options, while those on SMCs' involvement in SPIPs preparation and implementation had a five-point Likert-type scale asking SMC members to rank their views on a scale of strongly agree to undecided. The response options were Strongly agree (SA) coded as 5; Agree (A) coded as 4; Disagree (D) coded as 3; Strongly disagree (SD) coded as 2; and Undecided (UD) coded as 1. Two research experts assessed the content validity of the instruments, whose suggestions and comments were used to refine the items. First, to ensure internal reliability, the questionnaire was pre-tested using 30 SMC members from Wute Circuit in the Akatsi South District, which shares similar characteristics with STD. The overall reliability coefficient was .879, showing good internal consistency of the items. Second, the semi-structured interview guide was also pre-tested with five SMC chairpersons who were not included in the main study. The validation and pre-testing of the interview guide helped to modify questions that appeared ambiguous and to determine the average time required for each interview session.

Procedure

Access to the research sites was facilitated by an introductory letter from the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA) of the University of Cape Coast and an approval letter from the District Director of Education of STD before going to the field to collect the data. An arrangement with each SMC chairperson through a personal visit and discussed the purpose of the study, then took them through a consent form to assure them of confidentiality and anonymity. Each interview was recorded using a voice recorder, with the researcher being mindful not to bring individual opinions to influence the interviewees and using skills to achieve consistency in the results. All the interviewees were given pseudonyms and assigned numbers to hide their identities (e.g., SMC chairperson 1). Data was collected from 280 out of 290 SMC members with a return rate of 97%, with all 8 SMC chairpersons sampled taking part in the study.

Data Analysis

We analysed the quantitative and qualitative data concurrently. First, we organised and managed the quantitative data using SPSS Version 21.0. The findings were presented using descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation). The respondents did not answer the open-ended questions. Regarding the qualitative data, we used qualitative data analysis process, consisting of three concurrent flows of activities, namely data condensation, data display and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). In this process, we selected focused, simplified, abstracted and transformed data from written-up field notes and interview transcripts. We then manually organised and compressed the information to draw conclusions based on the data. Finally, we concluded and verified as the analysis proceeds (Cohen et al., 2007). This method provided logical and detailed outcomes on the SMC chairpersons' views on their involvement in SPIP planning and implementation in STD.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Information

The survey found that the majority of SMC members were male (55%), had a secondary school education (32.1%), and had between 4 and 6 years of experience (61.8%). Additionally, the survey found that SMC members had a fair understanding of SPIPs but were not as involved in preparing and implementing these plans as they could be. Table 1 presents the results of SMC members' demographic information.

The findings presented in Table 1 are expected because, first, men are more likely to be involved in school management than women; however, it is noteworthy that the number of female SMC members may be increasing. Additionally, secondary school education is the minimum requirement for SMC membership positions. However, it would be beneficial to have more SMC members with higher levels of education, as this would give them a better understanding of SPIPs. Furthermore, the fact that most SMC members have between 4 and 6 years of experience is a positive indication, as this suggests that they have the necessary experiences to be active members of the SMC. Nevertheless, having more SMC members with more experience is beneficial since this would help them better understand the challenges facing schools.

Knowledge of SMCs in SPIPs Preparation

The first research question sought to examine the level of knowledge of SMCs in the STD regarding SPIPs development. The findings show generally that knowledge of SMCs on SPIPs preparation was much lower than expected. Figure 1 presents the responses of SMC members' knowledge about SPIPs development.

