



Students' Perceptions of the Mini-Enterprise in Botswana Junior Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a study on the perceptions of junior secondary school students in Botswana on the effectiveness of the mini enterprise project carried out in schools in equipping them with business, management and entrepreneurial skills. Students' perceptions were evaluated using a qualitative approach which involved the use of focus group interviews of Form 3 students in 3 junior secondary schools in Gaborone, the capital. The findings of the study suggest that despite experiencing administrative, financial and operational problems, overall, students benefit through the acquisitions of invaluable business skills such as creativity, market research, risk-taking, financial planning, problem-solving, and, running and operating a micro business.

Keywords: Business Education, Business Studies, Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship Education, Entrepreneurial Skills, Attitudes, Mini-enterprise Approach, Mini-companies, Mini-enterprise Projects.

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INTRODUCTION

At junior secondary school level in Botswana, Business Studies is informed by the National Policy on Education of 1977, Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 and the Curriculum Blueprint: Ten Years Basic Education Programme of 1995. These policy documents called for the establishment of an education system that will prepare learners for the necessary skills needed to function in the 21st century and the needs of an economy that seeks to diversify from agriculture and mining. Among their major aims, the curriculum planners envisioned an education system that prepares the youth for the world of work and further education. To achieve this, they called for the vocationalization of academic subjects and the introduction of practical subjects which included, among others, Business Studies, in the existing Botswana junior secondary education curriculum. Students taking Business Studies at this level have the option of specializing in either Commerce and Accounting/Book-keeping or Commerce and Office Procedures. Also, these documents recommend constructivist pedagogical approaches that are action-oriented and learner-centered (Republic of Botswana, 1977; Republic of Botswana, 1994; Republic of Botswana, 1995). Thus the mini enterprise project undertaken by all Business Studies students at junior secondary school is congruent with the recommended teaching methods and envisioned outcomes of these foundational documents.

The mini-enterprise approach is one of the widely used methodologies in Botswana's junior secondary business subjects with the mini enterprise project contributing roughly 40% of the teaching time in the three years of study (Lauglo, cited in Sithole 2012). Business Studies is perceived as a practical subject, meant to impart students with skills necessary for them to be either self-employed or future employees (Fuller & Snyder 1991; Thetsane & Matsela 2014). The mini-enterprise projects therefore serve to bring about the vocational element to impart learners with practical business skills, balancing out business education from being too academic and teacher-centred in its teaching (Thetsane & Matsela, 2014).

According to Sithole (2010), some of the benefits of mini-enterprise methodology include equipping learners with business, management and personal entrepreneurial skills. He further argues that learners taking part in the mini-enterprise learn how to set up and operate new business ventures. The mini-enterprise approach is the embodiment of "education through enterprise" par excellence. It exposes learners to practical skill of operating a business such as carrying out market research, advertising and selling of products and/or services. They also learn about recording business transactions, processing and storing business information, and the appreciation of managerial functions of various departments in a business (Swartland, 2008; Sithole, 2010). When running the mini companies, students assume the roles of different functional managers in an organization which gives them an insight of how to run businesses. Students who participate in entrepreneurial activities also develop skills such as risk taking, creativity and innovation, planning and the ability to manage projects to achieve set goals (European Commission, cited in Quesel, Moeser & Burren 2015).

The inclusion of entrepreneurship education at secondary education has sparked debates about its effectiveness and benefits among scholars. According to Lope Pihie and Bagheri (2010) the debate emanates from questioning the ability and maturity of students at this age to grasp the intricacies and hurdles associated with the running of a business. This doubt about the maturity of students in junior secondary school seems plausible. In a study that focused on pedagogical challenges faced Business Education teachers, Thetsane and Matsela (2014) found that 61% of teachers in Lesotho (a country with a comparable education system to Botswana) were of the

impression that students in this age group lack maturity and mental readiness to operate school-based mini companies. The teachers submitted that students were mostly excited about businesses that sell food items they could eat, and not business knowledge and skills they are supposed to get from running the mini-enterprise. These findings corroborated an earlier study by Sithole and Lumadi (2012), which focused on the pedagogical challenges facing business subjects' teachers in Botswana. The duo found that junior secondary school students shy away from projects that do not entail any food-related products. They therefore submitted that learners at this level of education may be lacking the maturity to come up with viable business ideas, carry out meaningful market research and other activities related to setting up a new venture. They however argue that even with such challenges, introducing learners to entrepreneurship at an early age is still desirable.

