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Proprietor-headteacher Power Dynamics in Managing Procurement in Kampala Metropolitan Area for-profit Secondary Schools, Uganda

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Abstract The study explored power dynamics between for-profit secondary school proprietors and headteachers in managing school procurement, focusing on; identifying school suppliers, negotiating contracts, and making purchases. A qualitative case study design was used to collect data in six for-profit schools in Kampala Metropolitan. Two schools are patronized by high income families, two by medium income families, and two by low-income families. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews from 12 participant; one proprietor and one headteacher from each school. The study established that five out of six proprietors have exclusive powers to identify suppliers, negotiate terms, and make school purchases. The headteacher who does is confined to academics-related requirements. Besides, no school observes guidelines for school procurement, and instead, proprietors use their school ownership powers to usurp headteachers procurement duties. We recommend that government fortifies its inspection, supervisory, and advisory support mechanisms to ensure that proprietors comply with procurement guidelines for schools.

Keywords: *School procurement management, for-profit schools, power dynamics, school proprietors*

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1. Introduction

In the last three decades, Uganda has witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of for-profit education institutions at all levels of the education system [1]. This followed in the wake of market liberalism that promoted a market economy, private entrepreneurship, individual choice, and measured state regulation in the provision of social services [2,3,4]. Even education systems, whose mandate is to preserve and transmit their nations' unique culture, were not spared [5,6]. Thus, under government stewardship, the non-state education sector, notably, for-profit education sector, came to the fore as a major provider of secondary education in Uganda, especially in Kampala Metropolitan Area-KMA [3]

The law forbids proprietors to head their own schools, and every proprietor is required to employ a qualified headteacher to manage the day-to-day affairs of the school. Headteachers are the schools' statutory accounting officers, under the oversight of governing boards, to which proprietors enjoy full membership [7]. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that the pursuit of profits, however, gives proprietors incentive to circumvent financial management regulations [8,9]. Balancing educational aspirations with business realities seems to tempt proprietors to blur the boundaries between school ownership and management [10,11], which may lead some proprietors to usurp headteachers' school procurement duties. The key question we sought to address is: How do KMA for-profit secondary school proprietors and headteachers exercise their powers to manage school procurement?

2. Statement of the Problem

Unlike government schools that enjoy funding from the state, for-profit schools do not because they are considered private businesses. However, the cost of starting, equipping, and running schools is enormous due to the mandatory regulations on classrooms and administrative blocks as well as boarding, sanitary, laboratory, catering, and sports facilities design [7,12]. Since proprietors hold the biggest stake in this investment, they are under pressure to balance their schools' educational aspirations with business realities [1]. It is alleged that the pursuit of business interests tempts proprietors to focus on minimizing costs so as to maximize profits. On their part, headteachers are inclined to maximize school expenditure so as to improve students' learning achievements.

However, the apparent goal conflict in managing school procurement and its implications is not clearly investigated. Thus, we explored the proprietor-headteacher power dynamics in managing for-profit secondary school procurement in KMA.

Research Questions

1. How do KMA for-profit secondary school proprietors and headteachers exercise their power to identify school suppliers?
2. How do KMA for-profit secondary school proprietors and headteachers exercise their power to negotiate contracts with suppliers?
3. How do KMA for-profit secondary school proprietors and headteachers exercise their power to make school purchases?

3. Methodology

This was a multiple case study [13] conducted in six for-profit schools, selected from KMA, based on the socio-economic status of the families that patronize these schools. February SS and March SS are patronized by high income households; July SS and August SS are patronized by middle income families; and November SS and December SS, are patronized by low-income families. The schools were selected to determine the pervasiveness of the problem across the different categories of for-profit schools in KMA. This reinforced the theoretical generalization of the study findings [14]. One proprietor and headteacher were selected from each school, making a total of 12 participants. We had face-to-face interviews with participants at their respective schools, each recorded interview lasting at least one hour. Interview recordings were transcribed, data analyzed, coded, and organized into themes, related to the research questions: (i) to identify school supplier (ii) to negotiate contracts with suppliers (iii) to make school purchases.

