

School Board 'Visibility' During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Education Management Musings From A Tripartite Case Study of Schools in Central Uganda

Gyaviira Musoke Genza ¹

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School level education management requires the active involvement of both school administration and the board of governors. Without board's supervisory eye, school administration may easily lapse to the detriment of education quality. How, then, did school boards execute their oversight mandate during the difficult times of COVID-19? Using a tripartite case study design, the study examined school board 'visibility' in school management during COVID-19 with focus on the ensuing education management lessons. Results showed that, during the pandemic, the visibility of different school boards varied from 'considerable' to 'no visibility' depending on certain interesting factors. It was concluded that there is no single uniform descriptor of board's visibility during an emergency such as COVID-19. Secondly, there are both materialistic and altruistic antecedents of boards' visibility levels. The study serves as a correction to the stakeholder model's excessive faith in board members' disinterested commitment to service of the common good. It also recasts the question of board membership for better school management.

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INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of 2020 to about two years later, the world was awash with distressing narratives of the novel corona virus (COVID-19), which WHO declared a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The pandemic brought about unprecedented disruptions to all sectors of life including education (Hylton & Hylton, 2021). "Lockdowns, quarantines, self-isolation, [and] physical distancing" (Pollock, 2020: 40) became the 'new normal' – the new but typical way of going about day-to-day life (Hylton et al., 2021). Within schools, there was much "situational ambiguity, where the operational context could change overnight" (Beauchamp et al., 2021: 388). Head teachers (principals) had it rough maintaining institutions that were now and again left 'empty' due to partial or full suspension of schooling to contain viral infections. Their woes were not only associated with lack of funds to cover schools' operating costs (Francisco & Nuqui, 2020; Varela Fedynich, 2020), but also with feelings of abandonment with none to guide them through the many emerging issues (Brelsford et al., 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Where were school boards? How 'visible' (active) were they? How did they go about their oversight role during the uncertain times of COVID-19? It is the search for answers to such questions that motivated this study.

Globally, school boards are taken as 'boards of trustees' for their respective schools (McCormick et al., 2006; Ojijo, Ajowi & Aloka, 2020; Steadland, 2015). Some countries refer to them as 'School Council' (McCormick et al., 2006), 'Board of Governors' [BOG], or 'Board of Management' (Ojijo et al., 2020). Their role is to oversee the running of a given school to safeguard public interests (Ojijo et al., 2020; Tatlah & Iqbal, 2011). "As a trustee, board members represent the collective values and interests of the whole community" (McCormick et al., 2006: 431). Unlike a Parents and Teachers' Association ('PTA'), a school board has a statutory mandate; it is part of a given school's substantive governance structure (Tatlah et al., 2011). Thus, commitment and a sense of ownership are expected of a school board for better school management (Carlitz, 2016). Indeed the importance of boards in checking on and controlling administrators' actions cannot be overstated. "The more [school] boards fulfil their roles such as resource provision, service, monitoring and control, the better the performance of the school" (Nkundabanyanga et al., 2015: 231).

In Uganda, boards of secondary schools are called 'Board of Governors' [BOG]. However, Uganda's Education Act 2008, which contains the country's most comprehensive and current policy on school boards, is not straightforward on BOG functions (Nkundabanyanga et al., 2015). It first states that "a board shall have

¹ School of Education, Makerere University; gyaviira.genza@mak.ac.ug; orcid.org/0000-0002-5927-8731

the functions conferred on it by [the] Minister or district secretary for education" (MoES, 2008: 62). Then it outlines what it calls board's 'additional functions', namely; to govern the school for which it has been constituted; administer a school's funds as well as its movable and immovable property; provide for the welfare and discipline of students and staff; fix fees and other charges with the approval of the Minister; and perform other functions as prescribed by the Act (MoES, 2008: 63). Similar roles are further decipherable from the three key committees instituted by the same Act: a) Academic, sports, games and recreation committee; (b) Discipline and public relations committee; and (c) Finance, development, production and self-help and staff and students welfare committee. The current study therefore posits that the mission of BOGs in Uganda is to ensure effective school governance in general, with specific focus on the academic, financial, and moral wellbeing of students and staff. It should also be noted that although it is the head teacher who is responsible for a school's day-to-day administration, s/he does this on behalf of the board. Thus, as the statutory overseer, the board should keep an open eye, including regular demands for accountability. Board's composition also enables it to cater for the interests of a wide range of stakeholders including the foundation body, local government, parents, staff and old students.