Proponents of entrepreneurship education at secondary level, however, argue that students should be prepared for careers at adolescence; they are still malleable and as such, traits and attitudes of entrepreneurship can be easily developed than at a more older age (Oosterbeek et al. 2010); students also show interest in these programmes; and they are less risk-averse and more creative, traits which are important for one to be successful as an entrepreneur. It therefore becomes more beneficial for these opportunities to be exploited and nurtured when students are still at middle school or high school (Lope Pihie & Bagheri, 2010). In addition to the potential to develop an entrepreneurial mindset among learners, the mini-enterprise is a powerful pedagogical approach capable of delivering a wide range of learning outcomes (Williamson, 1989).

Rationale of the study

Regardless of all the purported benefits and limitations of the mini-enterprise, there is need to capture students' experiences about how it is administered, benefits derived from participation and challenges they faced during the mini-enterprise projects. As the first study of this nature in Botswana, the findings of this study will communicate to teachers, policy makers and teacher educators students' perceptions about its effectiveness. It will hopefully highlight practices that make the experiences a success and worthwhile for learners so that they can inform existing practices. Highlighted problems make it possible to think of possible solutions to make the mini-enterprise better through recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

The study took a qualitative approach with focus group interviews of Form 3 (junior secondary school final year) students in schools around Gaborone. The researchers interviewed 6 groups of students, with each group not exceeding 10 students. The participants were purposively sampled based on the fact that they were doing Business Studies class, had participated in the mini-enterprise project, and belonged to teams or groups that worked together in the projects. It is worth noting that in some cases mini-enterprise groups were far less than ten, and in such instances different teams were combined to make a focus group of ten students. The benefit of this was that it increased the breadth of experiences by pooling together different mini-enterprise teams into one. The focus group approach was adopted because the current study was influenced by an earlier study in Wales by Williamson (1989) which used group interviews of learners. In addition, a focus study is "particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences

and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). It is also easy to implement since students run enterprises in small groups, as such easy to administer and capture their experiences. The homogeneity and familiarity among group members is likely to create a relaxed atmosphere where respondents can freely express themselves and they can also correct one another in the case of contradictions (Kitzinger, 1995).

For ethical considerations, we as researchers, communicated to and assured participants of anonymity and confidentiality. Their names will not be revealed and the groups will be labeled randomly using letters and figures. The collected data were used solely for purposes of the study. Permission was sought, first from the Ministry of Education and Skills Development and from school heads of sampled schools to interview learners. Learners were also informed that they had the right to not participate in the study and that they were free to discontinue at any time should they felt the need to do so.

Limitations of the Study

Although there are many positives about this study, it is also in order to note a few limitations that come with it. The study was qualitative and therefore used a relatively small sample size in its focus groups. Whereas this is in order as pertaining to the nature of qualitative studies, it is also a limiting factor in that the findings cannot be generalized to the larger student population outside Gaborone and the whole country. The learning that has occurred as a result of participation in the mini-enterprise is not so much measurable, thus necessitating a larger scale quantitative study with a pre-test and post-test to actually determine the entrepreneurial learning gains that occur as a result of participation in the study. Another limitation pertains to some of the participants’ responses. On a few instances, some of the students gave their responses in the local language, *Setswana*, so such responses were translated to English. Also, researchers had to undertake data cleaning in some cases to make sure participants responses are clear and comprehensible without adulterating the essence of what the respondents sought to communicate.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the mini-enterprise administered in junior secondary schools?
2. What are the perceived benefits learners derive from the mini-enterprise approach?
3. What are the challenges faced by learners in setting up and operating mini-enterprises?

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

A total of 60 students from 3 junior secondary schools in Gaborone (School A, School B and School C) participated in the study. 20 students in each school formed 2 focus groups of 10 students each and consisted of a fair distribution of boys and girls. The interviewees in each

focus group did not necessarily represent a business team but were randomly pooled from different mini-enterprise teams or groups. This way experiences from different groups or businesses were represented in the study.

School	Group	Subject area	Form	No. in group
School A	G1	Commerce and Office Procedures	3	10
	G2	Commerce and Accounting	3	10
School B	G3	Commerce and Office Procedures	3	10
	G4	Commerce and Accounting	3	10
School C	G5	Commerce and Office Procedures	3	10
	G6	Commerce and Accounting	3	10

The Administration of Mini-Enterprise Projects in Junior Secondary Schools

In all 3 schools, students worked collaboratively on the ME project in groups whose sizes ranged between 4 and 11 members. Evidence gathered showed that it was the teachers who assigned students to groups using random or purposeful assignment procedures. The following were some of the comments proffered by respondents on group formation and dynamics:

G1: “Group members were selected randomly by the teacher. There were 10 members in the group and some members were not productive and preferred to work independently”.

