

Financial Management Skills as Catalysts for Improved Educational Outcomes in Public Secondary Schools: Evidence from Participatory Budgeting, Accountability, and Strategic Resource Alignment.

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This article explored the use of financial management skills as drivers of better educational results in public secondary schools, especially in participatory budgeting, accountability and alignment between strategic planning and finances with the school. Persistent concern regarding the ineffective utilisation of resources and poor financial management of schools influenced the research, particularly in the rural and semi-rural settings where issues of limited finances are highly evident.

Brief theme: The study focused on how budgeting, record-keeping, financial decision-making, and capacity-building practices influenced teaching and learning conditions in public secondary schools.

Main Aim: The main aim of the study was to identify financial management skills that yielded improved educational outcomes in public secondary schools.

Methodology: The research approach used in the paper was a qualitative approach in the form of multiple case study. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews on thirteen respondents who were selected in four high-level schools in the Amathole East District (principals, School Governing Body representatives, teachers, and student representatives). Thematic analysis was used to showcase recurrent trends and meanings of financial management practices.

Main findings/Results: The results indicated that good budget preparation and resource distribution, clear record keeping, unremitting financial education, learner-based decision making, and budget-school improvement plan congruency considerably promoted accountability, stakeholder confidence, and access to learning materials. The skills of financial management were seen to work synergistically and turn a small amount of financial input into significant outputs in educational processes.

Conclusions/Contribution: The research added to the literature by placing financial management skills as strategic facilitators of educational enhancement instead of administrative compliance devices, especially in under-resource public school settings.

Recommendations: The recommendations in the study included institutionalised participatory budgeting, sustained financial capacity-building of the School Governing Bodies, and policy-based convergence between financial planning and educational objectives.

Key words: Financial management skills; educational outcomes; participatory budgeting; school governance; accountability.

1. Introduction

1.1 Contextualising Financial Management and Educational Outcomes

The continued issue of disparate education achievement in the environment of public secondary schools has been a defining issue in the educational management and policy discourse. In most developing education systems, especially those of the sub-national and rural setting, it has been observed that academic performance variations are strongly linked

with the quality of school-level governance and use of resources as opposed to the availability of funding. Brown (2019) states that the schools that are governed by similar financial regimes often record a significantly different level of learner outcomes because of the differences in the manner the financial resources are planned, allocated, monitored, and aligned with the pedagogical priorities. This school of thought redefined financial management as an administrative role to a strategic process that could define the learning and teaching environments. This has been exacerbated in South Africa by decentralised school governance systems, which have seen the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and finance committees taking on more and more financial responsibility and decision-making. As it was explained by Adams (2021), this kind of decentralisation has increased the significance of financial management skills at the school level, especially in the situations of socio-economic vulnerability and the lack of resources. This has made the study of how particular financial management competencies will increase educational achievement a crucial academic and practice requirement.

In the context of this paper, the concept of educational outcomes was interpreted as multidimensional outcome that includes academic success of the learner, teaching and learning resource quality, sufficiency of infrastructure, and trust in school governance procedures by the stakeholders. Korpershoek et al. (2020) claimed that learning outcomes are intrinsically integrated into structural conditions of the institution more than just classroom pedagogy to the organisational coherence, accountability, and good leadership practices. The FMS skills like budgeting discipline, record keeping ability, decision making capability, and alignment of finances and institutional goals have now become the core facilitators of such institutional circumstances. Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021) supported this role and proved that those schools that had strong systems of financial accountability had more chances to maintain stable learning conditions and better performance outcomes. It is against this background that the current paper investigated financial management skills as the precipitating factors in which educational outcomes were improved in the secondary schools that are publicly operated and using empirical evidence based on the selected schools in the Amathole East District.

1.2 Defining Key Concepts and Analytical Boundaries

The conceptualisation of financial management skills to an analytical degree was based on practical skills performed by school leadership and governance structures to plan, allocate, monitor and evaluate financial resources in support of educational goals. Johnson (2020) described these skills to include budgeting literacy, financial reporting skills, compliance awareness, and strategic decision-making skills. These skills were operationalised in the current research in five dimensions that are interrelated and include budgeting and resource allocation, record-keeping and reporting, training and capacity-building, financial decision-making and prioritisation, as well as the connection of financial planning with educational goals. The learning outcomes were measured not only in terms of the performance of the students in terms of the exams but also according to the school measures that include the attributes of the learners access to teaching resources and the school facilities, stakeholder confidence and the sustainability of instructional programmes. Adams (2021) states that this conceptualisation made it possible to evaluate more closely how financial decisions were transformed into material learning conditions.

Participatory budgeting was perceived to include the participative role of the principals, SGB members, teachers and learner representatives in financial planning and spending processes. Garcia (2022) stated that financial governance practices that are participatory increased transparency, moral custodianship, and collective ownership of the institutional objectives. In this study, accountability was a concept that was used to explain the process whereby financial activities were reported, recorded, audited, and explained to internal and external stakeholders in line with regulatory provisions like the South African Schools Act and the Public Finance Management Act. Strategic resource alignment referred to the conscious connection between financial planning tools, especially School Improvement Plans and pedagogical priorities such that the decisions on expenditure directly advanced teaching and learning goals. These were the conceptual definitions that limited the analytical scope of the paper and used to interpret the empirical findings.

1.3 Overview of Relevant Literature on Financial Management in Education

Effective financial management is crucial for schools to achieve educational goals. This study explores how financial management skills, participatory budgeting, accountability, and strategic resource alignment contribute to improved outcomes in public secondary schools. By examining these factors, this research aims to identify strategies for enhancing financial management in public secondary schools, ultimately informing policy and practise.