During an emergency such as COVID-19 the criticality of the above board for sound school administration and management does not diminish. For example, writing from the Middle East context of Oman, Gokuladas and Baby (2020) contend that BOGs remain one of the stakeholders with an immense scope of contribution to COVID-19 issues at the school level. Processes such as school reopening are expected to be carried out in consultation with the board:

School Management Committee [or Board of Governors] has a pivotal leadership role to play at this point in time... [It] should rise to the occasion at this juncture to ensure that students are returning to the schools with more confidence and enthusiasm. The SMC [sic] should spearhead the process of reopening the school by providing strategic direction and unconditional support to the school administration (Gokuladas et al., 2020: 203-204).

How, then, did BOGs in Uganda actually carry out their functions during the traumatic times of the COVID-19 pandemic? Studies such as Howard and Dhillon (2021) indicated that considering the turbulence occasioned by COVID-19, the need for outstanding board leadership to ensure student and staff wellbeing became even more urgent. That is 'new normal leadership', which focuses on "the ability to be adaptive while staying strong with one's commitment" (Francisco et al., 2020: 18). School boards are therefore expected to have remained visibly resilient in their commitment to their mandate despite the pandemic. The current study was interested in finding out the reality. How involved in management were school boards during COVID-19? How 'visible' were they, and what explains the different level(s) of 'visibility'?

The term 'visibility' refers to an entity's degree of presence or general attention to something (Lannert & Derenyi, 2020). More specifically, and borrowing from Thompson (2021) and Lannert et al. (2020), this study conceptualised 'visibility' as school board's active involvement in school governance during the first two years of COVID-19 (March 2020 - January 2022). Visibility was operationally discerned in the moves that a board initiated to supervise what was going on at school; give support to and arouse hope in school administration; show interest in learner and staff wellbeing; and influence higher authorities, fellow board members and (other) opinion leaders to take action for the good of the school during the pandemic.

Board's visibility was studied with a keen eye on any emerging implications for education management at the school-level, hence the perspective of 'musings' (reflections) for better practice. In this case, educational management refers to board's responsibilities of overseeing, controlling and directing the various processes aimed at ensuring teaching, learning and overall school sanity (Craig, 2021; Agih, 2015).

In Uganda, where the study was conducted, the six-year long secondary level of education is quite critical of the entire national education system. It does not only absorb the about one million annual graduates of the seven-year primary level but also prepares candidates for the tertiary level (2-5 years) in view of providing employees for the national economy (MoES, 2008). Any oversight shortfalls at the secondary school level can have dire consequences for other levels. Currently the secondary school level has 2,792 schools, 64% of which are privately owned (Lee, 2017). Private schools were also the majority in the current study.

The study was informed by the stakeholder model (of the stakeholder theory) (Connolly et al., 2017; Freeman et al., 2004). The model posits that, first, public institutions such as schools exist to serve the interests of all stakeholders – the common good – and not only the interests of shareholders (owners) (Freeman et al., 2004; Steadland, 2015). Secondly, "public sector institutions should be governed by those who have an interest in them" (Connolly et al., 2017: 6) – those that hold a 'stake' (legitimate interest) in those institutions' wellbeing

(Freeman et al., 2004; Steadland, 2015). 'Stake-holders' are essential to the excellence of their institutions beyond mere survival (Freeman et al., 2004). Thus, in the context of education, BOGs are necessary for the achievement of school objectives (Steadland, 2015). They act as their schools' "controllers, regulators, collaborators, [or] agenda setters" (Gomes et al., 2010, as cited by Connolly et al., 2017: 7). However, this depends on the level of a given BOG's 'visibility' (active involvement).

The stakeholder model is criticized for its conception of board membership largely in terms of members' interests (stakes) in an institution, and not in terms of members' expertise as the skills-based model would prefer (Connolly et al., 2017). However, skills are not a preserve of non-stakeholders. Actually board membership is often constituted from among those with relevant expertise. Thus, the study concerned itself also with board members' skill-sets.

A review of literature indicated that existing research largely examines school leadership during the COVID-19 era from the perspective of principals (Harris, 2020; Howard et al., 2021; Pollock, 2020; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020), leaving the question of school board leadership during COVID-19 basically unasked and unanswered. Yet also before the pandemic scholars were complaining that "given the significance of the board's responsibility, board functioning as a focus of research remains somewhat neglected" (Connolly et al., 2017: 6). An example of a pre-COVID-19 study that focused on school boards at the secondary school level is Nkundabanyanga et al. (2015), which related BOGs with perceived school performance. However, Nkundabanyanga et al. (2015) is constrained by its use of a closed-ended Likert scale questionnaire as its sole instrument. Even worse, Nkundabanyanga et al. (2015) excluded school board members from its respondents. Other pre-COVID-19 Ugandan studies on school board effectiveness focused on the primary school level, not the secondary one (Adong, 2017; Kaggwa et al., 2017; Oloka, 2017). Such limitations further warranted the current study.