Table 1 *Demographic information of SMC respondents*

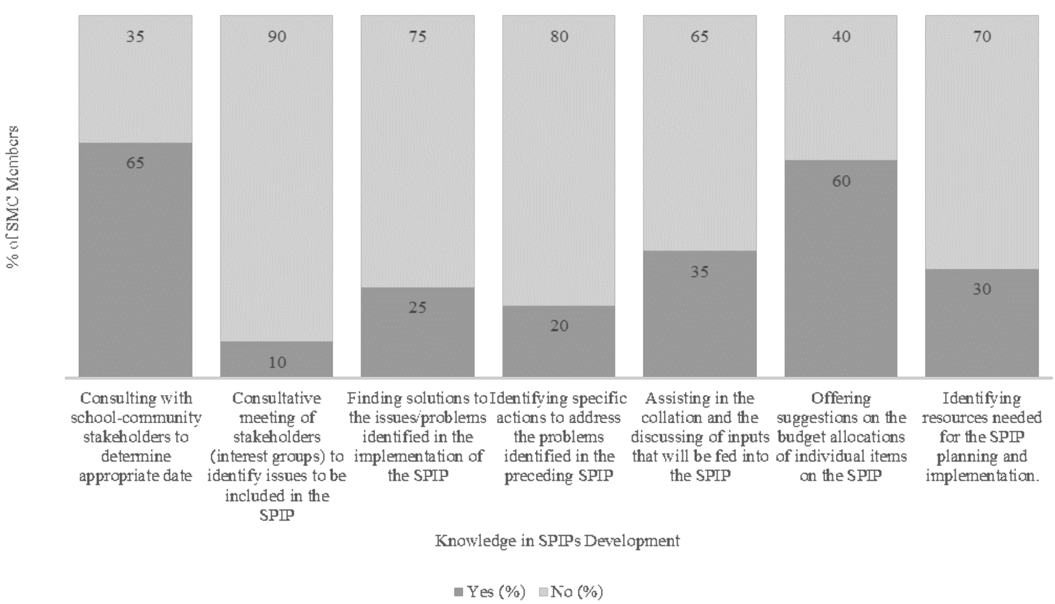
Variable	Respondents	
	Frequency (n)	**Percent (%)**
Sex		
Male	154	55.0
Female	126	45.0
Education		
BECE	36	12.9
SSSCE/WASCE	90	32.1
Cert 'A'	16	5.7
O' Level	20	7.1
MSLC	61	21.8
Diploma	34	12.1
Degree	15	5.4
Graduate	1	0 .4
None	7	2.5
Years of Experience		
0 - 3 years	72	25.7
4 - 6 years	173	61.8
7 - 9 years	16	5.7
10 years +	19	6.8

Note. N = 280.

Evidence from Figure 1 shows that between 10%-65% of the 280 SMC members surveyed knew the various aspects of SPIP preparation. However, reading across the Figure, between 35%-90% of the SMC members indicated they did not know much about aspects of SPIP preparation. The only aspect of SPIP preparation that few SMC members (10%) knew was the 'consultative meeting of stakeholders to identify issues to be included in the SPIP', leaving 90% of the SMC members who had limited knowledge about it. However, 65% of the SMC members said they were familiar with consulting with school-community stakeholders to determine appropriate dates as one of the steps in the SPIP planning and implementation. This item appeared to be the most common knowledge among the respondents on the SPIP planning and implementation.

Regarding the qualitative interviews conducted with the eight SMC chairpersons, there were some seemingly contrary views relating to their general knowledge of SPIP development. Generally, all the eight SMC chairpersons appeared to have a better understanding of the SPIP development. The following excerpts illustrate this claim clearly. For instance, one SMC chairperson said that "… before the SPIP is developed, we [must] involve all stakeholders (headteachers, teachers & PTA) in the choice of date … and to find solutions to the issues raised during our SPAM meetings (SMC chairperson 5). In the words of another chairperson, "... I know the consultative meeting of stakeholders (interest groups) seeks to identify issues to be included in the SPIP. We help to collate and discuss inputs into the SPIP (SMC chairperson 1). …We advise on the budget allocations to individual items on the SPIP… identify resources needed for the SPIP planning and implementation (SMC chairperson 8).

Figure 1
Proportion of SMC members with knowledge in SPIPs development



Note. N = 280. SMC members' knowledge was assessed using activities involved in SPIP development.

