

Teaching Experience as an Avenue for Participatory Decision-making in Schools

Newman Wadesango

Walter Sisulu University, East London, Republic of South Africa
E-mail: nwadesango@wsu.ac.za, newmanwadesango@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT The new dispensation in educational leadership calls for shared decision making by all the critical stakeholders. Teacher participation is a paradigm shift from traditional leadership styles which were autocratic in nature. It is set to transform 'top-down' approaches, which reduced teachers to tools of implementing policies and decisions without making any meaningful contribution. It encourages teachers to improve the quality of their profession and workplace, which may result in a less stressful, more satisfying and motivating environment. The study sought to investigate if teaching experience was an avenue for participatory decision making in schools. 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 findings from this study were that teaching experience and expertise were identified as accurate indicators of participation type. The study established that most of the participating school heads considered teaching experience and expertise as avenues for participation. Participating heads confirmed that in critical issues, they sought advice from the more experienced members of staff. The study concluded that when heads were faced with a sensitive situation, they approached the mature members of staff.

INTRODUCTION

According to McLagan and Nel (1995), many principals are reluctant to involve teachers in decision making. They fear that they may lose control, but participation does not imply reckless involvement as everyone does not have to be involved in everything. In a study conducted in Colombia on perceptions of staff on their involvement in decision-making, Steyn (1996), found that teachers wanted a say and not merely to adhere to autocratic decisions of the principal. There is, therefore, need for school administrators to adopt participative management styles in decision making in their schools, if schools are to be efficient and effective. Many theorists envisaged participative management as enhancing active involvement of relevant stakeholders in decision making (Rice and Schneider 1994; Rosenbaum 1996; Maers and Voehl 1994). It has been advocated by many scholars who believe it is the best leadership style in implementing democratic values to education (Etzion 1989; Erickson 1990; Copland 2001; Daun 2002a). The idea of participative management is generally viewed as an ideal style of leadership and management in education today (Johnson and Ledbetter 1993). They further argue that participative management has been

widely promoted as a means of formalising a new conceptualisation of management to bring about school improvement.

Developments in the field of organisation theory support this move towards participative management. Kurt Lewis' principle that "we are likely to modify our own behaviour when we participate in problem analysis and solution and likely to carry out decisions we have helped make" is central to participative management according to Smith (2003:04). Participative approaches emphasise management process rather than outcomes only and high involvement is seen as the ultimate key to the shift from autocracy to participation (Van Wyk 1995; Mac Lagan; Neil 1995). Hargreaves (1994) shares the same sentiment and argues that increasing emergence of participative management in schools reflects the widely shared beliefs that flattened management and decentralised authority structures carry the potential of achieving the outcomes unattainable by the traditional top down bureaucratic structure of schools.

Participative management is also at the heart of Bush's (2003) collegial model of management. According to Bush (2003:64), "Collegial models include all those theories that emphasise that power and decision making should be shared among some or all members of the organisation."

One of the features of collegial models is that it is strongly normative. The participative management approach supports the idea of school based decision making. The idea of school based decision is an effort to increase the autonomy of schools. In Australia, Chapman (1990) refers to the term devolution which has been used in their education cycles to describe the quite sweeping change to the pattern of school governance which began with the enactment of legislation giving powers to the school councils.

Teacher participation calls for teachers to assume leadership roles in schools and it requires that principals encourage such leadership from teachers (Wagner 1999). Principals cannot manage schools alone nor take the burden of motivating others to achieve objectives and complete tasks without support from their colleagues, they must actively involve them (Bell 1999). Teacher participation is linked to decision making in that it leads to the following three aspects: teacher empowerment, autonomy and accountability:

- ♦ **Teacher Empowerment:** Teacher empowerment is defined as the transfer of decision making authority of key issues to people who in the past had looked to an authority to make decisions (Bezzina 1997). According to Frost et al. (2000), teacher empowerment aims to: develop teachers' capacity for curriculum debate; develop self awareness and a sense of professional growth; increase teacher ability and motivation to engage in curriculum decision making; increase their capacity for honest self-evaluation; develop a critic of educational policies at both local and national levels and increase their ability to build and test theories about teaching and learning.
- ♦ **Autonomy:** A school is said to have autonomy if its teachers and other stakeholders are given a high level of responsibility and authority for making decisions that are related to the schools' decision-making like school policy, allocation of resources and so on (Gaziel 1998). According to Wall and Rinehart (1999), the participation of teachers in site-based decision making increases their sense of autonomy, status, self-efficacy and professional growth. According to Gaziel (1998), autonomy improves teachers' sense of commitment to their schools, it encourages teachers to help and

support each other in solving school related problems and it makes the schools to perform better than non-autonomous.