However, though gleaming the school leadership terrain from largely principals' administrative perspectives, existing literature succeeded in raising certain issues that were helpful in the study of school board 'visibility'. For instance, Harris and Jones (2020) contended that there was an ongoing shift in school leadership practices towards 'context responsive leadership'. The current study asks: Going by their visibility during COVID-19, how 'context responsive' are school boards in Uganda? Secondly, Harris (2020), writing from the US, intimated that "a new chapter in educational leadership is currently being written because of COVID-19. A changing leadership order is emerging that is more distributed, collaborative and networked" (p. 325). The study asks: How are Harris (2020)'s 'new' leadership behaviours being adapted by school boards for better educational management in Uganda? Thirdly, just like head teachers did in countries like Canada (Pollock, 2020), did BOGs in Uganda also become COVID-19 information mobilizers and policy interpreters for the good of their schools? If, during COVID-19, school leaders in USA were reported to be placing school interests above their own in servant leadership (Fernandez et al., 2020), how were things with BOGs in Uganda? Lastly, research associated COVID-19 with some leadership opportunities, such as the possibility of closer working relationships with parents (Fernandez et al., 2020; Harris et al., 2020). The epidemic was reported to offer "the opportunity to lead differently and, potentially, to lead more effectively" (Harris, 2020: 321). The current study asks: How did school boards in Uganda re-invent themselves during the epidemic by also leading differently?

To address the gaps in literature, the current study aimed at exploring the 'visibility' of different school boards in school management during COVID-19, taking the case of three secondary schools in Central Uganda. Two objectives guided the study, namely: To explore the involvement of school boards in school management during COVID-19; and to examine the antecedents of school board 'visibility' during the same pandemic. These issues were construed to be significant for their potential school management lessons during related crises in the future.

METHODS

This part contains an explanation about the development and validation of the Critical Thinking Skills of Environmental Education (CTSEE) test, an instrument designed to measure secondary level students' critical thinking skills about environmental issues. The entire process of development and validation was done through different steps.

The study was conducted using a descriptive tripartite case study design that followed a qualitatively interpretivist approach. A case study was preferred to a sweeping survey to enable an in-depth inquiry of

board's 'visibility'. Also Howard et al. (2021) contend that since context is even more important when considering effective leadership practices during such emergencies as COVID-19, case studies are preferable. Being 'descriptive', the study mainly aimed at exploring the who, what, how and why of board realities without delving into causal relationships (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). However, case study research is limited by its lack of external validity (for generalization) (Creswell, 2015; Yin, 2011). This limitation was minimized by going tripartite – localising the study in three different schools to realise a variety of management musings.

Data were collected from three BOGs, hence three secondary schools. The schools were arrived at using purposive criterion sampling, which pivoted around cases that met the predetermined characteristics of interest. The study aimed at studying three schools but of different foundational (ownership) types, since in Uganda school boards are mainly populated by foundation body representatives, including the chairperson (MoES, 2008). Apart from public schools, Ugandan schools are private – either private-for-profit or private community/religious schools (Muwagga et al., 2018). Though of different types, the study targeted schools that were located in the same geographical area to minimise diverse extraneous influences other than foundation body. It is in Sub-county X (pseudonym) in Central Uganda that schools with the desired characteristics were found. For ethical reasons, further details of the schools' location were kept secret. However, as is characteristic of case study research, the other pertinent details of each study school are provided (Table 1).

Table 1: Bio-data of the case schools whose boards were studied

	Bio-characteristic	School A	School B	School C
1	School type	Public	Private church-	Private for-
2	Ownership	Government	Catholic Church	Private
3	Years of existence	53	7	15
4	Board's years in	3	4	3
5	Number of students	1,300	350	278
6	Number of teachers	78	26	38
7	Non-teaching staff	30	11	15

Table 1 reveals that one government and two private school boards were studied. For private schools, one belonged to the Catholic Church (not-for-profit), and the other was private-for-profit. Each of the three boards had been in office for at least three years. This means that each had adequate experience for informed practice. Whereas students in the study schools ranged from 278 (School C) to 1,300 (School A), staff ranged from 37 (School B) to 108 (School A). These bio-data imply that the three cases in which the study was localized typified a variety of variables, hence a high probability of a variety of experiences.