4. Theoretical Framework

The principal-agency theory [15] that explains the dilemma associated with contracts or agency between the principal and the agent was used to guide the study. The principal contracts the agent to do the work, with the expectation that the latter will work in the best interests of the former [16]. The agency problem arises when the principal's and agent's interests are not aligned, leading to goal conflict between the two. In this study, the proprietor is the principal, who hires the headteacher, as the agent, to manage for-profit schools. The contract stipulates that the principal funds the school and sets expectations, while the agent manages the school for the mutual benefit of the two parties [18]. The goal conflict arises because the proprietor aims to minimize costs so as to maximize profits, while the headteacher aims to maximize costs so as to improve students' learning. Accordingly, proprietors are tempted to use their ownership position to usurp the headteacher's power in managing school procurement.

5. Literature Review

Procurement refers to the activities and processes of acquiring goods and services from an external source, whose cycle extends from identifying the need for the goods and services through to contract management. [19] unpacks the procurement process as entailing: choosing and engaging a supplier; determining procurement requirements; approaching the market; selecting a supplier and entering a contract; ordering goods and services from a supplier; payment for the goods and services; and actively managing the contract across its entire lifecycle from creation to expiry. [20] consider procurement as a key aspect of school operations because it involves purchasing goods, services, and works to facilitate smooth school operation. A fundamental procurement principle is that goods and services be appropriate and secured at the best possible cost to meet school needs in quality, quantity, time, and location [21].

According to [22], effective procurement is the backbone of efficient and effective operations in educational institutions. Effective school procurement management is a comprehensive process of planning, organizing, and overseeing the acquisition of goods and services [23]. Much as it is complex and elaborate, effective school procurement ensures a seamless acquisition of requirements needed for daily operations and long-term goals. Whether acquisition of classroom materials, technological resources, or services; effective procurement process is the foundation to school success. This is because it encompasses all activities related to acquiring what schools need to operate [22].

[25] however, clarifies that contrary to common belief, managing school procurement involves much more than just purchasing school requirements. Instead, school procurement management involves identifying needs, evaluating options, negotiating terms, and managing contracts to ensure optimal value and compliance with government regulations. Accordingly, [26] take procurement as the strategic management of activities that support the school's mission, enhance operational efficiency, and ensure compliance with regulatory and budgetary requirements. So, a well-designed procurement management system plays a pivotal role in achieving these objectives by providing the tools and capabilities needed to streamline and optimize the procurement processes [19]. That said, however, the degree to which the KMA for-profit school proprietors and headteacher activate a well-designed procurement management system is an empirical question.

[19] concurs that effective procurement and spend management are crucial to a school success. He expresses concern that teachers and staff that are already stretched thin by curricular and student needs, are likely to divert their valuable focus to such time-consuming tasks like procurement. However, whereas [20] does not dismiss this concern, they justify staff involvement in procurement and spend management that procurement secures resources needed for educational goals, as spend management ensures that purchases are approved and aligned with school budgets. Together, the two roles, though time consuming, maximize efficiency, control costs, and

support better educational outcomes [20]. These roles are even more critical in for-profit schools that are constantly navigating how to do more with fewer resources to meet high expectations for student achievement. This is on top of managing their facilities and co-curricular programming, while ensuring that they maintain compliance with the strict procurement regulatory standards [25].

[21] avers that the only way private schools can manage this fine balance is to plan carefully and control efficiently how funds are spent across various departments and projects. They illustrate that a school undergoing a campus renovation needs visibility and control to track spending across multiple vendors and ensure the project stays within the allocated budget. Accordingly, they recommend use of procurement software to enable managers to monitor spending in real-time, avoid overspending, and simplify the process for purchasing goods and services from the right vendors, at the best prices [21]. Thus, [19] concludes that gaining more visibility and control over spending helps schools to optimize how resources are allocated, to ensure that every shilling is stretched to its maximum potential [22].