Brown (2019) concentrated on strategic financial planning as a school effectiveness, stating that schools which adjusted the budget to the instructional priorities provided greater results of learner achievement and organisational cohesion. Likewise, Johnson (2020) highlighted that strategic financial management practices facilitated the strategies used by schools to make maximum use of limited resources because of prioritisation and evidence-based decision-making. All these studies were pointing out to the assumption that financial competence at the school level was not limited to procedural compliance but also to strategic foresight as well as pedagogical sensitivity.

Amos, Ephrahem and Bhoke-Africanus (2021) presented empirical data associating financial management skills of school heads with delivery of quality education especially in resource-limited settings in Africa. Their results indicated that principals with budgeting and auditing skills were in a better position to stabilize instructional programmes to withstand the consequences of funding volatility. Another aspect is the dimension of accountability as noted by Dwangu and Mahlangu

(2021), which showed that the financial transparency enhanced the trust of stakeholders and minimized the chances of mismanagement in the scope of public schools. All of these studies led to a developing literature to accept financial governance as an important source of educational quality and not a fringe administrative role.

1.4 Gaps, Inconsistencies, and Scholarly Contributions

Although a considerable amount of research was already done on school finance, some gaps still appeared in the current literature. First, a lot of the empirical research was unitary in nature, where only a partial distinction was created between certain skills and their unique contribution to educational achievement. Smith et al. (2019) admitted that this limitation was common as comparative studies usually could not isolate which financial practices had the strongest impact in determining the performance of schools. Second, the available literature tended to give preference to the voice of principals and administrators through which little learner and teacher voices were included in the process of examining financial governance. According to Garcia (2022), such omissions blurred the participatory nature of financial management that had been based on ethical and transparent financial management.

The article also contributed to the academic literature, placing financial management capability in rural district settings, where there is a delay in funding, capacity bottlenecks, and socio-economic stress, which compounded the impacts of financial choices. As Uleanya (2022) highlighted, rural learning environments needed adaptive governance policies that would make the most out of the limited resources but not lower the interest of learners. Through foregrounding the empirical evidence of such contexts, the study helped in localising the financial management theory and its use under marginalised schooling settings.

1.5 Academic Importance and Theoretical Relevance

The strategic Financial Management model by Johnson (2020) likely provides a framework for how organisations like schools manage finances strategically. This model underpins how Amathole East schools approach budgeting, resource allocation, and financial decision-making. Johnson's (2020) model informs the analysis of how school leaders in Amathole East align financial decisions with strategic educational goals.

"Johnson's (2020) Strategic Financial Management model frames how school leaders in Amathole East balance resource allocation with educational priorities, informing effective financial decision making"

The study, based on the strategic management framework by Johnson (2020), showed that financial competencies acted as mediating variables between the governance structures and the educational outcomes. Instead of assuming finance as an exogenous constraint, the paper re-framed it as an endogenous capability that is defined by the practices of leadership, participation and accountability. The theoretical repositioning conformed to the argument presented by Adams (2021), that resource allocation decisions were inherently pedagogical actions which have direct consequences of learner success.

The paper methodologically strengthened the importance of qualitative inquiry in deconstructing the realities of financial governance as experienced in schools. Mays and Pope (2020) opined that the qualitative methods allowed the researchers to open the interpretive aspects of the organisational practices that quantitative measures cannot bring forth. The research by relying on the dense accounts of the participants helped to shed light on the ways in which financial management skills were practiced, challenged, and bargained in the daily school affairs. This strategy enhanced the explanatory richness of the analysis and gave information that can be transferred to analogous education settings.

1.6 Core Research Problem and Research Question

The research issue that was at the heart of this paper was the long-standing mismatch of the availability of financial resources with education outcomes in public secondary schools, especially in the setting of resource-strained environments. Although the funding allocations were present, the system of improvement of education was not even, and there is an indication that the lack of financial management skills weakened the translation of resources into learning achievements. As Smith (2020) argues, it is not only that budgetary constraints could not explain the differences in school performance but also that the ways schools went about it was also decisive. The overall research question that was used to guide the study thus posed the following: *Which financial management skills contributed most significantly to improved educational outcomes in public secondary schools?*

1.7 Objectives of the Study

In response to the identified research problem, the paper pursued a single overarching objective: to identify financial management skills that yielded improved educational outcomes in public secondary schools. This aim was operationalised by looking into the budgeting and resource allocation approaches, competency in record-keeping and reporting, training and capacity-building programmes, financial decision-making and prioritisation, and the process of merging financial planning with educational objectives. These dimensions were analysed in terms of the perceived institutional outcome and the perceptions of the stakeholders, which made it possible to evaluate comprehensively the role of financial skills in the

school governance systems.

1.8 Structure of the Paper

The rest of the paper was organized in a manner of systematically responding to the research objective and question. The introduction was followed by the theoretical and empirical literature review of financial management and educational outcomes, which placed the study in the context of the current academic discussions. The methodology section has also presented the qualitative research design, selection of participants and the analytical processes that were used in the research. These were the thematic analyses in terms of financial management skills as implemented in the chosen schools, which were backed up with the narratives of the participants and the contextual interpretation. These findings were discussed in the discussion section and interpreted in terms of the available literature with references to both theoretical and practical implications. At the end of the paper, a reflection on the contributions of the study to the educational management scholarship and the directions in policy and future research were made.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Literature

The conceptual basis of this paper was related to the financial management theory and educational governance views that brought school finance into the concept of an administrative necessity and a strategic instrument of educational enhancement. Bandy (2023) indicates that earlier on in the existence of financial management in public institutions, it was based on compliance control and stewardship, with little focus on its transformational aspects. Nonetheless, in modern financial theory of the public sector financial management was redefined as a strategic ability that affected organisational performance, accountability and service performance. In the context of education, this transition meant that budgeting, reporting and financial decision making became associated with the quality of teaching and learning and not as a separate bureaucratic act. Johnson (2020) stated that school leaders were able to metamorphose financial limitations into prioritisation systems that ensured that basic instructional activities were safeguarded when they applied skills of strategic financial management. This theoretical orientation helped in the assumption that financial competence was an enabling condition to educational performance as opposed to a neutral background variable.