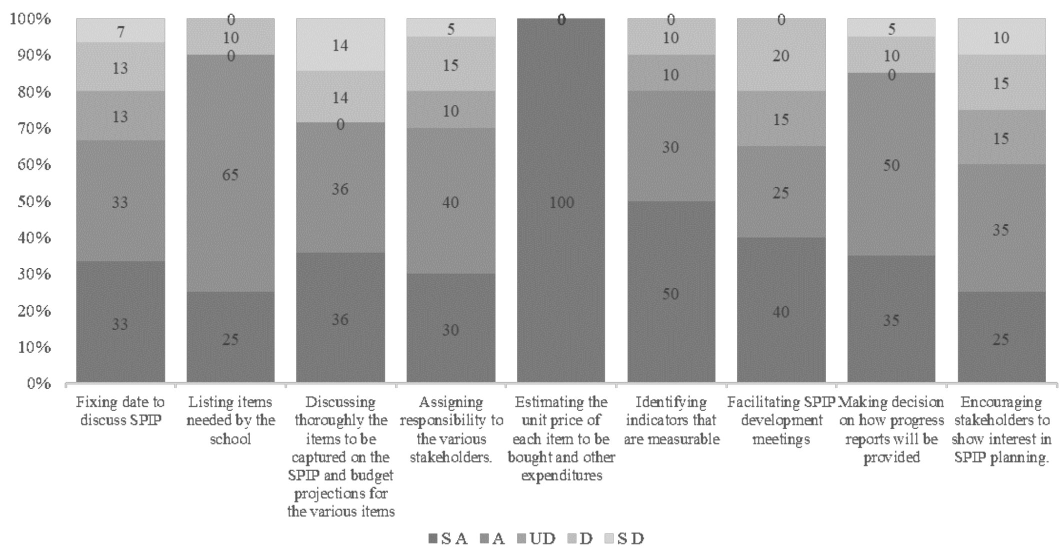
The limited knowledge of the SMC members regarding SPIP development could be because of inadequate training of the SMCs and lack of clearly defined information sharing among the SMC members. The practice of appointing or electing stakeholders into various school groups or positions without any structured induction programme could be responsible for the limited knowledge of the SMCs regarding SPIP development (Mfum-Mensah & Friedson-Ridenour, 2014). The SMC members' inadequate knowledge about their core duties could affect their level of participation in SPIP planning and implementation. It is a worldview that you give what you have. Indeed, if the knowledge of the SMCs in the SPIP development process is to be improved and consolidated continuously, then there is a need to promote good practices. These practices require building strong knowledge capacities among the SMCs (UNCHS [Habitat], 1999). Thus, SMCs' limited knowledge of SPIP development may hinder effective performance of their mandate as envisaged in the SMCs' policy guidelines (Ghana Education Service, 2001b, 2010; Ministry of Education, 1994).

SMCs' Involvement in SPIP Preparation

The second research question sought to explore SMCs' involvement in SPIP preparation. The respondents were asked to indicate 'yes' or 'no' to the statement 'Have you been involved in SPIP preparation as an SMC member?' The results revealed that only 20 (7.1%) of the SMC members indicated were involved in SPIP preparation. This result implies that a majority of the respondents, 260 (92.9%) had not been involved in SPIP preparation. As a follow-up question to SMCs involved in SPIPs preparation on which areas they were involved in. Figure 2 presents SMCs' responses to their involvement in SPIP preparation.

Figure 2

Proportions of SMCs' Involved in Areas of SPIPs Preparation



Note. N = 20. The figure shows the proportion SMCs involved in different areas of and the level of agreement or disagreement to SPIP preparation in STD. The values represent valid and approximate proportions.

Findings from Figure 2 reveal that 100% of the respondents strongly agreed that they were involved in estimating the unit price of each item to be bought and other expenditures. The Figure also shows that 13 (65%) respondents agreed that they were involved in listing items needed by the school for effective SPIP development. As noticed in Figure 2, some of the respondents disagreed with some of the suggested areas of their involvement in the SPIP planning. It is worth mentioning that 4 (20%) respondents disagreed that they were involved in facilitating SPIP development meetings. This result implies that not all the 20 SMC members were involved in the SPIP development in the STD. Nevertheless, the Mean of means analysis ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.61$) shows that most of the SMC members were involved in the activities of SPIPs development.

The analysis of SMC chairpersons' interviews further highlights similar views expressed by the SMC members. Six chairpersons conceded they were not involved in the SPIP planning. One SMC chairperson said, "They don't contact me on the SPIP planning … I don't even know when the headteacher and his teachers prepare it … they do their own thing and think I don't know (SMC chairperson 4). Another SMC chairperson said: "… I sign the prepared SPIP document … because I don't want anybody to blame me for delaying the school" (SMC chairperson 8). The following quote reflects another SMC chairperson's non-involvement in SPIP planning:

> … The last time I asked the headteacher, he behaved as if the school was his property. … the headteacher thought I didn't know anything about the SPIP planning. … I am not involved in the SPIP planning, but I don't blame the school because I'm a busy person (SMC chairperson 6).

