J Soc Sci, 29(2): 119-131 (2011)
PRINT: ISSN 0971-8923 ONLINE: ISSN 2456-6756 DOI: 10.31901/24566756.2011/29.02.03

Participative Decision-making: Perceptions of School Stakeholders in South Africa

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KEYWORDS School Based Management. Decision-making. School Governing Body. Stakeholders. Views

ABSTRACT Participative decision-making has increasingly become the agreed-upon model around the world for the operation of schools, particularly those in the public education systems. A critical element of the model is devolving enhanced levels of decision-making from the centre (head office) to schools. While this reform is viewed as a positive step, policy based on democratic principles takes some time to filter down to rural schools. The research on which this article is based aimed at investigating the extent to which rural schools understand, perceive and implement participative decision-making (PDM). The inquiry followed a qualitative approach. The findings highlighted achievements in these schools and factors that hindered the proper implementation of PDM. This research recommended that principals should create a space for debate and dialogue for all stakeholders to participate sufficiently in the school governing body (SGB) structure. Such a platform would allow stakeholders to air out their dissatisfaction and ensure their right to participation on issues dealing with school governance.

INTRODUCTION

Participative decision making (PDM) is still a central theme of research, policy, and practice in business organisations (Chen and Tjosvold 2006) as well as in schools (Pounder 1997; Leithwood and Duke 1998; Walker 2000; Somech 2002; San Antonio and Gamage 2007). This theme has been the subject of extensive research for more than 30 years in education, as exemplified in the seminal work of Conway (1984), Conley et al. (1988), Bacharach et al. (1990), and Smylie (1992). These scholars embraced the notion that flatter management and decentralised authority structures carry the potential for achieving outcomes unattainable under schools' traditional top-down bureaucratic structure.

In the past, principals throughout the world have been the main decision-makers at school level. This situation has been particularly evident in a number of countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and parts of the United States of America (Imber et al. 1990; Griffin 1995; Jonston 1997). During the past 20 to 30 years there has been a major shift towards participative decision-making (PDM) in schools (Hart 1995; Mosoge and Van der Westhuizen 1998; Gultig and Butler 1999; Mabaso and Themane 2002; Bush and Heystek 2003a). These authors have called for greater participation in decision-making as a progressive way of making schools more democratic and more efficient.

In South Africa, for example, the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996), which became operative at the beginning of 1997 and mandated that all public schools in South Africa must have democratically elected School Governing Bodies (SGBs) comprised of principals, educators, non-teaching staff, parents and learners, the latter applicable only in secondary schools. As a result, the nature and extent of school decision-making have changed. Decision-making at schools is now characterised by greater participation of all stakeholders. Parents, teachers, learners and non-teaching staff and learners who are elected to serve on the school governing bodies become school governors.

Though the South African Schools Act (SASA) calls for active involvement of all stakeholders in all aspects of school decision-making processes, research has shown that some principals allow little or no subordinate participation in school decision-making processes, because such involvement is perceived as unproductive (Bush and Heystek 2003b; Van Wyk 2004; Mncube 2007).

Research has been conducted in schools operating under PDM (Mncube 2007; Van Wyk 2004; Bush and Heystek 2003b; Cranston 2001; Blase and Blase 2000), however, little of this research has focused on schools in rural areas. Policy based on democratic principles has taken some time to filter down to rural schools. The research, which aimed at investigating the extent to which rural schools understand, perceive

and implement PDM, drew data from rural schools in the Free State, a province of South Africa. This article explores the realities facing the implementation of PDM at school level. The research question guiding this study is: "how do rural school stakeholders perceive and implement PDM?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

As participative decision making has become a popular theme, the definitions and meanings of the term have grown diverse and the concept remains surrounded by confusion (Brouillette 1997; Somech 2002). Although some studies have begun to explore the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the construct itself, no consensus as yet exists on the nature and meaning of PDM (Brouillette 1997; Sagie and Aycan 2003). For the purposes of this article, I choose to adopt the comprehensive definition of Heler et al. (1998:42):

"Participation is the totally of forms, that is, direct (personal) or indirect (through representatives or institutions) and of intensities; that is, ranging from minimal to comprehensive, by which individuals, groups, collectives secure their interest or contribute to the choice process through self-determined choices among possible actions during the decision process."

The concept of PDM is only one of a wider set of interests pursued by others researching distributed (Gronn 2002), shared (Wahlstrom and Louis 2008), dispersed (Ray et al. 2004), or collective (Leithwood and Mascall 2008) leadership, all of which describe the managerial approach of shared influence in decision making. In addition, this construct shares a close conceptual kinship with the ideas of professional learning communities (Bryk et al. 1999; Lavie 2006), or learning organisations (Harris and van Tassell 2005).