- ♦ **Accountability:** According to Bailey (1991), participation of teachers in decision making requires that every member of staff must be prepared for their own accountability. The school should therefore be the agency or group that is most interested in accountability. Teachers are given real decision making power to the management of the school and this means that there should be greater accountability on their part (Beckmann and Blom 2000). Five forms of accountability have been identified by Macpherson (1996: 32) as follows: Moral accountability-being answerable to those who have placed the teachers in a position of trust; professional accountability-teachers must be answerable to themselves and their colleagues; contractual accountability-they must show responsibility to those who have employed them; political accountability-they must show accountability to political decision makers and public accountability-they must account to the interest of the public.

In the study carried out in Virginia on shared decision making in schools, Lange (1993), found in a fifteen-month study of six schools that switched to shared decisions making that, as autonomy was achieved, better decisions were made than would have been under centralized school management. In a study conducted by Lontos (1995), in Massachusetts on teacher involvement in decision-making, the results showed that the majority of teachers said their participation in the decision-making process was unsatisfactory because their involvement seemed inconsequential. Also, Rutherford (1985) conducted a study in New Jersey on teacher participation in decision making and found that effective principals seek involvement and consensus of others in decision making more often than not. Research has shown that satisfaction and morale are likely to be higher in democratically led groups (Kassarjian 1992).

Over the years, a number of studies have been made of teacher participation in decision-making. For example, Trusty and Sergiovanni, as cited by Riley (1984), predicted that experience was related to participation. Theoretically, teachers with the greatest need deficiencies (5-

12 years experience) desire greater participation as a means of satisfying their needs. This assertion was later proved right through research carried out by Belasco and May in New York, cited by Riley (1984), when they found that heads prefer consulting experienced members of staff to those who have just graduated. Riley (1984) carried out a research study in London on the relationships between nine avenues for teacher-involvement, and the degree of actual and desired participation. Teachers' biographical characteristics, level of instruction, sex, teaching experience and academic qualifications were also correlated with the utilization of avenues for participation. His findings were that teaching experience was identified as an accurate indicator for participation. Results revealed that teachers with most experience were more active in the existing avenues for participation. Identification of the reasons for this is one potential area for investigation in this current research. This study therefore, sought to investigate from teachers themselves whether experience was related to participation.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher in this study adopted a qualitative case study methodology. Qualitative researchers often study human action from the perspective of the social actors themselves (Prozesky and Mouton 2005). Thus, in this particular research, the researcher gathered information from teachers themselves. The respondents were asked to give their views, opinions, perceptions and expectations with regard to the extent of their participation and involvement in decision making in their schools. The qualitative case study design was considered vital because of its idiographic nature. Instead of surveying large groups, the researcher took a close look at small groups in its naturalistic settings using in-depth case study. Thus, the researcher concentrated on few selected schools. The basic data collection techniques or strategies used in this study were individual interviews, observations and documentary analysis. The researcher looked for rich, detailed information of a qualitative nature through these strategies. The sample consisted of five secondary schools, five substantive secondary school heads and twenty qualified secondary school teachers.

Data Collection Instruments

The researchers looked for rich, detailed information of a qualitative nature. The methods that were used to gather information for this study were concerned with seeking participants' written and verbal information on the way problems are solved and decisions are taken in their schools. Therefore, the strategies used produced descriptive data based on insights rather than statistical data where hypothesis testing is involved. Two types of strategies that were used to provide the data for this study were: individual interviews and document analysis.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. This method was preferred because data was gathered systematically and the researchers were assured that no data was omitted. Through the use of interviews, the interviewer was able to elaborate on issues and questions as well as clarifying the meaning of statements, answers or questions that may not have been clear to the interviewee. Through use of semi-structured interviews, respondents were able to express themselves freely since the main purpose of this study was to let respondents narrate their experiences with regard to the teacher recruitment policy. In the process the study was able to get rich thick data from participants and this increased the validity of the findings of the research. During the interviews, certain issues respondents tended to leave unexplained were effectively probed. By so doing the study was able to gain a detailed understanding of the respondents' opinions rather than would be the case when using mailed questionnaires.

Documentary Analysis

Various documents that were related to teacher recruitment practices were examined. Such documents included public records, personal documents and physical material already present in the research setting. Documents helped the researchers to uncover meaning, develop understanding and discover insights.