On the other hand, the two SMC chairpersons who said they were involved in the SPIP planning had these to say when they were probed further. Their views are presented in the following quotes:

> "… I attend SPIP planning meetings… I am actively involved in choosing a good date and time to discuss SPIP… I have been listing some of the items needed by the school (e.g., TLMs) for inclusion in the SPIP… I coordinate discussions on the items to be captured on the SPIP and help in budget projections for the various items … I go to the classrooms to check the needs in the classrooms before the SPIP drawing meetings … I have been signing the SPIP after editing it" (SMC chairperson 3).
>
> "… I take time to examine the SPIP before signing … I attend SPIP planning meetings… where there are mistakes, I ask the teacher and staff to correct them … Most of the time, I call the circuit supervisor to support us in the SPIP preparation…. Most often, I witness the signing of the SPIP by the circuit supervisor … Sometimes, I carry the headteacher in my car to the DEO to submit the final SPIP to the District Education Officer for approval" (SMC chairperson 7).

The results show that SMCs were not fully involved in SPIP planning in the STD. The findings depart from the GES policy on the SMCs' functions in basic schools in Ghana (Essuman & Akyeampong, 2011; Ghana Education Service, 2010). The policy stipulates that for proper planning of the SPIPs, the SMCs must play a leading role in its development. Such SMC's roles include coordinating the SPIP planning activities (i.e., identifying resources needed, setting indicators of success, encouraging all stakeholders to show interest and participate) and assigning responsibility to stakeholders to facilitate the planning process. Again, the findings contradict UNCHS' (UNCHS [Habitat], 1999) assertion that participatory decision-making should include strategy and action planning. According to UNCHS, strategies and action plans are drawn up jointly and agreed upon by all the SMC members). Thus, contrary to GES policy and UNCHS assertion, the data from the study revealed that strategies and action plans in the SPIPs planning are not being drawn up jointly by all the SMC members.

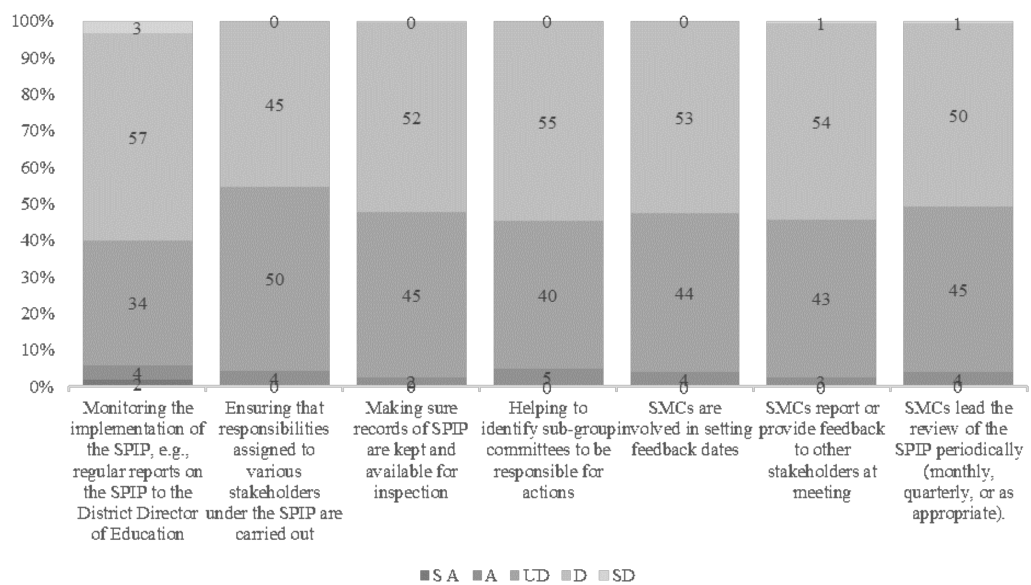
Areas of SMCs' Involvement in SPIPs Implementation

Research Question Three sought to explore how SMCs were involved in implementing SPIP in schools in the STD. The findings generally show that the SMC members were less involved in all the areas of SPIP implementation. Figure 3 shows the distribution of SMC members involved in SPIP implementation. Sixteen (6%) respondents (5 strongly agree and 11 agree) reported their involvement in the implementation of the SPIP. The highest response was for monitoring the implementation of SPIP. Only 14 (5%) of the respondents agreed that they take part in helping to identify sub-group committees. The research found that SMCs rated monitoring SPIP implementation (M = 3.56, SD = 0.71) more highly than ensuring assigned responsibilities (M = 3.41, SD = 0.59) in the context of SPIPs. The mean score for monitoring SPIP implementation was higher than the mean score for ensuring responsibility by 0.11 points, with more variability in the ratings for monitoring SPIP implementation. SMC members may find monitoring SPIP implementation easier than ensuring responsibility, possibly due to the tangible outcomes it provides. SMCs need more support and guidance to fulfil their SPIP planning responsibilities, especially for more complex tasks. Additionally, SMC members reported the least involvement in reporting or providing feedback, and their responses were homogenous.