The Role of the School Principal in PDM

The literature is convincing in its evidence that the role and responsibilities of principals changed when the PDM approach was introduced (Riesgraf 2002; Somech and Drach-Zahavy 2002). More than a decade ago, Brown (1990) noted that the role most affected by PDM is clearly that of the school principal. More recently, Riesgraf (2002) argued that PDM has had significant effects on the work and role of school principals.

Table 1 depicts a shift in the roles and responsibilities of the principals towards a more collaborative operational mode in the school situation. According to this table, the principal is no longer the only decision-maker in the school. These changes in principals' roles and responsibilities have emerged as a result of the establishment of structures and processes in the school (such as school governing bodies), and an increase in the number of decisions needed to be taken at school.

Table 1: Changes in the role and responsibilities of school principals

Decrease in	*Increase in*
• individual responsibility to take decisions, although the number and variety of decisions have increased significantly	• the need to work with and through representative committees and groups in a collaborative way to achieve consensus decisions
• time and opportunities to take individual decisions	• the need to delegate decisions to others to empower them
• involvement in low-level management activities delegated to others where possible	• accountability to school community members
	• school leadership through visioning, strategic planning, changes in attitudes and culture, and a focus on people
	• operational climate change for decision-making at school

Source: Adapted from Cranston 2001

Stakeholders' Involvement and Decision-making

The term "stakeholders" has become fashionable in many countries, including South Africa. The term is based on the assumption that certain groups and individuals have an interest, or a "stake", in the activities of an institution. According to Bush and Heystek (2003a), the stakeholders are all those people who have a legitimate interest in the continuing effectiveness and success of an institution. In contextualising this definition, one gets a picture of an ideal situation where various stakeholders in a school setting (parents, teachers, learners and the principal) come together and make decisions in pursuit of a common interest. This reform in decision-making approaches followed by schools presents a challenge for principals in terms of their skills

and capacities as they have to adopt more collaborative and inclusive decision-making processes. Research into the ever-changing school environment and the changes experienced by principals clearly shows that there is now a far greater focus on principals' interpersonal skills and capabilities. Since principals are now required to lead the whole school community while facilitating participation and collaboration among stakeholders in decision-making, planning and budgeting, their leadership skills and capacities are critical (Cranston 2001; Jackson 2000; Williams and Portin 1997).

Day et al. (2001) note that the majority of activities to be implemented by principals involve collaborative decision-making and that this demands sound interpersonal skills such as negotiation, conflict resolution, persuasion and collaboration. In addition, Jackson (2000) points out that principals need "continually and increasingly to involve staff in collective decision-making" as key aspects of their job, and he emphasises the importance of consultation, collective decision-making and delegated responsibility. It is clear that nowadays there are marked changes in the roles and responsibilities of principals in comparison to earlier, when the principal was the main (often only) decision-maker in the school.

Other scholars in the field of school leadership and stakeholder involvement underscore the importance of facilitative leadership by school principals. Principals have to initiate, implement and sustain viable forms of teacher empowerment and shared decision-making at school level. Scholars point out the need to think in terms of notions of "power with" and "power through" rather than the more traditional hierarchical "power over" notion that probably most closely aligns with how principals operated in the past (Blase and Blase 2000). One may conclude that the success of PDM has much to do the readiness of the principal to share power and his ability to establish the processes to make PDM works.

Somech (2002:343) shares this view: "Leaders must be willing to let go of traditional authority roles, not only allowing teachers to have a greater voice but helping to prepare them, providing support and establishing an environment of trust." Acker-Hocevar and Touchton (1999:26) hold a similar view: "Principals must know how to create conditions that foster empowerment and release their control over other stakeholders, alter their roles, and engender commitment, trust, and respect."

A study conducted by Mulford et al. (2000) in primary schools in Tasmania examined school decision-making processes as perceived by principals, teachers and school council members. Their findings seem to suggest that all the stakeholders (teachers, parents and learners) need to be engaged in real decisions about teaching and learning in the school if real improvement in education is to be achieved. Other studies of shared governance, such as those by Karlsson (2002) and Mncube (2007) point towards the same understanding. The next section provides theoretical arguments for stakeholders' involvement in decision-making.