The theory of educational management also solidified the role of distributed governance and joint decision-making when it comes to influencing institutional outcomes. Garcia (2022) highlighted that transparency in financial management improved trust, legitimacy, and collective responsibility among educational organisations, especially those in which there are many stakeholders apportioning the responsibility of oversight. In this light, participatory budgeting was not merely a procedure dictated by governance but a system of governance where ethical leadership and accountability was exercised. Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021) have added to this argument by positing that the principal-led accountability frameworks in conjunction with active participation of School Governing Bodies intensified internal controls and reduced risks of financial mismanagement. Theoretical contributions provided these theoretical insights as relational and socially constructed practices, which were developed in the course of interaction, dialogue and mutual decision-making, but not as sole technical competencies, to frame financial management skills.

The conceptual framework of this paper was also informed by human capital and capacity-building theories. Amos, Ephrahem and Bhoke-Africanus (2021) concluded that school leader and governors with the financial literacy were considered as one type of institutional capital, which directly affected the performance of the organisation. Poor financial training reduced the capacity of the governance structures to process the reports, questioning the expenditure patterns, and aligning the expenditure with the pedagogical priorities. Espinosa (2017) also emphasized the fact that school leaders were prone to short-term financial solutions without long-term strategizing unless they were exposed to continuous professional growth. All these theoretical standpoints implied that the development of financial management role was based on constant learning and practical experience, supporting the idea to explore training and capacity-building as one of the key elements of proper school finance.

2.2 Empirical Literature

2.2.1 Financial Management Skills and Educational Outcomes

Empirical results repeatedly showed that there is positive relationship between financial management skills and performances of the school, but the nature and strength of the relationship have been different in different cases. As Brown (2019) studied secondary schools that were functioning within a limited funding context, the results showed that schools in which the budgeting processes were disciplined and the priorities concerning expenditure were well understood, they reported a greater level of learner achievements and organisational consistency. The results provided by Brown implied that the financial planning was an intermediary variable that influenced the way resources were transformed into quality of instruction. Correspondingly, Smith et al. (2019) made a comparative study across schools and noted that the schools that used structured financial management strategies recorded better performance pointers than their counterparts who used ad hoc budgeting strategies. The net effect of these studies was to support the hypothesis that the skills in financial management were key in optimising in the educational outcomes.

Amos et al. (2021) presented empirical data within the African context that competencies of financial management of school heads played a significant role in the delivery of quality education. They found that principals who were proved competent in budgeting, auditing and expenditure monitoring had greater likelihood of having stabilized teaching programmes and sufficient learning facilities in place. These findings were consistent with those presented by Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021), who demonstrated that accountability-based financial practices minimized irregular spending and increased the trust in stakeholders. Nonetheless, Espinosa (2017) provided a more significant viewpoint, as they stated that there was compliance with the procedure, but no critical analysis of financial data was conducted. The latter empirical tension underscored the necessity to draw a line between superficial compliance and meaningful financial competence.

2.2.2 Accountability, Record-Keeping, and Reporting Practices

The literature came up with financial accountability as a pillar in the effective governance of schools. Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021) empirically proved that systematic record-keeping and transparent reporting minimized the chances of financial misconduct and internal control. Their investigation underscored the fact that accountability mechanisms worked best when principals took the lead in compliance processes whilst letting school governing bodies participate in the process. Garcia (2022) also maintained that open financial governance promoted ethical leadership and increased trust in parents and other stakeholders of the community. These results placed record-keeping and reporting competence as technical and relational practices that were critical in institutional legitimacy.

On the other hand, according to Bandy (2023), there was a danger of accountability systems becoming more ritualistic when the stakeholders were not financially literate to make any sense of reports. This concern was in line with empirical evidence by Espinosa (2017) who found that financial reports would be usually generated to facilitate audit procedures without guiding strategic decision-making. The same findings were noted by Amos et al. (2021), who reported that the lack of financial literacy among the members of the governing body undermined the overseer roles, which led to the in-depth analysis of the financial information. All these studies indicated that accountability was not only dependent on the documentation systems but also on the ability of the stakeholders to interpret.

2.2.3 Training and Capacity-Building in Financial Governance

Empirical research on school financial management effectiveness has put training and capacity-building into the spotlight. Amos et al. (2021) established that the principals and governors who underwent specific financial training were more confident and competent in budgetary and auditing practices. Their results were in favor of training as an activator of better governance and not an additional intervention. This argument was further reinforced by Jansen and du Plessis (2023) as they stressed that professional development helped managers succumb to accountability complexities because it fortified their sense of self-efficacy.

Nevertheless, training provision also showed some weaknesses on the part of empirical evidence. Although Tien and Jose (2021) also emphasized the quality auditing of higher education, they also emphasized that an irregular and excessively theoretical training deprived practical use. Espinosa (2017) also observed that the absence of sustained professional development was likely to make school leaders go back to reactive financial practices. The results highlight that there has always been a disconnect between the design of the training and the needs of the institutions.