Figure 3

Proportion of SMCs Involved in Areas of SPIP Implementation

Note. N = 280. The figure shows the proportion SMCs involved in different areas of and the level of agreement or disagreement to SPIP implementation in STD. The values represent valid and approximate proportions.



The views of the SMC chairpersons were not much different from those of the SMC members. However, when asked to mention specific monitoring duties they performed as SMC chairpersons, they mentioned roles as seen in the quotes from four of them: "… I sign the SPIP completed form … I sign cheque book for withdrawal of money to buy items (or if headteacher wants to withdraw money to buy items … checking payments and receipt records" (SMC chairperson 2).

> … inspecting items bought occasionally…visiting the school to talk to teachers and learners sometimes … signing the SPIP completed form … signing the chequebook for withdrawal of money to buy items … calling the headteacher on a mobile phone to enquire about the level of implementation of the SPIP (SMC chairperson 7).

Two SMC chairpersons (7 & 3) further gave some implementation duties they had been performing. The excerpts of their interviews were:

> … I monitor the SPIP implementation in my school through regular announced and unannounced visits … I chair the SPIP implantation review meetings. I ensure that duties given to the headteacher, teachers, the SMC, and the PTA under the SPIP are performed. I sign the SPIP completed form … I sign a chequebook to withdraw money to buy school items … I make sure records of SPIP are kept well… I see to it that records of the SPIP are available for inspection through proper filing of the documents. … I also present reports to other stakeholders at meetings termly (SMC chairperson 7).
>
> … I monitor sub-group committees (e.g., sanitation and project committees) responsible for implementing specific actions in the SPIP in my school; … I'm involved in checking feedback dates and updating stakeholders on feedback dates. … I also present reports to other stakeholders at meetings termly … I'm involved in providing feedback to other stakeholders at the meeting. I sign the SPIP completed form … I sign a cheque for the withdrawal of money to buy items … I coordinate the review of the SPIP periodically (monthly, termly, or as appropriate) … I chair the SPIP implantation review meetings (SMC chairperson 3).

Based on the views of SMC chairpersons, the duties performed by SMC chairpersons were signing the SPIP completed form and signing a cheque for withdrawal of money to buy items. In this light, we argue that SMCs' participation in the SPIP planning and implementation in STD has declined to a 'mere signature institution'. Additionally, the evidence shows that some of the SMC chairpersons, even though were not involved in the development of the SPIP, they performed some duties at the implementation level of the SPIP.

The six SMC chairpersons were probed further on why they performed those implementation roles even though they were not involved in the SPIP planning. While three SMC chairpersons (1, 2, & 4) could not provide any reason, two of them (6 & 8) had the following to say:

> … I'm the SPIP chairperson; if I don't sign the SPIP and the cheque for the withdrawal of money to buy items, check payments and receipt records, and call the headteacher on a mobile phone to enquire about the level of implementation of the SPIP, the school will be affected negatively and 'Torgbe' [Chief] will not be happy with … (SMC chairperson 6).
>
> Do I have a choice? I don't want anybody to blame me for drawing the school backwards. My predecessor told me that that was how they have been doing it so I don't want to offend the headteacher and the teachers … teachers don't like coming here, so we are handling them peacefully and with care (SMC chairperson 8).

The evidence further reveals that two out of eight SMC chairpersons (7 & 3) were highly involved in the SPIP implementation in their schools. However, the other two SMC chairpersons' (6 & 8) views showed an inadequate understanding of their duties as SMC chairpersons.