For number of participants, initially 12 were targeted, following Guest et al. (2006)'s advice that such a number suffices for case studies that use personal interviews. However, later more four were added for different reasons. For two extra board members, their inclusion aimed at data saturation (Creswell, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). Then one Diocesan Education officer was added for the Church-founded school since School B respondents kept referring to the Diocesan office. Similarly, for School C the school Director (owner) was added on realising that he somehow took over the role of BOG during the pandemic. Thus, the study had a total of 16 participants: two BOG chairpersons, four board committee chairpersons, three ordinary board members, three head teachers, two deputy head teachers, one Diocesan education officer, and one school Director. The 16 were selected using purposive sampling.

For data collection, the study used (unstructured) interview and documentary review methods (methodological triangulation). Then research quality was sought by ensuring credibility (via face validity and pilot-testing of tools); transferability (by providing details of the three cases and entire research regime); dependability (by observing case study research protocols); and confirmability (by sharing final data transcriptions with participants for cross-checking authenticity) (Creswell, 2015; Yin, 2011). Also participants' differing views were included in the final write-up. Data were analysed thematically but another expert compared the emerging themes with audio recordings (peer review) (Creswell, 2015). Ethical practice was attended to by preceding informed consent with full disclosure; using pseudonyms; destroying audio recordings after the study; and strictly observing COVID-19 SOPs.

RESULTS

The study had two objectives; to explore the involvement of school boards in school management during COVID-19, and to examine the antecedents of school board 'visibility' during the same pandemic. I measured visibility in terms of pertinent board activities such as meetings, school inspections, intervention in issues of virus prevention and student/staff safety, and general willingness to give advice when contacted by school administration. Also considered were the platforms which were prevalently used for visibility. This section presents the key findings, case study by case study.

Findings on board visibility at School A (the Government-aided school) indicated that the board became dormant during the pandemic until critical issues shook them from their slumbers. The Head teacher observed that;

The school was under closure most of the time so there were no board meetings generally. But eventually two board meetings were held in 2021 because we had a bank loan and [uniform and food] suppliers to pay. Board sat twice to pass the annual budget and to see what to do with the suppliers. For other times when I called the board Chair she would say board members were also busy struggling to survive wherever they were. That since I was still getting salary, I should be able to continue supervising the school. But she [the Chair] sometimes called me to ask for updates (Head teacher, Government school).

The board Chair shed more light on why the board opted to carry out its work by proxy;

Before COVID, the board used to meet every term. When COVID came, we suspended all meetings thinking the pandemic would end soon. But later [2021] we had two meetings to see what was going on. Also to pass the budget to authorize expenditure. Money is tricky, we must authorize every coin (Board chair, Government school).

These findings mean that during COVID-19 the visibility of School A's board was generally little. Except for the board Chair's phone calls, which is commendable for continued moral support to the Head teacher, board was visible only in emergency cases of financial decision making ('management by crisis'). No indications of board involvement in decisions of both preventing the virus and ensuring student and staff safety were found, for example. During COVID-19 the board relegated much of its oversight work to school administration, which is odd. However, key financial decision-making was not left to school administration. Might financial control perhaps be the defining factor of board involvement in school management in schools like School A?

Delving deeper, the study tried also to unearth the antecedents of the above kind of school board visibility, in line with the study's second objective. It was discovered that the first clear factor behind School A board's actions and inactions was understandably the existence of COVID-19. The Deputy Head teacher explained that;

Strange COVID-19 times made it difficult for our board to do its usual work. Our board used to meet about three times a year. The virus disrupted our usual meetings (Deputy Head teacher, Government school).

But what made it possible later for the two board meetings to take place?

The bank and suppliers were on our neck. Board had to sit to find means of settling these issues. There was also the annual budget [to discuss] (Head teacher, Government school).

Similarly, the board Chair said that;

Our school is big, with a big budget from government. So we must follow up closely because we are accountable. I don't just issue out millions that my finance committee colleagues have not thoroughly checked. You want me to be arrested? So we had to meet (Board Chair, Government school).

These findings mean that financial issues are a key antecedent of school board visibility during emergencies such as COVID-19. These are partly issues of board having to pass the school budget, which is done annually (by law); but also issues of individual members receiving a token (money) for attendance. Perhaps the board took finances more seriously (than COVID-19 SOPs, for example) because money can easily get lost at school if not adequately controlled. But the findings further mean that where there is a will there is a way. When board is determined to meet, it actually succeeds in doing so despite the pandemic.

