

Correlation between Teacher Participation in Decision-making and Collegial Interaction

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ABSTRACT A collegial school environment is one in which teachers are able to work well with other teachers as well as with their Principals. Collegiality greatly influences teachers' morale, commitment, job satisfaction and performance. The efficiency and effectiveness of any school depends on every teacher's ability to work with others. This study sought to investigate if a positive correlation does exist between teacher involvement in school based decision-making processes and collegial interaction. The study adopted an interpretive qualitative research methodology and a case study research design. A purposive convenient sample of 5 school heads and 20 secondary school teachers formed the study. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews, documentary analysis and observation of two staff meetings per school. The study found that a positive correlation exists between teacher participation in critical school based decisions and collegial interaction. It was established that the exclusion of teachers in strategic areas in decision making has led to formation of small cliques in four of the five participating schools. It was indicated that small groups had been formed, some of which were seeking fame from the administration by back biting others.

INTRODUCTION

School collegiality concerns the quality of the relationships between and among professionals in a school environment. This concurs with McLaughlin and Talbert's (2001) assertion that the relationship between and among professionals in any organization is critical to its success. Consequently, a successful school is one in which teachers work well together and with their administrators. Wadesango's (2011) study on the importance of group participation in decision-making found that a school cannot realize its full potential without clear and cooperative interaction among all members of the school. This view is supported by Martinez's (2004) study which found that worker satisfaction and productivity are influenced by social interaction. Furthermore, the same author asserts that teachers make important career decisions based on collegiality or whether there is positive social interaction in their schools.

Manouchehri (2010) suggests that in order for teachers to grow as professionals, schools should be transformed into communities in which self-renewal through collaborative networks supports instructional improvement. He further asserts that the increased interest in teacher development has led to augmented efforts to highlight the potential of peer collaboration and dialogue on improving teaching.

Manouchehri's sentiments concur with Wasley (1991) and Hawkey's (1997) views that more and more professional development activities are designed to provide opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative investigations of school curriculum and pedagogical innovations. This study was, therefore, conducted in order to ascertain the degree of collegial interaction among teachers in Zimbabwe and try to link it to their involvement in school based decision-making processes. The literature reviewed so far in this study calls for schools to facilitate more professional and collegial climates as this impact greatly on the efficiency and effectiveness of any organization.

Importance of Collegiality

Collegiality in any organization, is evidenced by the millions of dollars business and government managers spend to train their professionals to improve working relationships (Martinez 2004). Furthermore, the same author posits that working together for school success is for teachers who have a dual concern for the classroom and well-being of their schools. Fullan (2001) concurs with Martinez in that collegial relationships among teachers are a prerequisite for school improvement and make knowledge sharing and innovative practice possible. He further asserts that the success of broad school change also improves when teachers and administra-

tors work well together. In the study of high school teachers conducted by McLaughlin and Talbert (2001), it was found that collegial support and interaction influence how teachers feel about their jobs and their students. These authors found that collegiality also influences the motivation and career commitment of teachers and the extent to which they are willing to modify classroom practices.

Collegiality contributes to every successful change, and effective administrators purposely draw on the expertise of teachers to discuss or implement new initiatives and programmes (Martinez 2004). Martinez further propounds that if a change were to be implemented without teacher input, concerns about that change can be most effectively expressed by teachers with strong interpersonal skills. His study established that schools with strong collegial environments are better able to assess and implement changes than schools with weak collegial environments.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative interpretive research methodology was adopted in this study since this research aimed at elucidating what the participants had to say with regard to decision-making in their natural settings. It was, therefore, imperative that a methodological perspective be adopted to allow the findings to develop “from the data itself rather than from preconceived, rigidly structured, and highly quantified techniques that pigeonhole the empirical social world into the operational definitions that the researcher has constructed” (Creswell 2002). The problem identified in this study demanded that the participants themselves be allowed to freely express their feelings, views and opinions. To this end, Sherman and Webb (in Ely 1991:4) provide the following definition “...qualitative implies a direct concern with feelings, experiences and views as lived or felt or undergone...” This study adopted a case-study research design. A case study is described as a form of descriptor research that gathers a large amount of information about one or a few participants and thus investigates a few cases in considerable depth (Thomas and Nelson 2001). Purposive convenience sampling was adopted in the selection of participants for this study