Theoretical Arguments for Stakeholders' Involvement in Decision-making

Arguments for participation in decision-making are generally grounded in four theoretical orientations, namely the democratic, socialist, human growth and development, and productivity and efficiency arguments (Somech 2002; Margulies and Black 1998; Keith 1996). This discussion focuses only on the democratic, human growth and development, and the productivity and efficiency argument as they are the ones relevant to this article.

The democratic argument for participation has also been called the ethical approach (Somech 2002). The democratic argument reflects the belief that offering the opportunity to participate in the decision-making of an organisation is a moral imperative because individuals have the right to exercise some control over their work and their lives (Somech 2002). In the school setting this argument suggests that teacher participation is necessary to professionalise and democratise teaching. Furthermore, a democratic school environment is believed to encourage children to participate in and sustain a country's system of government (Barth 2001). Though the link between participation and democratic and pluralistic values is often cited, the emphasis on participation for professionalisation or equity reasons has been found to be less prevalent among school principals than other emphases (Blase and Blase 2000).

The second argument for participation, which is human growth and development, advocates "assigning greater importance to the intrinsic

motivational properties of work itself by allowing greater employee influence, autonomy, and responsibility" (Keith 1996). This orientation towards participation views the involvement of employees as a means of enhancing their lives by providing the opportunity for growth and learning within the workplace. The assumption of the human growth and development theory of participation is that work must provide intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and must satisfy workers' psychological needs such as affiliation, power, and self-esteem.

Finally, the argument most commonly known as worker participation is promoted as a way to increase the productivity and efficiency of an organisation. Somech (2002) calls it a "pragmatic" rationale. In the educational setting, where this rationale is widespread, teacher participation is believed to improve the quality of educational decisions and therefore to improve instruction. This theory can be summarised as follows: "Flatter management and decentralised authority structures carry the potential for achieving outcomes unattainable by the traditional top-down bureaucratic structure of school" (Somech 2002). In the language of business, worker participation yields "higher quality products and services, less absenteeism, less turnover, better decision-making, better problem solving, and less management overhead – in short, greater organisational effectiveness" (Duke 2005).

Conley (1991) argues that worker participation is the best way to increase the productivity and efficiency of an organisation. Contextualising this assumption, it can be argued that teacher participation is the best way to improve school effectiveness. In the study conducted by Blase and Blase (2000), this assumption was found to be legitimate. In a study of 45 principals affiliated with the League of Professional Schools, in which schools partner with University of Georgia faculty in the process of working toward shared governance, these authors found that most of the principals cited the improvement of teaching and learning as the primary purpose for employing participatory decision-making structures at school level. Based on these findings it may be argued that teacher satisfaction contributes towards student learning outcomes.

The foregoing discussion provided the conceptual framework that was used in this research. The next section discusses the research methodology followed in this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section of the article briefly discusses the context of the study, the characteristics of the participants, research design and approach followed and the derivation of the measurement instruments used.

The Context of the Study

Research was conducted in two public secondary schools located in a rural village in the Free State, a province of South Africa. The Free State Education Department regards these schools as one of the better rural schools in the region. This is one of the reasons why the schools were selected for this study. However, policy based on democratic principles has taken some time to filter down to rural schools. Therefore, the research which aimed at investigating the extent to which stakeholders in rural schools perceive and implement PDM was timeous and necessary. The schools selected for this study are discussed below. For confidentiality purposes the schools were named Alpha and Omega.

Alpha School

This school is located in Botshabelo, a place which in past, that is before 1994 democratic general election in South Africa was part of the former Qwaqwa homeland. The majority of the learners attending the school come from a relatively poor socio-economic background. The local community consists of a few working-class families and unemployment rate in the area is very high. Sixty to seventy per cent of learners qualify for fee exemptions as parents are unable to pay the school fees of R150 per annum. The school enrols approximately 300 learners per year and classrooms are inadequate, and as many as 60 learners sometimes have to be cramped into a single classroom. The school has established a number of formal structures that enable teachers, learners and parents to become involved in the school and participate in its decision-making. There is a strong sense that these structures create considerable opportunities for involving other stakeholders. These structures include:

- *The School Governing Body:* This structure is the strategic planning and monitoring body whose members are elected by teachers, learners and parents. It holds consi-

derable responsibility for setting the broad directions in the school, allocating resources to support priorities and monitoring progress.