G3: “Groups were formed through random assignment. We worked well and cooperatively because we had been together in the same classes since Form 1”.

G5: “The teacher allocated us to groups of 6 members per group. Relationships in the group were not good. Most members did not cooperate with others and did not contribute to discussions”.

It is apparent that the methods of group formation mostly used did not secure groups that are homogeneous in any ability or characteristic and this may explain why respondents from all but one of the 6 groups complained that the groups so-formed were fraught with conflicts and there was lack of cooperation and group cohesion.

Once formed the groups started by discussing and agreeing on a business idea which was arrived at by consensus after the idea had been brainstormed and market research carried out. Market research was mostly in the form of surveys in which questionnaires were distributed to fellow students. The group responses to an interview item that sought to elicit information on how students arrived at their business ideas and how they implemented them attest to this:

G1: “We arrived at three business ideas, carried out market research and settled on the most liked idea which was about with selling mini-pies and chocolate flakes”.

G3: “We came up with three business ideas and carried out market research on each looking at the cost of production, the likeability of the products, the availability of the products and the amount of money available. The teacher helped us to come up with the final idea. We had wanted to sell cream doughnuts but because the teacher said

there were no storage facilities for perishable foods, we ended up settling for selling chocolate bars and sweets”.

G5: “We identified three business ideas, did market research and chose the idea of selling Toppers, muffins and pies because it was the idea that the school community liked most. The teacher influenced choice of idea by rejecting ideas that were not feasible given the resources that we had”.

On the choice of business ideas, first individuals came up with their own ideas the group would caucus and come up with the “best three” ideas. The final idea would be chosen after the group had considered factors like potential demand for the product, benefits to customers, capital available and how readily available suppliers were. An observation made during the study was that all the 6 groups in the 3 schools had similar business ideas and that students were mostly involved in selling consumables like snacks and food-related products. It also emerged that some business teachers influenced and/or imposed the choice of business idea(s) and we can hazard a guess that teachers did this to dissuade students from embarking on business ideas that they considered risky or impractical. However responses from 3 focus groups insinuated that teacher influence was minimal and ended at offering guidance only.

In Botswana junior secondary schools, mini enterprises are funded by the government through a vote for practical subjects or students can contribute the start-up capital. Responses from all 6 focus groups indicated that ME projects were funded in three main ways: wholly by the school, school plus individual group members’ contributions and solely student contributions.

G1: “Our teacher provided us start-up capital but it was insufficient. We just had to work with what was made available to us.”

G3: “The school provided start-up capital for our business. Our subject teacher facilitated the process of getting funds from the school on our behalf.”

G5: “Each group member contributed BW P30.00. Through these contributions we managed to raise enough funds for our business but our teacher volunteered to buy the first batch of stock for us.”

G6: “We raised our start-up capital through our own contributions. Each member contributed BWP 35.00. The funds were sufficient and we did not get any assistance in the form of additional funding from anywhere.”

It is apparent that different modalities are used by different schools to raise start-up capital for the mini enterprise project. For two of the schools in the study, however, the project was funded through the vote for practical subjects. A drawback about this approach is that on some occasions the money made available may not be sufficient for the sum required to start the business. Although students in Groups 5 and 6 were able to raise sufficient funds through personal contributions, it came out clearly that this approach needs to be carefully looked into because some students may take long to make contributions, stalling progress as a result and some may not totally afford to raise the required amount due to family economic background. A standard

way of financing the project, especially through the vote for practical subjects could be more ideal and an equalizer for all groups.

Business subjects' teachers play a significant role in the administration of the mini-enterprise project, which has serious implications on the success or failure of the enterprise. They provide the needed guidance in the choice of business ideas, the writing of the business plan, sourcing funding, providing motivation and any other roles they may deem necessary. One the role of teachers in the mini enterprise projects, students had the following to say:

G1: "Our teacher allocated us into groups, and also taught us our roles and responsibilities for different departments, and provided us guidance on how to write the business plan. She also helped with the start-up capital. However, we were not satisfied with her engagement in the project because when we made a loss she did not care if we were fine, and did not advice when we made mistakes."

G4: "The teacher played mostly the role of a facilitator. She allowed us to pursue our business ideas without much influence, organized funding for us and handled our finances. She was very supportive and was always available when we needed help."

G5: "Our teacher allocated us into groups, and also provided guidance on how to write a business plan. Her role was mostly oversight as she gave us space to do things on our own. She however, helped with sourcing the start-up capital and kept money for us. When records did not balance, she helped us identify what the problem might be. We were very satisfied with her support."