In Australia, [27] is of the view that in educational institutions, procurement management involves:

Aligning procurement activities with the institution's strategic objectives to ensure resources are available to support teaching, research, and operational needs; build and maintain relationships with suppliers to secure high-quality products and services at competitive prices; craft and negotiate contracts that clearly define the terms of procurement to protect the interests of the institution; identify potential risks in the procurement process and implement strategies to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements and ethical sourcing practices; and continuously assess the effectiveness of procurement activities and supplier performance to identify areas for improvement [27]. Such elaborate, well-intentioned, and admissible school procurement procedures, however, does not show how specific school managers exercise their power to manage school procurement.

In addition, the Victoria State Government justifies efficient procurement management in schools because: Educational budgets are often limited, which makes it vital to acquire school requirements at the best possible cost; it helps institutions maximize their purchasing power and achieve cost savings; it ensures that resources are available when needed, to avoid disruptions in academic and operational activities of the institution; managing suppliers and contracts ensures receipt of high-quality goods and services that meet specific needs; it ensures compliance with the requirements, thereby reducing the risk of legal and financial penalties; and well-managed procurement processes give schools a strategic advantage by supporting innovation and responsiveness to changing educational needs [27]. Undeniable as the above justifications may be, the issue at hand in this study is how proprietors and headteachers exercise their power to ensure efficient school procurement management.

In Uganda, school procurement management is guided by structures and procedures prescribed by [21] Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets (PPDA) Guidelines No. 5 (2014). The Act, Regulations and Guidelines take schools, public or private, as Procuring and Disposing Entities (PDE) under the Ministry of Education & Sports (MoES). Every school is required to establish Procurement and Disposal Entities (PDEs), as part of the school structures to ensure that all procurement and disposal activities are carried out in accordance with the law. The regulations also require schools to conform to ethical conduct and best practices [21]. However, the degree to which the proprietor-headteacher power dynamics facilitate adherence to school procurement regulations was not very clearly investigated.

Furthermore, Section 26 of the PPDA Act 2005 and Paragraph 5.3 of the [21] PPDA Procurement and Disposal Guideline for Schools in Uganda (2014) spell out the functions of headteachers as the accounting officers in PDEs. The act gives the Finance and General-Purpose Committee of the governing boards the role of Contracts Committees (CCs). The school Bursar plays the role of Procurement Disposal Unit (PDU). However, the headteacher, CCs, PDUs, and User Departments (UDs) in a school are required to act independently in relation to their respective functions and powers. This ensures ethical standards and guards against possible cases of conflict of interest. [21]. But whether or not this is the case in KMA proprietary secondary schools, was a matter of empirical investigation.

Finally, as public procuring entities, education institutions are required by the [28] PPD Act 2005 to establish School Tender Committees (STCs) to take on procurement responsibilities at various levels. The composition of the committees is also determined in the law. Other committees are formed to procure specific items in learning institutions. Membership to the STCs is largely similar with the only difference that teachers play a greater role on the STCs and other school committees while parents play a greater role on the governing bodies [29]. All said, however, still the extent to which the proprietor-headteacher power dynamics enables management of school procurement in accordance to the PPDA Guidelines, is an empirical question this study sought to unravel.

6. Results

We sought to determine how six school proprietors and six headteachers exercise their power of managing school procurement. The six schools are code named Feb SS & March SS as High-Fee Proprietary Schools (HFPS); July SS & August SS as Medium-Fee Proprietary Schools (MFPS), and November SS & December SS as Low Fee Proprietary Schools (LFPS). Participants are codenamed Pt for proprietor and Ht for headteacher. Table 1 depicts the three themes derived from data analysis namely: (i) Identifying school suppliers (ii) Negotiating contracts with suppliers (iv) Making school purchases.