Therefore the kind of board (executive) that a school has might also constitute a key factor for its visibility. School A's board chairperson is a lady in her 50s, an academician with a PhD. The Finance committee chairperson is a medical doctor with a Masters degree. The Academic committee is chaired by a female lawyer in her late 30s. It would be expected that a board led by such well-read and elite members is more visible in School A's affairs even during the pandemic, since they (probably) appreciate more the importance of BOGs in school management. On why the board did not resort to virtual meetings, the Chair explained that most of the members preferred face-to-face meetings. It also looks like members' busy occupations contribute much

to board's level of availability. Yet one should appreciate that these are the same members (busy professionals) who used to hold board meetings regularly (termly) before the pandemic!

Concerning School B, the private church-founded school, findings on board's visibility indicated that the board remained actively involved in school supervision despite the pandemic. The Head teacher revealed that;

Board remained in charge, following up [the] school by [phone] calling and by holding meetings at school. Three emergency [board] meetings sat. The Chair wanted members to get the general situation and to discuss money for the askari [security person] and electricity (Head teacher, Church-founded school).

The board's Finance committee chairperson held a similar view;

Following up was not easy during lockdowns. We were not used to virtual meetings. But the Chair used to call some of us to sit down with the Head teacher to see what to do. Sometimes we met on site to see how exactly the school looked like (Finance committee chair, Church-founded school).

These findings mean that although the pandemic made it practically difficult for the board to meet every term (as before 2020), with extra commitment the board could still find ways of executing its mandate. This means that emergencies such as COVID-19 can only explain reduced visibility but not complete lack of visibility. Passion (commitment) is a key variable in moderating the influence of an emergency on board's visibility.

The study also inquired about board member turn-up for the meetings, and about members' financial tokens during the challenging times of COVID-19. The Head teacher explained that;

Not everyone attended. A few members like five used to attend these meetings but they were helpful. There was no allowance given to them. Actually it is the board members that raised some money for slashing the compound and paying the askari. Board knew the school had no money at all. We were not collecting any fees (Head teacher, Church-founded school).

Such board members' spirit of sacrifice is admirable. Might this have been the case also with other boards in Church-founded schools? The Officer from the Diocesan Education Secretariat said that;

Not all boards were so generous. But there are other boards which fundraised for their schools. Some bought food for the teachers who had remained at school (Officer from the Diocesan Education Secretariat).

The same caring spirit was also exhibited by School B's foundation body when, two months into the pandemic (May 2020), its Education Secretariat issued the following advice;

We also advise the headteachers to cooperate with the Boards of Governors and School Management Committees to distribute the food that had been stocked (in case there is still some) to the staff members before it is spoilt, to help them survive during this difficult moment [sic] (Letter from the Diocesan Education Secretariat; 14th May 2020).

This means that the spirit of caring for others is one of the cardinal values upon which Church-founded schools (and boards) are built.

The study also learnt from School B's Finance committee that, during COVID-19, whenever the board could not meet physically, they resorted to use of phone-calls;

Whenever government announced a partial or full lockdown I or the Chair [BOG] used to call the HT [Head teacher] to hear his plans for students' safety back home. Also for full reopening we inquired into safety issues like soap and water and spacing (Finance committee chair, Church-founded school).

This means that, first, School B's board used also the phone-call platform to ensure continued execution of its mandate. This was their 'online' platform. There was no mention of use of more advanced media such as zoom. Secondly, the Finance committee chairperson's sharing implies that the board actually involved itself also in decisions of virus prevention and student/staff safety, thus relieving the Head teacher of undue distress.

But how widespread is/was such high board commitment? Was this the case with all boards in Church-founded schools? The respondent from the Diocesan Education Secretariat intimated that;

During [COVID-19] lockdowns our school boards did a good job of following up. Our office has minutes of boards that sat. But overall only a minority of boards remained actively involved. The times were difficult (Officer from the Diocesan Education Secretariat).

This means that the board commitment at School B was quite unique even in the context of Church-founded schools. On the one hand, this further points to the disruptive nature of COVID-19 to school board activities and, on the other, to the rare spirit of commitment and care that some boards have.

What factors (antecedents) help to explain the rare commitment (visibility) of such boards? The study unearthed both religious (supra mundane) and secular (mundane) factors. The religious were detected in such views as;

Times were really bad. Not every board member could attend [meetings]. Those that attended like the board Chair and the two parents' representatives I think it is because of their unique love for the school. For them serving the school is serving God's children in the school. They have the school at heart (Head teacher, Church-founded school).

Then the secular antecedent was evident in such responses as;

Some schools had renovations going on. So boards or at least Finance committees had to sit to get updates and [to] authorise funds for next phases (Officer from the Diocesan Education Secretariat).