The findings from the study reveal that students look at teachers as very important partners for the successful administration of the projects. It is clear that their role is mostly of coordinating and facilitating success of the mini enterprise project while giving students autonomy to run their projects. They organize resources such as start-up capital, provide advice on business ideas, supervise the writing of the business ideas and may also handle finances for learners. In fact groups that had teachers manage finances did not have issues of loss of finances due to theft. Students seem to expect their teachers to be very supportive as they are prone to make mistakes, face challenges such as making a loss and it is on those times that they need motivation and support from their teachers since they are just teens.

Perceived Benefits Learners Derive from the Mini-Enterprise Approach

Students who participate in mini-enterprise projects at Botswana junior secondary schools glean many benefits which may help to instill an entrepreneurial mindset in them. The mini-enterprise approach provides students many opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary in the setting up and running a successful enterprise. The leading question in this section of the study is stated below followed by a summary of emerging responses: "*What would you say were your major lessons from running the mini-enterprise?*"

Creativity and problem solving: Among the important skills and qualities of an entrepreneur are creativity and problem solving. Responses from participants in the mini-enterprise project suggest that the mini company is capable of instilling and cultivating these skills. The direct quotes from students' responses evidently demonstrate this:

G3: “We had to think outside the box. When people were not buying the product, we came up with strategies to increase sales.”

G6: “When we realized that students could not afford our pizza, we decided to be innovative by increasing our product range. In addition to pizza we sold biscuits and chocolate.”

G2: “At the beginning some members were not cooperative. They refused to go buy stock refused to sell, absented themselves from meetings, and did not even attend meetings. Eventually we saw that team work is better, were rotated roles or activities (e.g. selling) and assisted one another.”

Students who participate in the ME project in all the groups, with the exception of one indicated that the mini-enterprise experience encouraged them to be creative in various ways. This creativity starts right from the generation of business ideas, product development, and finding creative ways to market or coming up with strategies to increase sales of their products to the school community. In essence, creativity was also a necessary element in solving problems in their businesses. At the beginning of the ME project students had to manage group dynamics and solve conflicts were some of their team members were not cooperative enough. Some of the businesses were not making profit and learners had to find ways of turning around the business.

Risk taking: Risk taking is one of the attributes required for one to be a successful entrepreneur. In response to whether the mini enterprise influenced participants’ inclination to take business risks, students’ responses showed that the experience encouraged risk taking in the following ways:

G1: “We invested our own money to recapitalize the business when we made a loss.”

G2: “We took a loan from the school that had to be paid back with interest. That was risk enough, and we could not afford to fail.”

G5: “The ME project helped me to be a risk-taker. Naturally I fear taking risks, I want to be sure of the outcome before doing something”

G6: “Selling pizza was a huge risk because the product is perishable. If we are not successful at selling all our output for the day, all that remained would be a loss to us.”

Without exception all the groups reported that the mini-enterprise helped them to be risk takers. The ME project helped learners to acquire this attitude depending on circumstances unique to each group. Some students took risk by investing their own resources such as money, some believe it was risk enough to commit time and effort to their business regardless of competition; some took a loan that they paid back with interest or just product choice. It is therefore plausible to deduce that the ME experience in creating authentic context does not totally remove all risks that are relatable to running a real business. With such “cushioned risks”, it helps students to be less risk averse through its wealth of near real life business experiences.

Working collaboratively with others: The ME project functions through students working together collaboratively in small groups to execute their business plans. The results below show the extent to which the mini enterprise is able to inculcate teamwork and collaboration among learners belonging to the same group.

G4: “Generally we were comfortable with one another in the group. However, we had challenges collecting start-up capital contributions and slackness when it came to participating in the selling of our product. These challenges in a way strained relationships among members. Nonetheless, our relationships improved as members learned to be patient with others and issues late coming and slackness were resolved.”

G3: “When the business was not doing well, we would not listen to each other. Each had their opinion. However, at the end we were able to make peace even after such challenges.”

G6: “Yes, we learnt to work with others even when my suggestions for promotional strategies were not considered or adopted by my team”

This study revealed that groups are teacher-assigned and heterogeneous, and, as a result they are fraught with group forming conflicts. Interestingly, as the ME projects come to an end most of the students appreciate the value of synergistic team work. Most students in the study report that the ME helped them to appreciate the value of working cooperatively with others. Perhaps what is saliently emerging here is that students learned how to manage and resolve conflicts for the sake of the project. They began to appreciate more fully that the success of their enterprise depended on collective effort. Interestingly, for the majority of the groups, students found things such as team work, interacting with others, handling customers and making friends as one of the most interesting aspects of the ME project.