- *The School Management Team (SMT*): The SMT comprises the principal, deputy principal and heads of department. This team manages day-to-day operational matters.
- *The Class Parent Forum:* This body comprises parent representatives for each class. Members serving on the forum meet fortnightly with the principal or one of the deputy principals. The purpose is to provide an opportunity to exchange ideas and share information in an informal setting.
- *The Learning Areas Management Committee:* The heads of department serve on this committee which is assigned the responsibility to develop an annual operational plan (including a budget) for the different departments. The school governing body approves these plans.
- *The Learners' Representative Council:* This body represents learners on the school governing body.
- *The Curriculum and Time Table Committee:* This committee comprises teachers and heads of department and is responsible for compiling a time table and reviewing the curriculum. This committee is chaired by the deputy principal.

Omega School

Omega is located in the former QwaQwa homeland. The school draws learners from neighbouring villages and a significant percentage of these learners are blacks. The school enrols 600 learners per year. Almost 70 per cent of these learners cannot afford to pay the school fees of R170 per year, thus qualifying for fee exemption. However, Omega has an adequate number of classrooms compared to Alpha even though classrooms are still overcrowded, with approximately 45 learners per classroom. The staff is made up of a stable and experienced group of teachers, many of whom have been at the school for a considerable period. Like Alpha, this school (Omega) had established a number of formal structures through which both teachers and parents and learners could become involved in the school and participate in its decision-making. These offered considerable opportunities for stakeholders' involvement. In addition to these formal bodies, the school had regular information evenings and a comprehensive set of written communication procedures for parents.

Participants

The research study targeted these members of the SGB (parents, principal, teachers and the learners). I assumed that this cohort of people has over time becomes knowledgeable about the governance issues of the school and would provide a unique perspective.

Approach

The current study is exploratory in nature. An exploratory study is conducted to gain insight into a situation, phenomenon, community or individuals (Bless and Higson-Smith 1995). The need for such a study could arise out of a lack of understanding in a new area of interest or in order to be acquainted with a situation (Fouche 2005). The study seeks to gain insight into how rural schools understand, perceive and implement PDM through the SGB.

Research Design

Mouton (2001) defines a research design as a plan or blueprint of how one intends conducting the research. A qualitative research design was used in order to establish how participants implement PDM in their setting. This was achieved by analysing the participants' perceptions, attitudes, understanding, knowledge, values, feelings and experiences about the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews which were conducted using a common interview schedule for all participants, that is, all members serving on the SGB at each school. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded and responses were grouped according to the questions asked and the responses were reported verbatim. Manual analysis of data was possible because of the reasonable size of the sample, that is, SGB members only at each school. For the purposes of confidentiality the school involved in this research were named Al-

pha and Omega. Before the research findings are presented, it must be pointed out that it was not the purpose of this research to generalise the findings, but to provide an in-depth view of the implementation of PDM at the particular schools. The data for each of the schools are initially considered separately, followed by the summary of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Alpha School

Interview with the principal revealed that parents were not involved directly in curriculum committees; a decision taken by the school as 'this is what teachers are expert in'. However, two members (a teacher and a parent) from the SGB are attached to each learning area, providing parents with some input into the curriculum of the school. The principal also identified that there had been a major cultural change over the past few years towards the greater involvement of parents and teachers in decision-making. The principal noted:

"In the past, the annual operational plans were just handed to the teachers by the principal. They meant very little and had no real bottom-up teacher involvement. Parent involvement was pretty tokenistic. Since the introduction of the SGB things have changed for the better at this school."

The principal considered there were many opportunities for both teacher and parent and learner involvement in the school. However, many of them needed encouragement and some skill development to take on their enhanced roles in the decision-making process in light of the fact that this had been only minimal in the past. Principal noted that, teachers participate to minimal extent in the committees, few of them maintained a stance that they only wanted to teach. In this school, teachers were expected to be on at least one major committee and one minor committee. It was important, the principal observed, that there remained a balance between teachers' commitments to committee work and program management activities outside their classroom and their overall workload, 'It is a dilemma. Some teachers complain about the extra work. But you could never take it back now, not now they've had a taste of it'.

Some parents were seen by the principal and teachers as being 'marginalised' from the school and saw significant challenges in getting these parents more involved. Many of these 'perhaps feel alienation from school based on their own experiences'. Others, the principal believed, did not want to get involved for a variety of reasons including work commitments.

Both parents interviewed agreed there were many opportunities for parents to get involved in the school, at both strategic (for example, through the SGB) and operational (for example, Parent Forum) levels. Despite this, they indicated the number of parents actually involved was generally small, and those who were involved tended to be highly so. Both parents believed the SGB had provided parents with an ideal opportunity to have a major say in the school.

"We are still learning about all this but it certainly is different from a few years ago. Now we have a real say of most of the important issues. But not all parents do actually get involved."