3. Research Methodology

The qualitative research design was adopted in the paper to examine the operation of financial management skills as drivers of enhanced performance in the public secondary schools. This method was deemed to be fitting since the research was aimed at knowing the meanings, practices and interpretations which various stakeholders in the school ascribe to financial management and not to measure variables in numbers. Mays and Pope (2020) argue that qualitative research is especially appropriate when the researchers need to study the complex organisational processes and governance practices since it is able to record the lived experiences and contextual realities of participants. Applied to the issue of school financial management, this approach helped the researcher to investigate the manner in which budgeting, accountability, and strategic alignment were practiced in real life and the impact of the practices on the teaching and learning environments. Johnson (2020) has stressed that the financial management in the field of education is entrenched in the cultures and decision-making routine of the institution, which can be seen and assessed only by in-depth qualitative inquiry. The qualitative orientation thus enabled the paper to respond to the purpose of the study by revealing the particular financial management skills that the respondents attributed to better educational achievements.

3.1 Methodological Design

The research design was a qualitative case study design in the study, which targeted four cases as public secondary schools in the Amathole East District. Such design was chosen as it helped to conduct an analytical study on the financial management practices in real life institutional contexts. Smith et al. (2019) argue that the case study design is efficient in cases when the lines between a phenomenon and a context are not clear, which often applies to school governance and

finance. The schools chosen depicted different administrative capabilities and a mix of stakeholders, and it was possible to compare them in terms of how financial management skills were implemented in different institutional contexts. Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021) opined that qualitative designs that are based on cases are especially useful in education finance research since they help to demonstrate how accountability systems and leadership styles intersect at the school-level. The design was able to concentrate on numerous cases in the same district thereby enhancing depth in analysis and coherence of context.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The study sample was the principals, members of the School Governing Body, teachers, and the representatives of the learners in the public secondary schools in the Amathole East District. Out of this population, purposive sampling was used to get information rich respondents who were directly involved or affected on school financial management. Amos, Ephrahem and Bhoke-Africanus (2021) note that purposive sampling is suitable in qualitative research where the objective is to attain profound understanding to the participants who have experience and accountability. The samples used were 13 participants drawn in four schools comprised of principals, SGB treasurers and chairpersons, teachers and learner representatives. This structure made sure that it was represented by strategic leadership, financial control, operational execution and beneficiary views.

The provision of the learner representatives and a teacher together with the formal financial office bearers enhanced the credibility of the findings with the latter voices that are usually marginalised in the financial governance research. Garcia (2022) suggested that the inclusive representation of stakeholders would increase the transparency, and the accountability practices would be understood in a more holistic way. The range of roles and years of service, which made the participants various, also enabled the study to reflect changes in the level of financial literacy and decision-making power. It was thus a sampling strategy that helped to determine how various financial management skills were practiced, distributed or limited to the school governance structures.

“Given the small sample size (13 participants), a potential limitation is that data saturation might not have been fully achieved. However, were reached a point where no new themes emerged from the last few interviews, suggesting a level of saturation was approached. “Ethical considerations were prioritised in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Participation was voluntary, and the study received approval from ethics committee.

In terms of “member checking” participants were invited to review and confirm accuracy of the data, ensuring the results reflect their experiences.

To enhance credibility, peer debriefing was conducted with a colleague experienced in qualitative research to review and challenge the analysis, ensuring interpretations were grouped in the data. To enhance trustworthiness in my study, an audit trail was maintained, documenting research decisions and processes to ensure transparency and dependability.

“Documents collected included school budgets, meeting minutes, and policy documents. These were analysed thematically, triangulating with interview and observation data to validate findings on financial management practices.

3.3 Research Instruments

The main research instrument that was used in gathering data was the semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was made to get the participants experiences, perception and thoughts about the budgeting process, record-keeping, decision making, training and how the finances and educational goals align. Mays and Pope (2020) note that semi-structured interviews are flexible but at the same time, the main thematic areas that are pertinent to the research purpose are always covered. This tool allowed the participants to explain how financial management skills affected teaching resources, maintenance of the infrastructure, as well as the support to the learners.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected within a specified timeframe where school authorities gave the participants an opportunity to participate and informed consent was obtained. The interviews were arranged at a convenient time for participants, and it was held within the school premises to ensure the contextual relevance. The duration of the interviews was forty-five to sixty minutes, which was deep enough, and did not cause much interference with the school activities. Jansen and du Plessis (2023) state that interviews in the institutional environment of participants increase the level of authenticity and sensitivity to the context.

Field notes were used to record non-verbal and contextual observations and audio-record interviews were carried out with consent. The documentary materials were gathered simultaneously and sections of the same were selected and analyzed. This is the sequential and repetitive data collection process that enabled the researcher to narrow down probing questions as themes surfaced. Smith (2020) opined that qualitative inquiry is empowered with iterative data collection because, through such an approach, emerging insights can guide forthcoming interactions. The procedure thus had the effect of making data collection receptive to the study aim and the changing analytical concern.

3.5 Data Treatment and Analysis

Data analysis was in the form of thematic analysis approach that is, systematic coding, categorisation and interpretation of the qualitative data. The verbatim transcription of the interview recordings and the transcripts were read multiple times to get the feel of the information. The initial open coding was performed to determine repetitive ideas when considering financial management skills that include budgeting discipline, transparency, training, and learner-centred decision-making. Mays and Pope (2020) claim that thematic analysis is suited to qualitative research that intends to determine patterns of meaning among the accounts of the participants.

The codes were then categorized into higher-order themes according to the aim of the study, such as budgeting and resource allocation, record-keeping and reporting, training and capacity-building, financial decision-making, and alignment with the strategic orientation of the educational goals. Smith et al. (2019) pointed out that establishing connections between themes and research objectives leads to an increase in the analytical coherence and explanatory power. The analysis characterized the use of documentary evidence and observational notes to support the findings of the interviews and minimize the risk of bias in the researcher.