Business planning, setting up and operating/managing a business: The ME project provided learners with the practical side of actually generating business ideas, evaluating the feasibility and viability of those ideas. After coming up with the business ideas, students had to carry out market research which formed the basis of arriving at the final idea they eventually implemented. Students from all the schools affirmed that the ME effectively taught them how to generate business ideas. All, but one, groups in the study reported that they believe they are not competent at preparing a business plan.

G1: “Through participating in the ME project...we got the reality of what was taught in class.”

G3: “The ME project gave us lots of experience in the running of the business compared to just attending class only. The ME project equipped us with skills to manage a business, to the extent that some of us are already selling stuff from home, through its inspiration.”

As indicated by the responses above, the ME project exposed learners to the real feel and experience of running an enterprise. It did not only bring book knowledge but also the practical challenges that entrepreneurs face such as dealing with changes in prices, competition, managing internal conflicts/disagreements within the enterprise for the greater good of all stakeholders,

handling customers and dealing with dwindling sales. Some students observed that ME project allowed them to interact with many stakeholders such as businesses outside the school where they had to enter into negotiations on discounts and agreements on free delivery of their stock. Students felt strongly about opportunities to interact with outside businesses and this came out more clearly in one group that did not have such an opportunity. Their concern follows below:

G3: “We did not have support from outside businesses. We never met the business that delivered our product as the teacher bought stock for us. We also needed the experience of interacting with outside businesses.”

Students see interacting with outside businesses as something that is enriching to their experience as well as invaluable. In fact managing relationships with business partners is an important element in business success. Some students got “privileged” information from such interaction or relationships as the businesses were able to share information most liked flavours by customers in addition to negotiating discounts.

Contextualized learning and marrying theory with practice: This study also examined the extent to which the ME project helped participants to understand the relevance of the concepts they were taught to the real world and also engender deeper learning of those concepts. The following verbatim quotes demonstrate how the mini enterprise project through its experiential nature contributed to helping students understand better concepts taught in class and provided opportunity for application and transfer of knowledge and skills.

G4: “It showed relevance of content we learnt in class and how it may be applied in the real business world. We were able to do many things hands-on such as business planning, budgeting, profit forecast, choosing location of our business, study customer buying habits and respond to them among other things. All in all, it helped us understand better what was taught class.”

G5: “Through the mini-enterprise projects we were able to understand much better concepts such as budgeting, sales forecasts, sales promotion to name a few. We were also able to see much clearly the stages that real enterprises go through from idea generation until they are fully operational selling their products and/or services. Some of the skills we learnt were also transferable to other subjects we are taking.”

The ME project was shown to provide opportunities for contextualized learning, thus marrying theory with practice. Students who took part in the project believe that the ME project helped them see the relevance of what they learned in class and how it applies in the real world. Not only that, it provided the hands on experience necessary for transfer of knowledge and skills to authentic contexts. Typically, students cover topics related to the setting up and operating enterprises in the third term, Form 2 and start working on the business plan and do production at Form 3. Students also reported that the ME project engendered deeper understanding and learning of the topics they had earlier learned through hands on experience. Some of the specific examples of topics that they indicate to have understood better during working on the ME project include business planning, profit forecast, choosing the business location, customer service, sales management and promotional strategies. Some of the students reported that they also learnt skills that are transferable to other subjects, such as the business aspect of Agriculture.

Challenges Faced by Learners in Setting up and Operating Mini-Enterprises

The mini-enterprise project is a simulated business that provides students practical experience while shielding learners from risks inherent in the real world. However, it is not entirely free from challenges. We gathered from the data that students experienced challenges of various forms. In the analysis, the following categorization of challenges emerged: team work related challenges; time demands challenges; competition and low sales; and dealing with debtors. All these are presented more fully below.

Teamwork challenges: Evidence gathered showed that managing well teams of heterogeneous group and enlisting the cooperation of every member towards the achievement of goals of the enterprise was a challenge for all groups from the 3 schools:

G1: “Yes, people did not know their roles, others did not take responsibility and other took decisions without consulting. Some stole money from the business, as they used money for personal matters without permission.”

G2: Some of our team members refused to take part in selling the product, only 70% were actively engaged. The other challenge is that some did not pay up their required dues towards start-up capital”

G3: “When the business was not doing well, we would not listen to each other. Each one had an opinion on how issues should be resolved.”

G4: “We had challenges with some of our team members that related to punctuality and absenteeism from work.”

G5: “Not everyone did their fair share of work. Some refused to sell...they were not cooperative. The accountants were “eating” our money”.