Table 1. How proprietor & headteacher exercise procurement management powers

Themes	KMA Proprietary Secondary Schools											
	Feb. SS		Mar. SS		July SS		Aug. SS		Nov. SS		Dec. SS	
	Pt	Ht	Pt	Ht	Pt	Ht	Pt	Ht	Pt	Ht	Pt	Ht
Identifying school suppliers	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y
Negotiate contracts with suppliers	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y
Making school purchases	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y

Source: Primary Data Y= Yes, N = No, Pt =Proprietor Ht = Headteacher

Power to Identify School Suppliers

Table 1 shows that proprietors reserve the exclusive power to identify suppliers of school requirements in five out of six schools and one LFPS proprietor lets the headteacher identify suppliers of academics-related requirements. The five proprietors were categorical that headteachers should focus on academic matters, and leave procurement matters to proprietors. None of the six schools gets even close to observing procurement guidelines for schools. The two HFPS have procurement units managed by people handpicked by proprietors. One proprietor summarized what appears to be the norm in all schools;

.... we have an office dedicated to finding suppliers of school requirements.... once the headteacher submits a list of requirements to me, our procurement officer contacts our long-time suppliers.... the headteacher does not concern himself with such matters .... he has enough responsibilities already in terms of academic and administrative matters (Proprietor, February SS).

When asked about the headteachers' role as procurement officers, proprietors were dismissive that such guidelines work in government schools. In one HFPS, the closest the headteacher can get is to guide and/or advise handpicked suppliers on the specifications of specialized academic equipment and materials.

…this school has clear division of labor policies based on one's area of specialization…the headteacher manages the school, and has so much on his plate already…we cannot engage him (headteacher) in chasing after suppliers and contractors…this would be too much for him, and would even divert his energy from academics (Proprietor, March SS).

In three schools, two MFPS and one LFPS, proprietors double as suppliers of school requirements. They allocate themselves tenders to supply stationery, food items, uniforms, construction work, as well as owning school canteens, as mused by one proprietor;

...the issue of suppliers has never been a problem in this school because it is managed by us the directors…. we are all veteran educators and we know what the school needs…we assigned each other items and services to supply the schools such as stationery, food, uniforms, construction, etc…we have internal mechanisms to guide our roles (Proprietor, July SS).

When reminded about the conflict of interest and violation of procurement guidelines for schools, the proprietor was adamant in her response;

…those people (government) forget that private schools are not run like government schools…this school belongs to us, individuals…. we put in our personal money and sacrificed a lot to educate the country's children…we also need to benefit from our investment… students here are performing a lot better than those in government schools that follow those (procurement) guidelines… (Proprietor, July SS).

Similarly, the five headteachers admitted that they do not deal with school suppliers at all. School suppliers are already pre-determined by the proprietors or their agents. One headteacher echoed what is seen as the norm in all schools; "Identifying suppliers is none of my business…I simply see people supplying materials, and to me that is what matters…I then distribute the materials to heads of departments…" (Headteacher, August SS).

At December SS, the headteacher is only permitted by the proprietor to identify school suppliers of academics-related requirements. As a typical businessman, the proprietor doesn't know much about running a school that he acquired on the cheap during the Covid-19 crisis, So, he depends much on the headteacher to turn the school around. "…he consults me a lot and we agree on the school needs that we categorize into academics and non-academics needs. He suppliers the non-academic requirements and I identify suppliers of academics-related requirements…no we don't follow government tendering guidelines, but nobody is complaining" (Headteacher, December SS).

Thus, proprietors in all school use their school ownership power to usurp the headteachers' power of identifying school suppliers. Only one headteacher is allowed this power to identify suppliers, but even then, this power is limited to identifying academics-related suppliers. So, the proprietor-headteacher power dynamics in identifying school suppliers, favors the principal at the expense of the agent.

Power to Negotiate Contracts with Suppliers

Table 1 shows that proprietors hold exclusive power to negotiate contracts with suppliers in all but one school, where the headteacher is permitted to negotiate contracts academic-related requirements suppliers. "…I negotiate the deals to suppliers all school requirements, save academics-related items that are handled by the headteacher…" (Proprietor, December SS). Other proprietors do not trust headteachers to deal with suppliers. Afterall, it would be absurd for headteachers to negotiate contracts with proprietors in the three schools where the latter double as school suppliers.