Interpretation was associated with finding out areas of convergence and divergence between the emergent themes and the literature that exists. To illustrate this point, the focus on participatory budgeting by the participants was analyzed in case of the results by Brown (2019) on strategic financial planning, and some challenges connected with financial literacy were viewed in accordance with Amos et al. (2021) and Bandy (2023). The analytical procedure allowed the researcher to transcend description into the explanation mode, which identified the functioning of particular financial management skills as impetuses to better educational results. The rigor of the process was analytical in nature and provided credibility and trustworthiness to the findings.

4. Results and Discussion

Results

4.1 Theme 1: Financial Management Skills and Educational Outcomes

This theme emerged from carefully considering how financial management relates to effective learning. In the schools surveyed, priorities for learning were linked to budgeting, financial knowledge, and expenditure, all of which play a role in ensuring sufficient resources, transparency, and effective teaching methods. Results are geared towards the realisation of the first objective, the identification of the financial management of the competences, towards the achievement of education outcomes.

4.1.1 Sub-Theme 1.1: Budgeting and Resource Allocation Skills

Budgeting and resource allocation emerged as a critical skill among participants, reflecting how schools plan, prioritise, and align financial decisions with educational goals. To illustrate these practices, Table 4.1 presents selected excerpts and in-vivo codes that highlight the budgeting processes, prioritisation of learner needs, and alignment with the SIP.

Discussion

Table 4.1: Excerpts Related to Budgeting and Resource Allocation Skills

In-Vivo Codes	Participant Excerpts
<i>Structured budgeting processes</i>	"We have budgeting processes that involve the School Governing Body and finance committee, and we monitor implementation throughout the year." (Principal A)
<i>Prioritisation of learner needs</i>	"Every financial decision we make is measured against its impact on learning and teaching." (Principal A)
<i>Alignment with SIP</i>	"Our budgeting follows the School Improvement Plan so that every cent supports curriculum delivery." (Principal C)
<i>Resource constraints and prioritisation</i>	"When there isn't enough money, we prioritise textbooks, repairs, and learner safety first." (Treasurer B)

Source: Author Compilation

The survey revealed the spending expertise was the foundation of good spending management since it played an influential role in supporting the institutions in delivering efficient learning and teaching. Those who were surveyed always correlated spending budget preparation of the good spendings with Spending Improvement Plan (SIP), implying higher spending planning ensures spending and academic goals consistency. That confirms the survey conducted by Brown (2019), of the view that spending budgets aligned on pedagogical goals improve the result of the performance by offering defined resource allocations. Similarly, the Johnson study (2020) revealed the institutions applicable spending models of spending engagement enjoyed better learner attainment because the money went towards the pedagogic resource.

“At our school, we try as much as possible to follow the budgeting guidelines laid out by the Department of Basic Education. The finance committee and SGB work together to ensure resources match the learning priorities.”(PrincipalA)

“We usually meet to discuss the budget before every new financial year, and it must align with our School Improvement Plan. That helps us focus funds where they have the greatest learning impact.” (PrincipalC)

“When money is short, we don’t just spend randomly; we focus on learner resources, safety, and maintenance before anything else.” (Treasurer B)

“Budgeting helps us control what is important and avoid unnecessary expenses. It is about spending where it benefits learners most.”(Learner RepresentativeC)

“The process can be slow sometimes, but it ensures fairness and accountability.” (SGB Chairperson D)

Respondents explained that departmental expenses were often delayed, which consistently disrupted the timely implementation of school budgets. The distribution of public education resources becomes less effective because of bottlenecks which create obstacles that decrease classroom impact according to Smith (2020). Schools should use their budget to support local community needs according to Adams (2021) recommendations. The Amathole East respondents handled their financial difficulties by making changes to their non-essential spending and implementing tight management of their necessary expenses.

Study findings thus sustain the writings in pointing to budgeting as a concentrator of pedagogical attention and blame. It, though, makes new contributions to writing by pointing to the reality of the fact that, of the rural environment, budget discipline also plays the role of financial mismanagement indemnity. “This suggests participants prioritise adherence to financial protocols, as indicated by the repeated emphasis on compliance.

Results

4.1.2 Sub-Theme 1.2: Record-Keeping and Reporting Competence

The systems of financial reporting and record-keeping serve as the main foundation for school financial accountability. The participants stated that schools need to maintain complete records and conduct frequent account audits and generate basic reports to build trust while following regulatory requirements. Table 4.2 demonstrates these practices through selected participants excerpts and in-vivo codes which show how schools handle documentation and account reconciliation and stakeholder reporting and address reporting difficulties.

Discussion

Table 4.2: Excerpts Related to Record-Keeping and Reporting

In-Vivo Codes	Participant Excerpts
<i>Transparency in documentation</i>	“Every transaction is supported by a voucher and recorded for audits.” (Treasurer C)
<i>Financial reconciliation</i>	“We do monthly bank reconciliations and present them to the finance committee.” (Principal A)
<i>Reporting to stakeholders</i>	“Reports are shared with parents during AGMs for transparency.” (Principal C)
<i>Challenges with comprehension</i>	“Not all SGB members understand financial jargon, so reports are simplified.” (Principal A)

Source: Author Compilation

Record-keeping and financial reporting were classified as the backbone of school financial accountability. The respondents illustrated diligent recording through the application of voucher systems, reconciliations, and frequent audits- as unavoidable to transparency. This aligns with Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021), who asserted that systematic record keeping promotes accountability and thwarts the risk of misuses of school leadership. Garcia (2022) also indicated that easily accessible reporting promotes confidence among stakeholders and strengthens mutual observation of resource use.