The level of involvement by parents had increased in recent years, particularly through the encouragement of the principal for this to occur and the opportunities she created. As a result, one parent observed the relationship between parents and teachers had changed, now developing into one more collaboratively oriented, rather than the earlier 'them and us'. However, another noted that a 'small number of teachers still would rather we weren't involved in the school', although this number was declining over time.

Parents acknowledged that the school had supported them to develop their skills through courses and workshops. This allowed them to understand better what was happening in education generally and facilitated more effective participation and contribution by them in decision-making processes. Both parents identified benefits for themselves and the school as a result of their involvement. They believed it 'sent positive messages to our kids that school is important', and felt they had a real say in 'where the school is going'. It also provided the school with a wider range of views from parents of a variety of backgrounds, giving the school 'a better idea of what the community wants of the school'.

One parent noted that on some occasions she felt as though decisions had already been taken by 'the school' and that they were really only being provided with information, not having their opinions sought. Another argued that parents of-

ten were inadvertently marginalised from having an input because of the jargon surrounding the issue. Educators, she noted, need to 'speak in simpler language so we can all understand what is going on'. She believed that this turned some parents off or made it confusing for them as to how they might get involved in the school. The second parent thought better decisions would be made if more parents were involved through better communication between the school and the parent body. The parents observed that teachers were highly involved in the school.

The three teachers interviewed (one a deputy principal) all agreed there were considerable opportunities for teachers to get involved in decision-making in the school, from a strategic level to 'real day-to-day operation of the school'. One observed there had been a marked change in recent years, with earlier experiences really just tokenistic:

"The way it operates now I believe it is highly professional. We are treated like professionals and have a real say in what is happening. A professional culture has developed."

Previously, priorities were decided 'at the top'. Now teachers and many parents had an input into what was to be done and what funding was needed to support it. Most teachers were involved in some way, although a small number chose to remain isolated. All teachers saw the many professional development opportunities available as significant in the changes in the school, again contributing to the professional culture that had developed. The greater involvement of teachers was seen by one teacher as leading to developing positive relationships, enhanced collegiality and ownership of decisions among teachers, although some needed 'to learn how to collaborate and negotiate!' However, this skill development enhanced the professionalism of teachers as they adopted many of the skills used by those in other professions outside education. One teacher reflected that some of her colleagues had been on a 'steep learning curve and still were' as the culture of the school changed to be more inclusive and collaborative. In this, some teachers have also needed to be more accepting of parents and their ideas.

The teachers agreed the principal had been a positive influence in generating a more collaborative culture in the school, welcoming input and involvement of both teachers and parents. One teacher observed that if an outsider attended an SGB meeting, it 'would be impossible to tell who were the teachers and who were the parents'. Despite this, teachers observed that parent involvement was variable, with some highly involved in the SGB activities for example, while many other parents had no involvement. However, all teachers agreed there were considerable opportunities for parent involvement and some had taken up these opportunities with positive effects. This is what they said:

"We now hear what parents think about issues. And this is important after all it's their kids. As long as they don't get on these bodies to check up on us. There has to be trust and openness all round."

Overall, this school has developed a variety of structures and processes to enhance teacher and parent involvement in the school in recent years, although involvement by parents in direct classroom teaching-learning matters is minimal, except at a strategic level through the SGB. The nature of parental involvement is quite varied but ranges from the strategic to the operational, and is much greater than it was previously. There are clearly many opportunities afforded for involvement, with most teachers - but many fewer parents - taking up these opportunities. There is some wider community involvement in the school. For example, the school draws on a considerable range of local people as volunteers to support their literacy and mathematics tutoring programs. Other involvement is demonstrated through sponsorship arrangements and visitations by guest speakers.

Interviews with learners from this case study revealed that their role in making decisions about curriculum issues was insignificant. Learners seemed to be involved only in insignificant structures, as is evident in the following statement of a respondent:

"I only serve the school in terms of cleanliness, that is, I supervise when they clean the school. The principal calls me into his office if there is a learner who has done something wrong and asks for my advice and that's it."

The other LRC participants interviewed shared the same sentiments. This is what they said:

"I become involved in uniform inspection and that's it.

No, I am not part of decision-making!"

In assessing these responses from learners, it became clear that they were not truly involved

in issues that affected their schooling and education. In general, the interviews with learners confirmed that some governors (teachers and the school management team) did not approve of the idea of learner participation on school curriculum development committee. However, one learner noted that the leaner representative council (LRC) was an official body elected to represent learners on the school governing body but these structures were still marginalised.