What is evident is that conflicts and non-cooperation among students right from generating business ideas through to the implementation phase of the project were rife for almost all the groups. Some students were not happy when their ideas were not adopted on various situations such as solving business problems, whereas others were unhappy that some of their colleagues were uncooperative, absented themselves unnecessarily and did not do their fair share of the work. Another challenge that drew the students aback was mishandling or misuse of finances from those who were supposed to be custodians of the business finances. They helped themselves from the coffers of the business without consent of the whole team.

Time demands challenges: Although many students reported that they found the ME project to be more enjoyable compared to normal schooling, all the groups found it to be more demanding time wise. Students’ verbatim responses are captured below:

G1: “The business plan was tiring because if we made a mistake we had to rewrite again. We missed lessons because we had to finish the project (business plan).”

G3: “The mini-enterprise brought lots of pressure because during study time we had business meetings instead of reading. It was also time consuming because we did business during tea break and lunch time, so there was no sufficient time for eating and preparing for lessons that come after tea break or study time in the afternoon.”

G3: “We had a normal school day and had to purchase stock purchase stock every day after school, as a result we would get home late.”

G5: “Writing the business plan was a difficult task for us and was time consuming too.”

The data showed that time demands came from various aspects of the ME project. For some students, writing the business plan proved a challenge time wise. They found it exhausting and having to rework certain parts of the business plan that they had not done well naturally added strain on time demands. Some of the time-related challenges came from the actual running of the business. The ME project demands lots of time in actual implementation because students have to sell their product during tea break and lunch time and still have their meals. To some students juggling these two was quite demanding. Other groups held business meetings during afternoon study time, which means they forfeited study time on some days or time to work on assignments while still at school. In addition, some groups had to replenish their stock every day, and this meant that after school they had to first to go buy their stock first before going home.

Competition and low sales: Like any other business which has to deal with competition and develop strategies to raise sales, the mini-enterprise is not an exception. Students’ mini-companies faced various competition related challenges from various sources, affecting sales:

G1: “We faced stiff competition from the school tuck shop; as a result we had to lower prices to attract customers.”

G3: “We faced competition from the school tuck-shop and some suppliers increased their prices. The effect of such competition and changes caused our business to experiences damages and sometimes shortages.”

G5: “Sometimes customers would not buy our product, especially in the middle of the month or on days of the week where our product conflicted with the school menu, leading to low sales.”

The ME projects mostly faced competition from the school tuck-shop. This forced students to lower prices to attract business and stay afloat. The small businesses were also affected by changes in prices from their suppliers and this threatened the bottom line. The mini-companies cannot easily change their prices to respond to changes on the suppliers’ end because their primary customer base is students who may not afford higher prices. In addition, some of them sold food related-products, and some groups faced very low sales on days were their product collided with the school menu. Case in point, if the mini company sold a product with chicken meat, sales would go down on the day the school menu served chicken. The primary customers of ME projects are students whose income is not stable. In the middle of the month sales would be very low as students did not have money to spend or they would find the products just expensive.

Dealing with debtors: Students reported to have challenges dealing with debtors. Some of their illustrative verbatim responses are captured below:

G3: “Some of the debtors made late payments whereas others totally refused to pay. Teachers were often the ones who often took our products and refused to pay.”

G5: “Our product was very expensive for most students and we ended up resorting to sell to them on credit, and they would not pay. Whereas some of the teachers supported the business by buying our products, some just took and did not pay at all.”

The issue of dealing with debtors was not so much prevalent across all groups but nonetheless experienced by some mini-companies and affecting their profits negatively. Although not common across, it is evident that this was a challenge which affected students felt strongly about. Two of the six businesses, specifically, lamented the issue of debtors making late payments or failure to pay by student customers. Coupled with the issue of late payments was the issue of the teachers who would buy the products on credit with the promise to pay but eventually failing to pay or flatly refuse to pay to the items they got on credit. This challenge of defaulting teachers proved difficult for learners because they could not hold adult figures to account or honour their promise and they felt weak to refuse to give them the products.

DISCUSSION

Students were generally assigned to ME groups on random selection or teacher nomination which often led to group dysfunction due to the lack of group cohesion and cooperation and the forming of disruptive factions within the groups. One way to go round these problems could have been for teachers to consider using friendship grouping. The use of friendship grouping was found to be beneficial in mini enterprise work by Riese (2011), who in his study on school-based mini enterprises in a Norwegian secondary school found friendship grouping to be beneficial in all ME work since friendship includes a notion of trust and intimate knowledge of the other members of the group. He argued further that friendship supports creativity and promotes action and activity by group members towards their common mini enterprise assignment.