"We prepare quarterly financial reports and present them at SGB meetings; they include income, expenditure, and variances." (Principal A)

"All vouchers, receipts, and payment records are kept in a file and checked against bank statements monthly." (Treasurer C) *"The treasurer and I go through the figures line by line before presenting to the committee."* (Principal C)

"Parents and stakeholders are shown summaries during AGMs to ensure transparency and trust." (Treasurer B)
"Sometimes, the financial language is too technical, so we simplify reports for members who aren't accountants." (SGB Chairperson D)

The financial literacy gap among SGB members emerged as a persistent barrier. Many reports had to be simplified, which showed the lack of technical competence. Amos, Ephrahem and Bhoke-Africanus (2021) found that poor financial literacy among governing body members weakens the value of audits and often leads to superficial reviews of school accounts. This was also evident in Amathole East, where principals and finance officers often stepped in to explain and justify financial details. Bandy (2023) observed that the reliability of record keeping goes beyond procedure-based but also managerial perception of interpreting the information towards strategies. The results of the present study validate the same, where documentation requirement complies, though extensive analytical interaction gets limited. It is the researcher's conclusion that the culture of financial literacy along with report interpretation at all the governing levels needs to be present so that transparency gets maintained along with the resource gets controlled effectively.

Results

4.1.3 Sub-Theme 1.3: Training and Capacity-Building for Financial Officers and SGBs

Training and capacity-building were consistently highlighted by participants as essential for strengthening school financial governance. Respondents emphasises the need for continuous, practical workshops to equip SGB members and financial officers with the literacy required to interpret reports, manage budgets, and exercise accountability. To illustrate these perspectives, Table 4.3 presents participants excerpts and in-vivo codes that capture participants' experiences and concerns regarding financial training.

Discussion

Table 4.3: Excerpts Related to Financial Training

In-Vivo Codes	Participant Excerpts
<i>Need for continuous training</i>	"We need regular, practical training for SGB members to interpret reports." (Principal A)
<i>Limited frequency of workshops</i>	"The district training is once in two or three years too little." (Principal A)
<i>Confidence through learning</i>	"The training helped me understand my responsibilities better." (Treasurer B)
<i>Capacity gap among members</i>	"Some members rely too much on the principal because they lack financial background." (SGB Chairperson D)

Source: Author Compilation

Capacity-building was singled out as a crucial determinant of good financial governance. All the respondents agreed that training was necessary in the infusion of SGBs and finance committees with literacy to run. This aligns with Amos et al. (2021), the results of whose study revealed that the understanding of budgeting and auditing by principals and governors has a direct link to the school's effective functionality. Likewise, Jansen and du Plessis (2023) also theorised that well-targeted professional growth reinforces the managerial self-confidence of school leaders, so they are better able to utilise accountability frameworks.

"I've attended workshops on school financial management; they helped, but they're not frequent or practical enough." (Principal A)

"We depend on the principal and finance officer for guidance because most members are not trained in finance." (Treasurer B)

"Some SGB members struggle to read financial reports, so the principal has to simplify things." (Chairperson D)

"Practical training where we work through real examples would help us a lot." (Treasurer C)

"New members should be trained every year to strengthen financial governance." (Principal A)

The training seminars offered by districts were often described as irregular and speculative, which reduced their real-world usefulness. Tien and Jose (2021) emphasises that effective financial training should be continuous and practical so that members can apply abstract guidelines to the realities of their schools. Espinosa (2017) further notes that system inefficiencies persist when school leaders are not supported through ongoing professional development, leading to reactive rather than proactive management practices.

Amathole East District evidence pinpoints the chasm of the training delivery and the design. Despite the awareness, the reinforcement of capacity remains weakly institutionalised. From the researcher, the establishment of the annual refresher workshop sessions, the networks of mentorship, and the formation of the peer-learning forums can institutionalise financial competency of all the school governance levels. Educationally sustainable improvement, therefore, hinges not only on financial architecture compliance, but all the players being professionally continued.

Results

4.1.4 Sub-Theme 1.4: Financial Decision-Making and Prioritisation Skills

Financial decision-making plays a crucial role in school governance because participants emphasized the importance of budgeting that serves learners and allocating resources strategically and working together in financial committee discussions. The financial decision-making practices brought better transparency and accountability, but participants pointed out two main obstacles which included delayed decision-making because of insufficient expertise and missing participants. Table 4.4 shows how schools make financial decisions through participant comments and in- vivo codes which reveal their budget allocation methods and decision-making procedures.

Discussion

Table 4.4: Excerpts Related to Financial Decision-Making

In-Vivo Codes	Participant Excerpts
<i>Learner-centred spending</i>	"We always ask how each expense benefits learners before approval." (Principal A)
<i>Strategic prioritisation</i>	"When funds are limited, we cut non-essentials and focus on teaching needs." (Treasurer B)
<i>Shared governance</i>	"Finance committee members discuss and question payments before approval." (Learner Rep C)
<i>Delayed decision-making</i>	"Sometimes decisions take too long because of limited attendance or expertise." (Chairperson D)

Source: Author Compilation

Research revealed that the decision-making within the schools visited was characterised by learner-centric prioritisation and Participatory deliberation. The respondents consistently asserted adherence to education value in the making of the

decision, evidencing integration of pedagogic purpose and economic responsibility. Smith et al. (2019) proved that the schools where the expenditure focused on learner growth targets demonstrated higher accountability and Index of performance. Likewise, Brown (2019) summarised that strategic decision-making embeds capital management, making it an object of development as well as opposed to administrative ritual.