This means that when there are financial decisions to be made, board makes sure that it sits even during challenging COVID-19 times. This might be due to the legal issues commonly associated with financial accountability or due to members' personal interests in certain financial votes. A board member confirmed;

As board much responsibility for the school rests on us. There's no way we can just sit home and leave all decisions to the Hm [Head master]. What if big mistakes are made, like finances? We have to explain to the Diocese and the Ministry (Finance committee chairperson, Church-founded school).

However, for the case of School B, there were no renovations going on. So it was the religious explanation at play.

School B's board is chaired by a male graduate social development worker in his late 40s. Board committees are chaired by equally educated individuals, each a graduate. They are also heads of schools elsewhere – one for a Primary school, the other for a Technical school. These bio-data may help to account for School B board's apparent appreciation of their mandate, as a necessary (but not sufficient) explanation. It is other factors that may explain board's rare commitment as indicated by board's continued execution of its oversight role despite the pandemic. The religious antecedent typifies 'other factors'.

The third case board was that of School C – the private for-profit secondary school. For visibility, it was discovered that the board 'disappeared' during COVID-19 and its role was played by the school Director (owner). Shaking his head and smiling at the same time, the Head teacher revealed that;

Board was nowhere to be seen. The Chair never called even once. We at school were on our own [and] board on theirs. Whenever I called him he would say he was having a difficult time [due to the pandemic]. He would say he will call back but didn't. Sometimes he would advise me to call the Director instead (Head teacher, Private-for-profit school).

Asked more specifically about board's role in ensuring certain COVID-19 interventions, the Head teacher reiterated that;

No, no; there was no board intervention in issues of preventing the virus. May be at the beginning [of the pandemic] when some members called me. But after that board went silent. May be they lost interest because also the Director was quiet. He wanted to sell the school (Head teacher, Private-for-profit school).

The lack of board visibility was confirmed by two board members, one of whom reported that;

Before the virus we could meet maybe once a year. But when the virus started, the Director forgot us and we forgot the school. In these private [for-profit] schools board has no business if the Director does not show interest in your ideas. It is his school. If he needs your advice, he tells the Head teacher to call a meeting. We didn't hold a single board meeting (Academic Committee Chair, Private-for-profit school).

These findings mean that even the little visibility of School C's board, which existed before the pandemic, got lost during the pandemic. This implies that with such emergencies as COVID-19, the boards of schools such as School C (private-for-profit) become quite irrelevant. School management becomes the sanctuary of only two officers – the Director and the Head teacher. In this case, management can easily get derailed due to lack of a neutral body to advise.

When contacted, the Director explained rationale of his actions and inactions;

Board didn't meet, true. There was no schooling, no fees [collected], no allowances to give them. You don't allow board to sit if you have no money. They are expensive. Transport, break tea, lunch, airtime. [During COVID-19] I was in charge of the school, with the Hm [Head master] (School Director, Private-for-profit school).

These revelations were interpreted to mean that since School C is a for-profit school, board's visibility is perhaps also equally motivated by a *quid pro quo* mentality (of monetary gain) as 'payback' for members' time and ideas. Similarly, the Director does not seem to appreciate the role of a school board. Rather, he views it as a 'necessary evil' – a body to be tolerated simply for the sake of fulfilling the national regulatory authority's

requirements for license. This further means that the role of school boards in such private-for-profit schools is null *ab initio* (futile from the very beginning).

Thus, foundation body type seems to have been a critical antecedent of board's visibility during COVID-19. For example School C's board Chairperson further explained that although this was the first time that more than a year had elapsed without holding any board meeting, it was not uncommon for the school to go without holding any board meeting for more than two terms (about seven months). Particularly when the school's financial standing is not good, the Director does not allow the Head teacher to call board meetings;

The School Director had no money for board's allowances. So no board meetings were held during COVID-19. Members will eat you if you give no allowances (Board Chair, Private-for-profit school).

This means that for such private-for-profit schools as School C, the key motivation for board's visibility is financial gain (*quid pro quo*), and not lending a hand to school management. Might this further mean that such boards are ready to pass any agenda as long as they are paid for it? With what implications for the effective management of private-for-profit schools for quality education?

But there was another (unusual) antecedent behind the Director's unwillingness to let board sit. The Head teacher revealed that;

The director had a secret plan of selling off the school. He was much disappointed by the endless pandemic. He urgently needed money to sustain his other businesses. Fortunately no one gave him the [amount of] money he wanted. So the school survived (Head teacher, Private-for-profit school).