The findings on the areas of SMCs' involvement in SPIP implementation contradict the leadership roles imposed on the SMC as a major stakeholder in the planning and management of basic schools (Abreh, 2017; Ghana Education Service, 2010; Kwaah & Ampiah, 2018; Ministry of Education, 1994). As documented, SMCs are expected to help guide the activities needed in implementing targets, identify achievements and new challenges and offer advice, assign new responsibilities, and ensure that earlier targets set in the SPIP are delivered. They must also visit schools and use participatory planning and decision-making approaches in guiding the school to implement the SPIP according to the road map drawn. The functions of SMC at the implementation stage of the SPIP include contacting headteachers and/or teachers for financial and school reports on the achievements of the SPIP, supervising and inspecting the implementation of the SPIP and generating progress report/observation on the SPIP activities (Ghana Education Service, 2001a, 2001b). From the findings, the SPIP implementation duties of the SMCs had not been fully seen in the STD.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge the crucial role played by head teachers, teachers, and parents in successful school improvement efforts. The active participation from these stakeholders also contributes to the effectiveness of SPIP implementation. Headteachers, teachers and parents also play crucial role in the successful school improvement efforts. Their active participation in the preparation and implementation of SPIP contributes to its effectiveness. For example, headteachers are required to lead the development and implementation of specific improvement strategies within their schools. In addition, teachers provide support to headteachers and facilitate collaboration between the school and parents. Further, parents contribute to the planning process, offering feedback on school policies, and supporting their children's learning at home (International Labour Organisation, 2012).

IMPLICATION FOR QUALITY EDUCATION

These results have significant implications for quality education for all and helping to address challenges reported by the United Nations in its 2023 report. First, SPIPs are essential for improving school quality. SPIPs are supposed to be data-driven plans that identify areas where SMC members need to improve and outline specific strategies for addressing those areas. We argue that when SPIPs are competently prepared and implemented, they could lead to significant gains in dropout rates, learning loss, and learning outcomes. As SMCs play a critical role in SPIP preparation and implementation at the school level, they are also responsible for overseeing the management of basic schools and ensuring that they meet the needs of all learners. Thus, SMCs in STD should be highly involved in all aspects of SPIP preparation and implementation, from needs analysis to goal setting to strategy development to monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, SMC members' lack of knowledge or capacity to participate successfully in SPIP preparation and implementation can hinder their ability to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, 1994). This limited knowledge can negatively impact the quality of education learners receive.

The study's findings suggest that there are measures that can help improve the quality of education for all in STD by ensuring that SMCs participate actively in SPIP preparation and implementation. One way is for STDED and STDA to train SMC members on SPIP preparation and implementation (Ghana Education Service [South Tongu], 2017a, 2017b). This training should cover all aspects of the SPIP process. In addition to providing SMC members with the needed training, STDED and STDA should empower them to participate actively in SPIP preparation and implementation. SMC members should have a meaningful voice in all aspects of the SPIP process and be able to provide input on needs analysis, goal setting, strategy development, and monitoring and evaluation (UNCHS [Habitat], 1999). Finally, STDED and STDA should provide SMC members with the resources to participate successfully in SPIP development and implementation (Ministry of Education, 1994). This measure may include providing them with access to data, technical assistance, and financial resources. We expect that by applying these measures, policymakers and SMCs can help ensure that all learners have access to sustainable high-quality education, regardless of their schools.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, our study explores SMC members' knowledge and involvement in planning and implementing SPIPs in schools in one district in Ghana. Our findings highlight the limited knowledge and participation of SMCs in SPIP development and implementation, which is an obstacle to improving school performance. Our study reveals that the role of SMCs in SPIP planning and implementation has been reduced to a mere formality of signing completed forms and chequebooks. Therefore, to improve SMC members' knowledge and involvement in SPIPs preparation and implementation in STD, DED should provide SMC members with more training on SPIPs, invite SMC members to participate in the development and implementation of SPIPs, and recognise and reward SMC members for their contributions to school performance improvement. By following these recommendations, the STD and DED can help to ensure that SMC members are better equipped to help schools improve their performance.

However, while the findings presented in this paper offer valuable insights into the issue of SMC participation in SPIP preparation and implementation in one district in Ghana, we acknowledge some limitations that need to be addressed. The main limitation of the current study is that it focused on the SMC's role in SPIP development and implementation. Future research should investigate the impact of headteachers leadership on successful SPIP execution, evaluate the effectiveness of collaboration strategies between headteachers and teachers in achieving SPIP goals, and explore how parent engagement can be fostered to support school improvement initiatives.

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