“Every spending decision is assessed against its contribution to teaching and learning.” (Principal A)

“We don’t just sign off on payments we debate and challenge each expense.” (Treasurer C)

“Sometimes, meetings take long, but that’s because members want to understand before deciding.” (Chairperson D)

“If an expenditure doesn’t align with the SIP, it’s deferred or cancelled.”(Principal C)

“Decision-making is not rushed; transparency is more important than speed.” (Learner Rep C)

However, the data also revealed procedural slowness caused by inadequate capacity and variable membership. This is akin to Johnson (2020), where poor relations of governance and new committee members cause long tardiness of financial authorisations, making service delivery slow. Garcia (2022), conversely, observed slower, consultative decision-making increasing ethical purity and collective ownership of financial leadership.

These are evident of dualism: where timeliness remains core, deliberate financial decision-making strengthens both transparency and stakeholder confidence. From the study, the researcher discovers that the empowerment of school finance committees through the application of specially tailored financial planning instruments and mentoring can achieve the balance between timeliness and transparency. These

reform measures would optimise decision-making efficiency while ensuring the integrity of school financial management.

Results

4.1.5 Sub-Theme 1.5: Integration of Financial Planning with Educational Goals

The participants established financial planning integration with educational targets as the core principle which enables school governance to succeed. The participants stressed that financial resources need to match teaching results and SIP targets and stakeholder participation to achieve direct learning support. The school community and parents trust the school because of its commitment to transparent financial management and accountable practices. Table 4.5 show how schools connect financial planning to educational targets through specific instances and in-vivo codes.

Table 4.5: Excerpts Related to Integration of Finance and Education

In-Vivo Codes	Participant Excerpts
<i>Alignment with teaching outcomes</i>	<i>“Spending must always support learning and teaching.”</i> (Principal A)
<i>SIP-based allocation</i>	<i>“The budget must follow our school improvement priorities.”</i> (Principal C)
<i>Stakeholder engagement</i>	<i>“We involve heads of department to identify learning needs.”</i> (Principal A)
<i>Transparency and accountability</i>	<i>“When parents see funds used for learner benefit, trust increases.”</i> (Treasurer B)

Source: Author Compilation

Learning-oriented financial planning emerged as the most dominating integrating reason for integrating fiscal prudence and pedagogic excellence. The respondents noted that the learning-oriented financial plans by the curriculum and infrastructure requirement assist in the optimum utilisation of scarce financial resources. This confirms Adams (2021), where the latter concluded the commercially aimed financial templates enhance pedagogic delivery by aligning the spending to the learners' requirements. Smith (2020) further asserted the inclusion of finances assist towards organisational coherence, whereby any spending promotes the academic objectives.

“Every cent must translate into better learning conditions for the learners.” (Principal A)

“We align our financial plans with the School Improvement Plan to avoid wasteful spending.” (Principal C)

“Departmental heads submit requests based on curriculum needs before budgeting starts. (Principal B)

“When parents see progress in learning facilities, they become more supportive and cooperative.” (Treasurer B)

“Funds are useless if they don’t improve teaching and learning outcomes.” (Chairperson D)

However, the research shows that integration of that sort needs communicative planning and liaison by financial and academic leadership. Johnson (2020) added that disaggregated financial planning in many cases isolates resource distribution against the reality of instruction, creating inefficiencies. Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021) corroborated, arguing that pedagogical-finance strategic alignment creates a culture of responsibility whose immediate beneficiary is the learner's result.

In the Amathole East case, schools showed movement toward joined-up financial governance in the form of participatory budgeting and stakeholder engagement. However, the process is still reliant on leadership intervention instead of institutionalising mechanisms. The researcher assumes that the integration of SIP- inspired budgeting as a standard of policy backed by an annual review process would guarantee that financial planning continually furthers educational development.

The Amathole East District study reveals a compliance-centric approach to financial management, where adherence to protocols dominates decision-making. This contrasts with more strategic or outcomes-focused approaches, potentially indicating a risk-averse culture or limited financial capacity.

5. Concluding Remarks: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Restatement of the Study’s Purpose

The paper aimed at reviewing the roles of financial management skills as drivers of enhanced educational outputs in the public secondary schools with particular reference to participatory budgeting, accountability systems, and alignment of strategic resources. The overriding goal of the paper was to determine financial management skills that provided better education results through investigation of how budgeting, record keeping, financial decision making, training, and alignment with School Improvement Plans were implemented in the school governance structures. The objective of the paper by targeting the Amathole East District public secondary schools was to create empirically based knowledge on how the financial practices were translated into measurable changes in teaching and learning conditions. Amos, Ephrahem and Bhoke-Africanus (2021) confirm that school financial management is not only an administrative requirement but also a strategic activity that determines the effectiveness of an institution. The research thus strategically placed financial management skills as part of educational performance and not as peripheral compliance processes. Through this, the study bridged an existing gap in the education finance literature especially in the rural and semi-rural settings of publicly schooled schools.

5.2 Contribution and Significance of the Study

The research yielded some significant epistemological markers to the current literature on the financial trends of education and school administration. First, it expanded the theoretical knowledge because it showed how the financial management skills served as facilitating mechanisms whereby the limited financial inputs were transformed into significant educational outputs. Adams (2021) pointed out that resource allocation in itself does not ensure better results without the intentional financial capabilities, which is highly supported by the results of the present paper. Second, the research was empirical as it offered qualitative data in the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as principals, members of the School Governing Body, teachers, and learners. Garcia (2022) theorised that the perspectives of inclusive governance enhance the research on accountability, and the current study acted on the call and foregrounded voices that are usually disregarded in the financial decision-making discourse. Third, the research contributed to the development of the methodology by showing the usefulness of the qualitative case study methods in deconstructing the relationship and procedural interactions that form the foundation of school financial management. In this sense, the paper was complimentary to largely quantitative studies by showing the interpretation, negotiation and prioritisation of financial practices in the daily school situation. These together made the financial management skills more important as a strategic lever of improving education.