RESULTS

Table 1 indicates that the majority of teachers in this study are not involved at all in school based decision-making processes. It was established that the exclusion of teachers in strategic areas in decision-making has led to formation of small cliques in four of the five participating schools. It was indicated that small groups had been formed, some of which were seeking fame from the administration by back-biting others. Some of the responding teachers from one of the schools asserted that there was very little collegial interaction and some of the interaction was viewed with suspicion with the next person because of the camps in the school. Responding teachers went on to disclose that there was no freedom of expression in this school. Teachers were now interacting in small groups to share their personal grievances. Gossiping was very high as teachers did not have the correct platform to share ideas.

Table 1: Level of teacher involvement in decision-making (n=20)

<i>Not Involved</i>	<i>Slightly Involved</i>	<i>Involved</i>	<i>Total</i>
15	2	3	20

This is the same school where teachers as well as the school head indicated that teachers were not consulted in critical school based decisions. This is the same school again where teachers as well as the school head indicated that experience was not a factor to be considered in decision making. On further probing it emerged that in these four schools, committees were not all that autonomous in decision-making.

It was brought to the fore that teachers were united into their small cliques. The net outcome is that a class of people with similar problems or interests forms a clique, not really for the good of the institution but to satisfy other social demands that could be at crossroads with the interest of the school. The above sentiments were also echoed by R2 who made the following comments:

Respondent 2: There is a lot of suspicion that some teachers are spying on others on behalf of the administration. Collegial interaction is very low, you have to be careful who you confide in; you do not just air opinions in staff meetings or to anyone not very close to you. There are cliques in this school.

Teachers in this school reiterated that long back when their views were being considered in strategic issues such as the choice of curriculum and school based promotion, they used to have a social welfare club in the school. They would contribute and assist one another in times of bereavement, weddings, illness etc. thus, they would stand with their fellow teacher both in times of happiness and sorrow. They would also organize Christmas parties and get together parties. They would spoil themselves as a united family. Those were the good old days. Teachers in this particular school feel that all that is gone and perhaps gone forever and yet with effort, the same days can be revived in their school with their inclusion in more strategic issues such as school based promotion, student discipline policies and teaching load allocation. To confirm the state of affairs in another school, Respondent 3 also made the following comments:

R3: There is very little collegial interaction and some of the interaction is viewed by suspicion with the next person because it looks like we have divided sides. You are not sure how/what you have talked about, how the next person is going to take it or interpret it. Sometimes you are afraid to talk with the next person because of fear of the unknown that maybe this person I am talking to may take what I am saying to the head and you are pinned down, and the head is good at pinning down. However, I wouldn't say it's because some are linked to the head, maybe there are very few that are linked to the head, but they are linked to themselves in their various groups.

The sentiments above demonstrate the effect of involving teachers in critical issues and at the same time excluding them from other strategic decisions. The minutes that were reviewed confirmed that teachers were no longer meeting as family members as they used to do. This has affected commitment to their work. Minutes indicated that one of the new teachers asked why the school did not have social clubs like in other schools. In response, the head indicated that the idea was noble but unfortunately teachers had resisted it some time when one of the senior teachers wanted to launch the association. Minutes further show that social gatherings such as end of year get-together used to be held in this school.

The same minute book showed that committees such as bereavement and get together used to be selected at the beginning of each year up till 2003. There after the practice was discontinued. These could be indicators that there is low collegial interaction in this particular school. One of meetings attended by the researcher revealed that the atmosphere was not conducive. In the same meeting the head castigated some of the teachers for not having contributed their condolences towards the death of one of the teacher's sister. However in reply, one of the teachers indicated that when his uncle passed away, nothing was done and why now?

While this situation prevails in most of the schools under study, an exception was made in one of the schools where teachers revealed to the researcher that they are close to one another and meet on several occasions for a cup of tea or so. One of the responding teachers (Respondent 15) from one of the schools made the following comments: *"Teachers in this school are united. We actually work as a team in this school. We are like a family and collegial interaction is very high. Our motto is always: united we stand and divided we fall"*.