A learner governor explained:

"Learners are a channel of communication between learners and the SGBs. Learner governors are better positioned to inform the SGBs of what learners think and want. And this kind of exclusion denies us (learners) an opportunity to acquire skills that would enable us to contribute constructively in the governing body's meetings."

Surprisingly, it emerged that learners were included in other decisions such decisions about finance and the selection of staff, but in accordance with departmental regulations they did not form part of the interview panel. They also gave input on staff disciplinary matters, but they were excused when the discipline of a teaching staff was discussed. In general the interviews showed that, despite certain positive outcomes achieved by both schools, some governors did not approve of the idea of learner participation, especially learner participation in curriculum issues.

I argue that curriculum development is influenced by many factors outside the realm of education. These outside influences come from homes, churches, social agencies, politics, textbooks, industry, and many other sources. Many of these same influences come to bear on the minds of our learners, making them much more aware of curriculum matters than they have ever been. To say that learners are instructional technologists in a lateral sense would probably not stand the tests of logic, but all of us have certainly heard and read about the effects of mass media on learner awareness. Also, curriculum development and content are not items that are very well camouflaged, and to say that our efforts have not caused learners to be better informed in these areas would be a rather serious indictment of our own schools.

On the basis of the above argument, I am tempted to draw the following suggestion:

"If curriculum development is not an exclusive function of educators, and if learners are relatively well versed in curriculum matters, and if learner involvement does not mean that learners will eventually dictate what is to be taught and how, then learners must be given the opportunity to become more involved in curriculum development".

Omega School

Similar to Alpha, parents were not directly involved in curriculum committees in the school. Moreover, they did have some input through a major curriculum renewal project conducted in the school, namely, Outcomes Based Education (OBE). The parents were quite comfortable with their limited level of input to the curriculum, because teaching was, as one parent noted, what 'teachers are paid to do. It's their responsibility'. The deputy principal chaired the curriculum committees, membership of which is comprised of teachers representing their particular interests and expertise. This committee identifies priorities and budget allocations, which are then taken forward by the deputy principal to a management meeting with the principal, where final priorities and budget are determined. One teacher observed that he believed teachers had real decision-making responsibilities in the school. Another took a contrary view, suggesting that with the deputy and principal having the final say, teacher input was really more advisory in nature.

I'm not sure if this is because we're not trusted or if they think we don't have the big picture … maybe that's true, I guess someone has to see the whole picture before deciding about particular areas.

The principal saw the curriculum committees and the SGB as genuine opportunities for teachers to get involved. However, he noted that teachers took up these options with varying levels of enthusiasm. Some teachers are very professional and want this degree of involvement … others just want to be left alone in their class and avoid all this. Then it can become a workload issue with some getting overloaded with responsibilities because they volunteer all the time. Some want more say but are not prepared to give up the time required. Teachers also agreed with the 'workload issue'. For them, it became a matter of balancing their time sitting on committees and carrying out their classroom responsibilities. One teacher said:

"Where do you put your energies? I can't do it all. I've been on the SGB now for two years but have to have a break and get back to concentrating on teaching."

The principal noted that for some teachers, the changes in their roles was something they did not yet understand in so far as being part of the school's decision-making processes. He saw this as part of a 'new professionalism'; one that required greater commitment and greater openness to parents and the wider school community. Some teachers were willing to have parents work in and visit their classrooms, while others were reluctant for this to happen. Parents agreed, one observing that some teachers still liked 'to keep us out'. One parent said:

"It's a matter of trust. They have to understand that I am not there spying on them or checking up on them. But that I want to help if I can. They're the experts, I just want to help in some way. It works well where there is a good trusting relationship between parents and teachers."

The principal, teachers and parents all agreed that the level of teacher involvement in the school had increased in recent years. Where once the principal was at the 'top of the tree and had all the power', now teachers were having a much greater say in what was happening in the school. A teacher of twenty two years experience noted:

"The principal's role is now a much more collaborative one ... a mediator, balancing …negotiator. But at the end of the day the buck stops with him."

Like Alpha, the SGB had been operating for a number of years. However, despite its history, the new chairperson of Omega saw it still maturing in its role in the school and how it aligned with other bodies such as the Parents' Forum. The chairperson also noted that members had to understand the relationship the SGB held with the principal and that both teachers and parents needed some training to be effective governors. One parent said:

"We still have to work out the roles, the strategic and operational. On top of that, members have to be trained. New members need induction. You can't just sit around and hope it will work."