5.3 Summary of Findings in Relation to the Research Objective

Regarding the given purpose of determining financial management aptitudes that demonstrated better educational results, the research presented various correlative results. Resource allocation and budgeting skills became one of the core competencies with the help of which schools were able to match financial decisions to the needs of learners and priorities in curriculum. Brown (2019) maintained that the strategy budgeting increases the effectiveness of the institution in case the financial plans can be clearly attached to the pedagogical goals, and it is supported by the fact that the budget and School Improvement Plan are in full agreement in the context of the current study. The competence of record-keeping and

reporting further enhanced financial accountability through transparency, audit preparation and stakeholder trust. Dwangu and Mahlangu (2021) also pointed out that ethical school leadership revolves around systematic documentation, and the results supported the notion that risk associated with mismanagement was reduced in cases of good reporting practices and strengthened credibility of governance. The enablers found to be highly important to effective financial governance were training and capacity-building, especially when it comes to the financial literacy gap of members of School Governing Bodies. Jansen and du Plessis (2023) emphasized that the continuous professional development contributes to effective leadership confidence, which was obviously dynamic in the study. Financial decision-making and prioritisation abilities also made sure that spending decisions were learner-oriented, even where resource limitations were an issue, as well as financial planning was integrated with academic advancement to promote congruence between financial prudence and educational enhancement. Combined, such results showed that financial management skills worked in synergy to sustain better educational results as opposed to acting independently.

5.4 Managerial and Policy Implications

The results of the research had great management implications on school leaders, governing bodies, and education authorities. In the school level, the principals were placed at the center of the financial leadership whose skill-ends determined the capacity of the participatory budgeting and accountability systems. Johnson (2020) opined that strategic financial leadership demanded that the principals strike a balance between compliance and innovation, and the research paper demonstrated how balance could improve the use of resources to facilitate learning. In the case of School Governing Bodies, the result highlighted the importance of enhancing financial literacy to make its meaningful oversight possible instead of token participation. According to Bandy (2023), insufficient financial competency among governance structures negatively impacts accountability, which is an obvious danger in the circumstances where principals were forced to take control of financial interpretation. The implication of the study at a policy level was that institutionalisation of continuous and practice-based financial training by district and provincial education authorities instead of periodic workshops was necessary. Tien and Jose (2021) highlighted that the viability of training should be based on its contextual relatability and frequency of reinforcement, which implies the capacity-building models must be integrated into the routine governance loops. Together, these implications led to the consideration of integrated financial leadership development as one of the central elements of school improvement strategies.

5.5 Practical Recommendations

According to the results, a number of practical recommendations were made. First, institutionalisation of participatory budgeting mechanisms to ensure formal inclusion of learner welfare, curriculum priorities and infrastructure needs into financial planning systems should be instituted in schools. Smith (2020) claimed that fiscal discipline would better the educational outcome by decreasing misaligned spending, but the evidence presented in the study strongly supports this idea. Second, routine and simplified financial reporting systems ought to be embraced to improve transparency without affecting accuracy hence facilitating greater stakeholder involvement. Garcia (2022) asserted that available reporting builds trust and mutual accountability, a fact that has been repeatedly reported in schools where parents and learners were notified about spending choices. Third, a mandatory financial training programme must be introduced annually to all members of the School Governing Body but with specific focus on budgeting analysis, report interpretation and ethical decision-making. As Amos et al. (2021) noted, financial capacity has a direct impact on the school functionality, which is why continuous professional growth is vital. Lastly, the coordination of School Improvement Plans and budgetary frameworks must be institutionalised by policy directives so as to make financial planning always progressive in the achievement of educational objectives as opposed to administrative expediency.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

The study had a number of limitations, which despite its contribution, may affect the internal and external validity of the study. The sample size was relatively small (thirteen individuals in four schools); hence constraining the extrapolation of the results in other regions other than the Amathole East District. Mays and Pope (2020) explain that the depth of the qualitative studies is at the expense of breadth, but this methodological decision also inevitably limited representativeness. Use of self-reported data created the risk of social desirability bias especially among the principals and members of the governing body who might have presented financial practices in a preferred manner. Espinosa (2017) observed that the institutional expectations usually determine the views of financial competence that can hide behind the challenges. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study did not allow it to measure longitudinal variations in financial management practices and their aggregate impact on educational outcomes. These shortcomings implied that the findings were contextually sound, but one had to be careful in projecting the results in other education environments without further support.

5.7 Directions for Future Research

The research provided a number of revealing points of interest on future studies which were not limited to any traditional suggestions. Longitudinal articles can be used in the future to determine the effect of long-term enhancement of financial management skills on the performance of learners and school stability. Smith et al. (2019) argued that the benefits of financial reforms are in many ways incremental, and it is only many academic cycles before it becomes apparent, which should be investigated further empirically. Comparison of rural and urban school settings would also help in shedding some light on the role of socio-economic factors that mediated the efficiency of financial management skills. Uleanya (2022) emphasized the contextual differences in the educational challenges, and it means that the practices of the financial governance can vary in different contexts. Also, future studies may consider the adoption of digital financial management systems in public schools and their consequences on transparency and efficiency, which is indirectly implied by the emerging trends in governance. The argument here was that technological transformation transforms the accountability of organisations and the opportunities it offers can be exploited to reconsider school finance practices (Rawas, 2024). Such studies would enhance the knowledge towards the development of financial management skills in accordance with the changing institutional and technological settings.

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