In agreement, the five headteachers admitted that they do not deal with suppliers. One resignedly stated she has nothing to do with procurement. When asked if he was not bothered with the blatant violation of procurement guidelines for schools, he wearily responded: "…well their school, their money, their business…I have a lot of work to do as it is, and perhaps not being involved with suppliers is a blessing in disguise…" (Headteacher, March SS).

Thus, all the six proprietors use their school ownership position to usurp the headteachers' power of negotiating contracts with school suppliers. This disregards the fact that headteachers are the schools designated accounting officers. In the school, where the headteacher negotiates some contracts with suppliers, it is because of the prevailing circumstances, otherwise the situation would be the same.

Power to Make School Purchases

Table 1 shows that proprietors reserve the power to make school purchases, save one who is permitted to purchase academics-related requirements. The reason proprietors give is that making school purchases would distract headteachers from academic matters. "….it is in everybody's interest to stick with the division of labor principle…. the headteacher and his team focus on academics, as we focus on providing school requirements…. It is that simple…" (Proprietor, February SS). However, the undertones were clear that proprietors don't trust headteachers to be in charge of school purchases. Besides, proprietors have vested interest in purchasing school requirements, as one proprietor said;

…my friend, you expect me to entrust my hard-earned money to an employee (headteacher) whose intentions may be different from mine? …the headteacher can leave any time she wants. For me this is my business and my life…I can't trust anyone with school money…I do it myself, I have the budget and I know what the school needs to function…the headteacher's job is to produce good results, he is not the school's purchasing officer… (Proprietor, August SS).

Similarly, headteachers confirmed that they are not involved in purchasing anything for their schools, save one headteacher. They seemed resigned to their fate that as long as the departments get what they need to operate smoothly, headteachers are not bothered with who buys what and where. To them, the end justifies the means, as stated by one headteacher;

...buying school supplies is outside my area of operation…. the proprietor handles that department…I only come in when suppliers deliver substandard items…. when I express my concern to the proprietor, these days they value my feedback because the director sometimes asks me to verify the quality of some materials on delivery… (Headteacher, March SS).

A headteacher of one LFPS was frustrated over the proprietor's tendency to buy inadequate requirements, to a point where the school often runs out of supplies in the middle of the school term.

"My concern is that purchase of school requirements is a big challenge…the proprietor does not follow the budget…he buys supplies on a retail basis instead of making large purchases to take us for a reasonable period of time….this leaves us in endless debts…every time I demand something, he tells me to collect outstanding fees from parents…then he turns around to blames me for the school's debt burden (Headteacher, November SS).

Asked why the school does not have a procurement plan to guide purchase of school requirements, the headteacher lamented;

…he (proprietor) is a businessman not a teacher, and he thinks he can manage the school the same way he manages other businesses…he uses school money to finance his other businesses…. the money students pay in the bank is used to repay bank loans…teachers are not paid in time, which affects the school's performance… (Headteacher, November SS).

Thus, all proprietors use their school ownership position to usurp the headteachers' power to manage purchase of school requirements, save one headteacher who purchases academics-related requirements. This reflects lack of trust in the schools' accounting officers and fragrant violation of procurement guidelines for schools.

Cross-case analysis of results indicates a pattern of proprietor-headteacher power dynamics in managing school procurement in HFPS, MFPS, and LFPS. One LFPS, whose proprietor permits the headteacher to participate in managing school procurement, does so out of necessity other than out of the proprietor's respect for procurement guidelines for schools. The dynamics for identifying school suppliers undermines the headteachers' power to manage school suppliers. The dynamics for negotiating contracts undermines the headteachers' power to manage contract negotiations. Finally, the dynamics for making school purchases undermines the headteachers power to manage school purchases. Thus, regardless of the school category, proprietors exercise most powers to manage school procurements in the six KMA proprietary schools.

7. Discussion

Results show a clear pattern of proprietor-headteacher power exercise. Apart from one LFPS proprietor, the rest do not permit headteachers to participate in identifying suppliers, negotiating contracts, and making purchases. The justification given resonates with [19] concern that headteachers should focus on managing academics, discipline, and students' welfare. More importantly, none of the six schools adheres to school procurement guidelines [21]. Instead, just like [30] established, proprietors usurp and bulldoze headteachers and end up taking full control of managing school procurement. This power grab undermines the agents' active participation and responsibility in performing their school procurement duties.