During the course of this research, more probing was conducted and it was established that teachers in respondent 15's school were involved in several strategic areas like fundraising activities, sports organization, ordering of textbooks and teaching load allocation as individuals or being represented by their members in those various committees only in one of the participating schools. However, in the other four, teachers indicated that besides being represented in decision-making processes in committees in strategic issues such as those listed above, they were rarely consulted in their individual capacity in the process of budget formulation as well as the formulation of student discipline policies which they considered as critical decision-making areas.

Teachers in one of these four schools are still meeting together during these days of economic hardships for a cup of tea. This was witnessed in one of the meetings when the head asked if it was possible to have end of year party and members would invite their fiancées. The house accepted the proposal and a committee was appointed to oversee the function. Another teacher suggested that the party be held soon after end of year examinations and everyone

agreed with this suggestion. The tentative date was set for 2.12.09. The minute book collected from this particular school also confirmed that critical issues like examinations were discussed by all staff members in a staff meeting and consensus reached by all. An extract from the same minute book reads as follows: *Mathematics issue: The HOD of the Maths department expressed her sentiments that because of different teachers taking different classes for form one Maths, there is need also for the form ones to write examinations. After some deliberations, the house agreed that as long as all the work planned for is covered, sequencing of topics does not necessarily affect setting of standard tests from which assessment is going to be done during the mid-year exam period.*

DISCUSSION

The study established that insignificant teacher participation in decision-making leads to the formation of small groups in schools. It was found out that there was little collegial interaction among teachers in four of the schools under study. Since teachers were interacting in small groups, this has tended to affect team work as teachers are teaming up in small groups in this school. Lack of team work could also have been caused by lack of communication between the administrators and their teachers. In support of this, research has demonstrated that involvement in decision making is associated with a number of individual and organisational school outcomes (Hoy and Sousa 1984; Wadesango 2011). Among these are acceptance of change and team work and the reduction of conflict among staff members.

Studies have shown that participation in deciding matters of concern has positive effects on the school climate. For example, a study carried out by Guthrie and Koppich (1993) in America revealed that autocratic (formal model) atmosphere generated a higher degree of tension amongst staff members than the democratic one (collegial), thereby creating an uncondusive school climate. Therefore, Guthrie and Koppich's results confirm what emerged from this study as well. Thus, the management model in a given school has a lot to do with team building. However in the other four schools, teachers were not working as a team.

One person cannot be a good resource for every decision. Advantages of team interaction are lost; zero team commitment is developed for implementing the decision. Resentment and disagreement may result in sabotage, deterioration of team effectiveness and resources of other team members are not tapped. According to Martinez (2004), today's teachers must interact with each other more than ever before. The traditionalist claim is that interaction among teachers is of little consequence since the majority of teacher time is spent in the classroom. Martinez promulgates that this claim is no longer accurate since teachers certainly continue to derive tremendous satisfaction from their classrooms if they are involved in critical issues of curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study found out that participating school heads have the tendency of making unilateral decisions in certain critical areas. School heads also make unilateral decisions in situations of a volatile nature where time will not permit consultation of every stakeholder. It also emerged that in certain issues all school heads usually involve their administrative advisers. These are their deputies, senior women and the senior masters. Heads of Departments "HODs" were also at times invited to join the senior management teams in making decisions with regard to issues of teaching load allocation and choice of curriculum but not always. The impression that the researcher got is that in critical school business issues, school administrative decisions is a prerogative of the school head and his/her advisors who constitute the school administration board. The study, therefore, concludes that people working together are more effective than a collection of individuals working alone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends teacher empowerment in decision-making. This implies that teachers need the opportunity and space to participate in decision-making at a level that is beyond the classroom. Such involvement provides fora through which teachers' creativity contribute to the running of their schools. Allowing teachers access to meaningful decision-making in major school issues may provide a fertile ground for

them to look through themselves with respect and dignity. Teachers are likely to regard this climate with esteem and trust. Furthermore they may feel respected if their interests and expertise are recognized in the decision-making processes. Perhaps more importantly, this recognition is likely to unlock vast levels of cooperation, dedication and commitment which are essential ingredients for the success of the school.

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