This means that the Director sees the school not as a social service but as any other money-generating project to be kept open or closed depending on whether it is making money or not. In such a case, board is at the mercy of the Director whether it fulfils its mandate or not. Secondly, board are also unwilling to involve themselves in school management unless they are to be 'paid' (financially). These findings point to a likelihood of many finance-related governance dilemmas existing in the private-for-profit school landscape in Uganda.

Bio-data on School C board indicated that it is chaired by a male business man about 50 years old. His highest educational qualification is UCE (an equivalent of Lower secondary education). Whereas one of the board's committees is headed by a Diploma holder (a town clerk) in her 60s, the other (committee) has a male trader in his 30s; probably a secondary school dropout. These findings point to a likelihood of a big money-making mentality in School C's board executive. Secondly, the secondary school level members of the board may not be the kind to expect to have the guts to assertively reign in both the Head teacher and the school Director to call meetings. School C board executive's bio characteristics therefore constitute a critical antecedent of its lack of visibility during COVID-19.

DISCUSSIONS

For the first objective, the findings revealed that the involvement of school boards in school management during COVID-19 oscillated between considerable involvement (at School B) and no involvement (School C). Considerable involvement is in line with the study theory's assumption that stakeholders such as BOG care for the wellbeing of their institutions (Freeman et al., 2004; Steadland, 2015). However, the lack of involvement at School C contradicts the stakeholder's further hypothesis that BOGs act as their schools' controllers and regulators (Connolly et al., 2017). This may be the principle (theory), but not necessarily the practice. Was Tatlah and Iqbal (2011) perhaps justified in querying the commitment of many school boards, and in pointing to a growing variance between the 'real' role(s) of boards in school governance and the 'prescribed' role(s)? Thus, findings point to partial variance between educational policy theory and practice.

The findings also showed existence of extra board resilience, commitment and care in school management during COVID-19, at least at School B. This means that passion ('love') is a variable that is capable of moderating the influence of such debilitating variables as COVID-19. For example, unlike the other two cases, School B board directly involved itself in decisions of virus prevention and student/staff safety decision-making. These behaviours confirm Fernandez et al. (2020) that during the pandemic some leaders placed school interests above their own in servant leadership. The findings further prove Fernandez et al. (2020) that during the pandemic there are leaders that communicated frequently with each other and with school administration "to build a sense of community, belonging and trust and reduce anxiety" (p. 43). This is what Howard et al. (2021) call 'compassionate leadership'. This board bought into Davis (2020: 1)'s recommendation that board "chairs should work with members...to ensure that meetings, in whatever form, can still be held to

conduct necessary business". In this case, the board of School B may be taken as exemplifying 'outstanding leadership' during a crisis (Howard et al., 2021). However, even for School B's board, there was no evidence to support Pollock (2020) that boards became COVID-19 information mobilizers and policy interpreters for the good of their schools.

However, according to the findings, none of the three boards used virtual (online) meetings for continued visibility during COVID-19. Those that met (Schools A and B boards) either used face-to-face meetings or phone-calls for their continued relevance. These findings disagree with McCrone, Lucas and Sims (2021) in the UK that during the pandemic 'the how' of board meetings shifted from face-to-face to virtual meetings. In the context of the current study, 'the how' did not change except in terms of 'how often?' Similarly, the findings contradict findings from USA where school boards resorted to "engaging with others through a laptop or phone screen" (Harris, 2020:321). Thus, in general, there is no evidence from any of the three boards to support Howard et al. (2021) as well as McCrone et al. (2021) that a virtual (online) cum face-to-face hybridized future awaits education management as one of the lasting legacies of the COVID-19 era. Rather, the study findings concur with McCrone et al. (2021) other discovery that although they became quite difficult to hold, "face-to-face meetings remained vital...and were generally viewed to elicit more in-depth, nuanced discussions" (p. 4). These findings seem to mean that developing world contexts such as Uganda still have a long way to go in the use of online fora in education management.

In general, school board efforts during COVID-19 only partially concur with the stakeholder model that boards exist to serve the interests of all stakeholders in public institutions such as schools (Connolly et al., 2017). But they largely agree with Fornaro et al. (2021) that COVID-19 was an experience in 'crisis leadership'.

For objective two, the study discovered that the first antecedent of board visibility was understandably the emergence of COVID-19. This antecedent explains both the partial visibility of School A's board and the lack of visibility for School C board. These findings concur with Davis (2020) and McCrone et al. (2021) that COVID-19 negatively affected many school governance routines. However, the pandemic did not necessarily make board visibility impossible, as the case of School B also attests. It only reduced it further implying that there are other key antecedents.