This parent also saw a need for training and skill development for the Classroom Parent Representatives. Again, she believed that if parents were going to make the most of the opportunities available and make a real contribution to the school then they would need some skill development. To this end, the principal had organised a six-day workshop for parents which had proved highly successful.

Parents believed there were sound opportunities for them to become involved in the school. However, they noted that parents needed to be proactive and not wait for the school to communicate with them. The parents also noted that by getting involved in the school, parents were able to contribute significantly to a shared vision for the school, potentially leading to better educational opportunities for their children. However, one parent noted that the overall level of involvement across the eight years she had been associated with the school had declined. The number of parents was smaller, but they were more highly involved:

"A lot of us are now involved with other things, like selling goods in order to generate income. You are aware that most people in this area are not working. These are some of the things that prevent us from taking part in school activities."

One teacher noted that the attitude of the principal was a key factor as to whether decision-making was genuinely shared in the school. In particular, he saw the whole 'involvement thing' as being about power and that the principal needed to be prepared to 'hand some of it over'. It was then a matter of whether teachers took up the opportunities. They had to weigh up whether it meant real changes and having a say in the school and whether they could balance the extra workload with the additional time and responsibilities.

The principal indicated that he attempted to inform parents of developments in the school (and beyond) through the newsletter and various other avenues such as parent information nights. In this way, he believed they could contribute more meaningfully to the school and their children's education. However, he observed that, like one of the parents, the number of parents involved in the school was getting smaller. There was a 'hard core' who were active in the SGB and other committees, but the number of parents contributing was diminishing. He cited requests for responses to surveys as an example, where the number responding was small despite his efforts to promote their importance. He also noted that the number of women involved in the school far outweighed the number of men.

Overall, like Alpha, this school (Omega) has made steps to include teachers and parents to a greater extent in decision-making since SASA was introduced. The SGB has been important is this endeavour.

While the SGB remains the major formal body through which a wider representation of people can be involved, other strategies such as the identification of Classroom Parent Representatives also create opportunities in this regard. However, while these bodies provide the opportunities, the training of participants and maturation and gathering of experience are key factors in achieving the most extensive and effective involvement by parents and teachers in decision-making.

Interviews with the learners revealed that they are consulted and involved on number of issues although they cannot influence the outcomes of decisions. Learners complain that they have not been given any real influence over outcome of decisions. This is what they said:

"The principal seems to be reluctant to extent genuine influence to us, perhaps assuming that we do not have the expertise to make valuable contributions or because he does not trust us to make decision in the best interest of the school."

Like Alpha, learners are also excluded on issues that deal with curriculum matters. This was also a great concern among the learners at this school. I argue that student involvement in curriculum development does not mean that students will eventually dictate what is to be taught and how. I further argue that curriculum development is not an exclusive function of teachers and principal. Most students have the competence and the right to make significant decisions concerning their own learning if they are provided appropriate leadership.

Another issue which once angered learners at this school was their exclusion from the disciplinary hearing which involved one of the learners. Learners were requested to leave the meeting even when the main issue was the debate about a learner who had stabbed another learner with a pair of scissors. Learners felt that this issue affected them and they wanted to be part of the discussions. Apparently, learners in this school serve on the disciplinary committee as well. This type of exclusion was unfortunate as learners believed that they had the right to know about disciplinary procedures, the progress of the case and the motivation, if any, for expulsion or suspension. In this case the school principal indicated that the learners had been excluded for security reasons. Incidentally, the learner mentioned here was expelled from the school.

In this article, I argue that the discussion about a learner who had stabbed another learner and was ultimately expelled from the school could have been enhanced by learner participation. Principles of fairness and justice could have prevailed. Research suggests that there are positive behavioural outcomes associated with learner participation. These outcomes include improved discipline and an increased ability to self-regulate behaviour (Mncube 2008; Karlsson 2002). I strongly argue that the exclusion of learners, especially from issues that affect them directly, like the one above, exacerbates disciplinary problems in schools. If learners are excluded from a discussion of issues that affect them directly, there is the potential for chaos and disruption in the schools.

Another issue that emerged during the interviews was the code of conduct for learners. This code of conduct had been compiled by teachers and the management of the school without consulting learners, and given to the learners without any contribution from them. This was also a concern of one learner governor who said:

"Some decisions at this school are made for us and adult governors perceive us as minors who have nothing to contribute to debates even on issues that affect us directly."