This study confirms earlier findings that students mostly sell food related products in their mini-enterprises (Sithole & Lumadi, 2012; Thetsane & Matsela, 2014). Whereas this was attributed to lack of maturity and desire to sell products they may eat, this study seems to suggest the possibility that students and their teachers take a more pragmatic approach when deciding on business ideas to implement. Looking at the customer base's ability to afford products and services, and the duration of the mini enterprise, they tend to lean towards fast-selling products which students can afford and are fast moving. However, the challenge still remains to explore other products and services beside those that are food related.

With regard to the administration of mini enterprise projects in Botswana junior secondary schools, teachers play a paramount role of a mentor and facilitator. In entrepreneurship education, the major functions of a role model or mentor include modelling, providing hands-on support and advice, helping learners develop self-belief in their competency (self-efficacy) and providing learners inspiration and motivation (Bosma, Hessels, Schutjens, Van Praag, & Verheul, 2012). In line with this thought, findings of this study reveal that teachers' mentorship role is mostly supervisory in nature as they facilitate the smooth setting up

and operation of the mini enterprise, as well as the writing of the business plan. They provide advice on the business ideas students may embark on, help with sourcing of funds, training students on functional roles, record keeping and assist in the safe keeping of students' finances and allow students autonomy in the operation of their enterprises. This is in agreement with the recommendation by Quesel, Moeser and Burren (2015) that teachers involved in mini-enterprise projects should exercise the principle of pedagogical self-restraint by avoiding to be too prescriptive and key decision makers for students. They argue that this helps to develop learners as well as help them realize their business ideas. In addition, the role of teachers as role models or mentors was found to be among the major influences for students to pursue entrepreneurship as a career (Kenedy, Drennan, Renfrow, & Watson, 2003).

This study also reveals that students expect teachers to provide support, encouragement and guidance when the business is not doing well. Invoking the social support theory, Boyd and Vozikis, (1994) posit that the support that students get from their teachers, who are also perceived by learners as role models or mentors, helps them deal with stress and challenges in a positive way, and that their words encouragement build learners' self-efficacy. The concerns of students who had an "absent" teacher during their challenging times seem to affirm this. We therefore conclude that teachers' mentorship and facilitator role is very important for the success of the mini enterprise but should also strive for a balance between guidance and freedom for learners while encouraging them to be autonomous and self-regulating.

This study also confirms that the mini-enterprise project is potent with many benefits in terms of imparting entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Its experiential, action-oriented and authentic nature allows for contextualized learning that complements classroom teaching. Students who participated in the mini-enterprise reported that the projects enriched their classroom experience as it married theory with practice. They managed to see the relevance of what they learned and how it may be applied in the real world. The likelihood of greater understanding and retention for the long-term is increased. When experiential learning is brought into entrepreneurship classrooms, it helps students to develop higher level thinking skills such the ability to analyse, interpret, decision making and consideration of consequences (Daly, cited in NBEA, 2013). The mini enterprise corroborates this assertion as participants learnt to quickly interpret feedback from their customer base, analyse data from their market research, solve problems and make decisions based on the information at their disposal.

Students also learn entrepreneurial skills and attitudes such as risk taking, autonomy, team work and collaboration, conflict resolution, and communication which are necessary for one to be a successful entrepreneur. They also learn skills that are directly related to conceptualizing and running a successful business such as business planning, marketing, sales management, customer service, budgeting, and choosing the location of a business among others, as was established by earlier studies (Swartland, 2008; Sithole, 2010).

Whereas the mini-enterprise project proffers many benefits to learners, it is equally clear that it is fraught with many challenges akin to those of running a real business. These challenges range from insufficient start-up capital, too much time demands, lack of cooperation among group members, dealing with competition and low sales. The issue of insufficient financing in mini-enterprise projects has been reported before by Thetsane and Matsela (2014). However, this study shows that different schools have different modalities of financing student mini companies. Some schools finance the projects from the school votes, some school votes and student contributions and others strictly student contributions. These differences in how mini enterprises are funded negatively affect the success of projects and disadvantages students who may not

afford to contribute due to their families' financial backgrounds. It should be clear policy wise how the projects should be funded so that there is consistency among schools and avoiding humiliation on students who may not honestly afford to contribute towards start-up capital, or failure of projects due to insufficient financing.

The findings of this study on the issue of too much time demands for both covering subject matter content in business education and doing the mini-enterprise project corroborate the findings of Thetsane and Matsela (2014). In a related study, the duo found out that the syllabus is congested as it requires students to cover both content and do the practical aspects, thus requiring teachers to find extra time to complete the syllabus since the mini enterprise is so time-consuming. Policy makers and educators may do well to look into the syllabus as to whether it is too congested and may need some revision so that students reap greater benefits of both content and the practical aspect of the subject.