This is in blatant violation of the guidelines that obligate schools to conduct procurement in accordance to the structures and procedures prescribed by the [21] Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets (PPDA) Guidelines No. 5 (PPDA, 2014). The guidelines task headteachers to establish institutional structures to ensure that all procurement and disposal activities are carried out in harmony [22]. The power grab also goes against [27] attributes of effective procurement management.

Whereas the law requires committees to be formed to procure specific items in learning institutions [22], results show that this role, in at least four schools, is performed by the proprietors themselves, each supplying different school requirements. So, while [31,32] consider effective procurement management as a critical process of planning, organizing, and overseeing the acquisition of goods and services; the dynamics in the six schools reduce this complex process to simply purchasing school requirements. This is done without a comprehensive approach to identifying needs, evaluating options, negotiating terms, and managing contracts to ensure optimal value and compliance with regulations [25].

A headteacher in one LFPS lamented about the way the procurement is managed. The proprietor is in charge of procurement, but the school is perpetually indebted to small time supplies of minor items such as chalk, pens, teachers' books etc. But according to [22] efficient and effective procurement management in schools is not just about acquiring goods and services. It is about strategically managing procurement activities to support the school's mission, enhance operational efficiency, and ensure compliance with regulatory and budgetary requirements. [27] agrees that a well-designed procurement management system plays a pivotal role in achieving these objectives by providing the tools and capabilities needed to streamline and optimize procurement processes in schools.

Another issue that emerged during the study, was the principal-agent issue of goal conflict and moral hazard [18]. All proprietors seemed to have serious trust issues, that lie behind their reluctancy to let their agents manage procurement process in accordance with government regulations and guidelines. The principals' goal is to maximize benefits from the business opportunities presented by the school procurement management. This means following government guidelines would not be in the proprietors' business interests. On the other hand, the agents' goal is having all required teaching-learning materials available to maximize students learning. The goal conflict then motivates principals to commandeer the agent's procurement management powers [33].

Finaly, moral hazard is another driver of the six principals' power grab of their agents' procurement management powers. The principals fear that empowering their agents to manage procurement would tempt the latter to act contrary to the expectations of the former [34] by filtering money or conniving with suppliers to inflate prices. Referred to as the hidden action by [35], moral hazard implies a moral failure on the part of individuals, that may not be intended. Since, the six principals in the study cannot be sure of their agents' fidelity [16] if allowed to manage the procurement process, the former choose to usurp the latter's powers, without due regard to the established school guidelines [19].

8. Conclusion

We conclude that headteachers in the six for-profit schools do not exercise power to manage school procurement processes. Even the one who does is only allowed to procure academics-related materials. This demonstrates that whereas headteachers are the designated accounting officers; proprietors use their ownership powers to usurp the headteachers' power to manage school procurement. The power dynamics so reflected do not only violate procurement guidelines for schools, but they also undermine headteachers' active participation in the schools' procurement process, as the accounting officers.

9. Recommendation

Since effective and effective management of school procurement is the backbone to efficient school operations, proprietors need to observe procurement guidelines for schools. We thus, recommend that proprietors maintain well-designed procurement management systems by putting in place mechanisms and capabilities needed to streamline and optimize for-profit school procurement processes. Secondly, local governments need to strengthen their inspection, supervision, and advisory support mechanisms to ensure that to ensure that KMA for-profit schools comply with Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets (PPDA) Guidelines No. 5 (2014) for schools.

10. Study limitations

Despite its contribution to policy and practice, this study has limitations. First, data was collected from six for-profit secondary school in KMA, which limits statistical generalization of findings to the participating schools. Future research should consider a representative sample of for-profit schools to validate the findings. Second, the study was limited to proprietors and headteacher. Extending the study to school bursars, heads of departments, and governing board members would provide a more inclusive and comprehensive picture. The above limitations aside, the authors are confident that the study is valid, reliable, and timely.

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