The quotation provided above suggests that learner governors at Alpha seemed to be playing an insignificant role and therefore could not represent the voice of learners. This is another unfortunate situation caused by adult governors who still find it difficult to adapt to change. In contrast, it emerged that learners at Alpha were included in decisions on discipline but were only excused when issues dealing with the disciplinary matters of educators were discussed. However, these learners made inputs into discussions on staff disciplinary matters. In conclusion, I argue that a sustained effort is needed to enable learners to play a more comprehensive role in disciplinary processes and procedures. The principals should endeavour to treat learners as equal partners in SBG meetings.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM THESE TWO SCHOOLS

Both positive and negative remarks surfaced from research participants about their involve-

ment in decision-making areas, such as curriculum and disciplinary matters in their schools. Table 2 summarises some of the key findings from these two schools with regard to stakeholders' involvement:

Table 2: Summary of key aspects of stakeholder involvement in PDM

Key aspects of the involvement of stakeholders (teachers, parents and learners)
Achievements of the Schools Under Investigation Both schools have developed a variety of formal structures to facilitate greater involvement.These structures include governing bodies, curriculum committees, LRCs, school management teams, class parent forums and learning areas management committees. Opportunities for involvement are much greater than they were before the introduction of PDM, in particular SASA.Teachers and parents have responded positively to the opportunities presented by PDM, although some are reluctant to participate.
Factors that Prevent Parents From Becoming Involved Include the Following: ➢ a lack of skills and a poor understanding of some school issues ➢ time pressure resulting from involvement and home commitments ➢ some teachers' negative attitude towards parents ➢ lower education or a lack of education
Factors that Prevent Learners From Becoming Involved Include The Following: ➢ being denied the opportunity to participate in school-wide decision-making structures by adult governors ➢ a perceived gap between professional knowledge (teachers and principals) and lay knowledge (learners), which affects power relations ➢ deeply rooted cultural expectations of adult governors towards learners ➢ adult governors perceiving learners as minors who lack experience to contribute constructively in the debates

When considering these aspects in Table 2, it is essential to reflect on what have been identified as factors that prevent parents, teachers and learners from becoming involved in PDM at schools. These factors create major challenges for school principals. Schools need to move from a culture of exclusivity to one of inclusivity. To begin to move and sustain a journey to a more participative and collaborative state, this research suggests that principals need to demonstrate particular skills, capacities and attitudes with regard to the involvement of other stakeholders, in particular learners. These leadership skills are related to the principal as integrator, parliamentarian, educator and director, to name but a few of the aspects (Hoy and Tarter 2008:150). In terms of the general running of the school, whether it is budgeting, human resource management, planning or decision-making, it is true that most stakeholders still find themselves either unconsciously or deliberately excluded from such matters. The mere fact that some governors exclude some stakeholders (learners) indicates that in most cases the principals make decisions without the input of the learner governors.

Jackson (2000) suggests the following principles for principals to consider in order to achieve greater stakeholder involvement.

- Be willing to share decision-making with others. Let go of traditional authority and top-down roles.
- Providing empowerment through training. This aspect is crucial, especially for illiterate parents.
- Strive for flatter organisational structures.
- Give support and establish an environment of trust and respect.
- Strive to ensure that involvement becomes meaningful to all role-players.
- Endeavour to engage a representative of learners in issues that affect their education and schooling.
- Help teachers to balance their increased workload that has resulted from involvement in decision-making structures (curriculum committee).
- Minimise the perceived gap between professionals (teachers) and lay persons (parents and learners), as it affects relationships.
- Adopt an open-participatory management approach.

For some principals and in some school cultures the aspects in cited by Jackson (200) may pose major challenges. However, they seem crucial if the question of inclusiveness becomes a reality across schools.

CONCLUSION

Although optimum involvement by all members of the school community may bring certain pressures to bear on the school principals, such involvement constitutes an extremely valuable resource for them and serves to broaden their base of manoeuvrability and decision-making. A vital part of that broad base is learner involvement in matters of formal instruction. It is good that learners can be involved in the coordination of non-curriculum matters, but it is not enough.

Most learners have the competence and the right to make significant decisions concerning their own learning if they are provided appropriate leadership. The rural school principals must assume responsibility for initiating that leadership and ensuring its continuity. Only then will learners truly appreciate the piece of action that is rightfully theirs, and only then will the learners, teachers, parents and principals be able to exert a truly unified effort as they strive to reach a common goal.

In conclusion, it is recommended that while full PDM will all always be difficult to implement given the history and the nature of rural schools and their leaderships, it will be significantly more difficult if attempts are not made to better conceptualise the role of learners in this process and to better effect this participation within the thinking and logic of school leadership and management systems. Principles suggested above in the text for principals to consider, are crucial for effective implementation of PDM in schools.

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