Although the challenge of non-cooperation and conflicts within groups could be solved through homogeneous groups comprised of friends and like-minded individuals (Riese, 2011), it may not be entirely a bad problem for several reasons. The majority of teams indicated that they eventually made peace, solved their conflicts and dedicated their efforts to the project. This finding confirms an earlier study by Quesel, Moeser and Burren (2015) on mini-enterprise projects in Switzerland that found that students as individuals learn that their individual effort can make a difference to the success of the team. They learn to appreciate the value of individual accountability in team success. The skill of de-escalating situations, resolving and managing conflicts is essential for any entrepreneur. Vocational subjects such as business education train students for careers and entry into higher education. Interpersonal skills and collaboration are therefore important for success in careers and the workplace. The conflicts at the beginning of group formation which eventually resulted in focused performing groups that channelled their efforts towards the goals of their enterprises seem to be more of part of the normal group dynamics identified by Tuckman and Jensen (1977) as *forming*, *storming*, *norming* and *performing*. In a study on entrepreneurial teams of newly formed ventures, Vanaelst, Clarysse, Lockett, Morray and Jeggers (2006) have argued that "the concept of team is evolving rather than static" (p. 251). Furthermore, Darling, Keefe, and Kay (2006) submitted that the world of entrepreneurship is characterised by a myriad of exciting activities, different stakeholders and constantly changing innovations and concepts that require a business environment that encourages and nurtures constant change and conflict management. The trio further argue that the ability to build active, cooperative and enthusiastic teams that are loyal and willing serve to pursue organisational goals and fully exploit the window of opportunity is paramount to entrepreneurial success. Hence we submit that the group dynamics in the ME projects could possibly be an important factor in building entrepreneurial mind-sets. Teachers and leaders of groups need to be trained in team building so that the heterogeneous groups stay focused and deliver on their mandate.

Furthermore, students who run mini-enterprises in Botswana junior secondary schools face challenges of competition, low sales and late or no debt payment. The challenge of competition arises from the fact that different school based mini-enterprises run simultaneously, in addition to the existence of a school tuckshop in some schools. This competition may be a contributor to lower sales, in addition to the fact that the majority of customers are students with meagre disposable income. We agree with Thetsane and Matsela (2014) that mini-enterprises do not necessarily exist to make a profit but to provide a laboratory for entrepreneurial learning. Lope-Pihie and Bagheri (2010) have found that there is a positive correlation between coping

with unexpected challenges and new venture creation. Thus these challenges provide learners opportunities for problem solving through critical thinking, creativity and innovation as was observed in this study. Perhaps students need protection by school authorities from adult figures such as teachers who take students' products and refuse to pay as this may not only demotivate learners but may lead to the collapse of the enterprise, and much worse, interferes with student learning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the junior secondary school students' experiences of participating in the Business Studies mini-enterprise projects. It focussed on how the mini-enterprises were administered, the perceived learner benefits and the challenges faced by the students in setting up and managing the mini-companies. The study found out that most students were concerned by the way the mini-enterprise project group members were selected. The random nature of formulation of groups was seen as the cause of the tensions, conflicts and lack of co-operation and team work challenges faced by the groups and affected the operations of most businesses. Students were of the view that teachers must allow the students to choose their own friends and colleagues as group members. Future studies could focus on group dynamics between heterogeneous and homogenous mini-enterprise groups, to determine which the role of each and the benefits each confers to learners. However, due to the many relational challenges and conflicts among students in mini-enterprise projects, we recommend for teachers to train their students in interpersonal skills such as team building and conflict resolution. The study also found out that many teachers', who participated in the mini-enterprise project, play the role of a facilitator, allowing learners to be self-regulating and autonomous.

The study found out that most students benefitted and accumulated real life business skills by participating in the mini-enterprise projects. Such skills include creativity, problem solving, risk taking, collaboration, conflict resolution and many other interpersonal skills. Students also expressed their desire and confidence to start and establish their own business after leaving school, as they had acquired business planning, set up and management skills and that they are able to relate and marry the theory they learn in the classroom to the real world of business.

Like any other business, the students as entrepreneurs, faced various challenges in running the mini-enterprise projects, including team work challenges, delay or non-payment of dues, misuse of funds, restricted time allocations and high levels of competition that resulted in low sales. The same students also revealed that despite the challenges and the unfavourable trading environment, they still managed to operate profitable business ventures. It is the recommendation of the researchers that the government of Botswana must ensure that schools provide a uniform and standard method of operating mini-enterprise projects in junior schools. Since the mini-enterprise project is examinable, it must be run in well-defined and consistent manner and must not differ from one school to another.

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