Findings revealed board's appreciation of its mandate as another antecedent, and it is associated with board's educational qualifications inter alia. These findings concur with Carlitz (2016) and Kanyiri et al. (c. 2009) that board's low education and training impede their performance. They are also in support of Tatliah et al. (2011) conclusion that some boards complete their term without understanding their roles. Yet mandate appreciation is taken to be the necessary condition for board's visibility; the sufficient condition being the prepotent values of board members, particularly those in the executive.

These values and beliefs are partly nested in the foundation body, which was another unearthed antecedent of board's visibility during COVID-19. For example, School C board's lack of visibility was partially accounted for by its foundational philosophy of (financial) profit-making. Here the Director (school founder) takes the BOG merely as a 'necessary evil' – a body to be tolerated just 'for the sake' (of fulfilling a legal requirement). For such a private-for-profit school, also the key motivation for board members' visibility was reported to be personal financial gain ('quid pro quo'), which contradicts the stakeholder model's 'common good' hypothesis (Connolly et al., 2017; Steadland, 2015). The existence of such commercial calculations aligns with Carlitz (2016)'s observation that members join board "expecting to receive personal material benefits, and when this fails to happen they become disinterested" (p. 7). It is such preoccupations that also confirm Nkundabanyanga et al. (2015) that many boards are merely ceremonial and thus ineffective in overseeing school operations. Are these perhaps the kind of boards that eventually become a mere rubber stamp for head teachers' and directors' covert moves, as Carlitz (2016) opined?

School B board's considerable commitment during COVID-19 was also found to be nested in its foundation body's spiritual value of serving God by serving God's people in the school. This is in line with Howard et al., (2021)'s observation that "what has shown as being most important in a time of turbulence are a leader's vision and values. In times of turbulence personal qualities and characteristics are important" (p. 11). Yet board characteristics are largely determined by the characteristics of individual board members such

as “willingness to commit to the task of governing and to devote time” (McCormick et al., 2006: 432), in line with Fernandez et al. (2020)’s call for servant leadership during COVID-19.

Finally, due to both the criticality of funds in school management and the financial-gain motivations of many board members, financial decision-making was seen to constitute another prevalent antecedent of board’s visibility. When it comes to money, board puts aside all excuses and sits, as was the case particularly with School A. doing this to control financial spending is in line with the stakeholder model’s common good hypothesis (Connolly et al., 2017). It is doing so for personal gain that contradicts the model. Muwagga et al. (2018) were therefore justified in condemning the growing unprofessional commercialism of many school boards being more concerned with personal gain than with learner/staff education and welfare.

CONCLUSIONS

From the three school board cases studied it is concluded that there is no single uniform descriptor of school board involvement in school management during COVID-19. Rather, there are indications of both considerable involvement and apparent lack of involvement. However, whether considerable or not, during COVID-19 school board involvement required a more than usual spirit.

Secondly, financial considerations and service ethics for spiritual motivations constitute the most critical antecedents of school board visibility in school management during a crisis such as COVID-19. Boards get involved either to ‘follow-up’ funds (renovations, budgets, loans) or fail to get involved because there are no funds (for allowances). However, such mundane factors fail to account for some members’ high visibility during the COVID-19 crisis. It is transcendental motivations of serving God by serving schools that explain some members’ exceptional commitment. This means that whereas some board members are quite materialistic (self-centered) in their school management ‘services’, others are altruistic (other-centered).

Concerning the stakeholder model, the study concludes that the model is only partially justified in contending that boards of public institutions (such as schools) serve the common good. Not necessarily. These boards can also be quite partisan – even self-interested. However, the model’s other hypothesis that public sector institutions are governed by those who hold an interest in them is justified. But the theory leaves unanswered the question of the kind of interest which these members hold. The study reveals that there can indeed be much variance between the ideal interest and the reality. As a correction, the skills-based model that bases board membership on expertise rather than interest could be handy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that Education ministries and foundation bodies should leverage the immaterial motivations that prompt some BOGs to remain committed to their statutory mandate despite critical challenges such as COVID-19. The values and motivations of such boards could inform board composition in the future, the skills-based model notwithstanding. Secondly, district education officers and foundation bodies should organize annual refresher courses for all school boards under their jurisdiction to update them on their statutory roles and functions. Apparently, there is a lack of appreciation of board’s mandate among many board members.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The study is limited by its case study design, hence lack of empirical generalizability beyond the three cases. This limitation is typical of case study research. Therefore, the study’s strength does not lie in its generalization to all school boards in Central Uganda but in its exemplification of research on such a topical issue, moreover, using an in-depth approach. The study’s qualitative findings also provide a strong basis for more generalizable survey research in the future. For example, a survey may be carried out on the relationship between foundation body type and school board performance.

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