Ethical Considerations

According to Creswell (1994), a researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs,

values and desires of the respondents. The research was therefore conducted with respect and concern for the dignity and welfare of the informants. The individual's right to decline to participate was respected in this study. The researchers ensured that the purpose and activities of the research were clearly explained to the participants. The authors of this document ensured that promises and commitments were honored by safeguarding participants' identities.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

In order to get insights into the quality of the respondents, the researcher established their professional qualifications. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Highest professional qualifications (N=25)

Professional qualification	Males	Females	Males %	Females %	Totals
Teacher Certificate level 4	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Certificate in Education	3	6	20.1	60.0	36.0
Diploma in Education	4	2	26.7	20.0	24.0
Bachelor of Education	6	2	40.2	20.0	32.0
Master of Education	2	0	13.4	0.0	8.0
Total	15	10	100	100.0	100.0

The table shows that all the respondents are qualified teachers- holding at least a Certificate in Education in an area of specialty. It was also noted that there are respondents that hold university degrees. These numbered to 10 or 40% of the respondents. Among these respondents were 2 (8%) who hold a Masters' degree in Education. This picture gives the impression that the respondents are likely to give valued responses given their relatively high academic and professional qualifications.

To get an even deeper understanding of the respondents, the researcher collected data on the respondents' professional experience. To this end the findings are presented in Table 2:

Table 2 indicates that 48% of the respondents have extensive teaching experience that ranges from 11-20 years. Five of the respondents had over 30 years of teaching experience. How-

ever, there were other respondents whose teaching experience fell below 10 years. These numbered 4 out of the 25 respondents. It is also apparent that no respondent had less than 5 years of teaching experience. The meaning one deduces from this data set is that the respondents were well experienced in the teaching profession.

Table 2: Respondents' teaching experience (N=25)

Teaching experience in years	Males	Females	Males %	Females %	Totals %
Below 5	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
5 – 10	4	0	26.6	0.0	16.0
11-20	6	6	40.0	60.0	48.0
21-30	2	2	13.2	20.0	16.0
31 and above	3	2	13.2	20.0	20.0
Total	15	10	100.0	100.0	100.0

In four of the five schools under study, teachers' teaching experience was considered as an important factor for one to be involved in the decision making process in strategic issues according to the information obtained from the responding teachers. To consolidate the above statement, some of the participating teachers gave the following comments:

Teacher (T) 10-Decision making in this school in most of the areas does not involve everyone else. Usually it is done by the head of school, the deputy head, the senior master, the senior woman and at times senior teachers. So in most cases others are just told what to do.

T12-Those in administration, that is, the deputy, senior woman and senior master are the ones who are normally consulted most of the time. The school head also consults the senior teachers, senior in the field.

Four of the participating school heads asserted that although they involved all their teachers in the making of certain decisions, there were times when they would approach the more experienced members of staff. Below are some of the sentiments that were expressed by two of the five school heads who participated in this study on the issue of teaching experience:

Head (H) 3-Experienced ones yes, they are more confident but we have those who are not experienced also trying to bring in new ideas, new concepts. As I have already mentioned earlier on, at times I get ideas from the more expe-

rienced teachers especially if there is no time to call for a staff meeting.

H4-Experienced teachers, yes it's quite fortunate Mr. Wadesango that the teachers whom I have are very industrious. We came up with "A" level classes starting last year 2005. Most of the "A" level teachers are fresh from University. They are still in a learning process. However, there are experienced ones and those who can teach up to "O" level who are the majority in the school. So you will find that these youngsters who are coming straight from University are still in a learning process. But the old guys are quite dominant within discussions, so we are trying to encourage these youngsters so that they can actually develop that degree of confidence which we want. But however it also depends on how one is sharp and how one is assertive. There are also high fliers who are coming straight from University, they can competently and confidently contribute to any discussion.

In one of the five schools where teaching experience is an avenue for participation, the school head asserted that she got most of her advice from long serving members of staff as she believes they have more to offer and that some of them would have experienced a similar case before. She went on to indicate that when she is faced with a crisis, she normally gets advice on one -one-basis with some of the long serving members of staff. This is what was said by H5:

I involve all my teachers in decision making, but there are times when I consult experienced members of staff more than junior teachers because of the nature, complexity and sensitivity of the problem. Some of them are actually in the same age group with me and they may have better solutions to the problem. Most of the teachers here are experienced. They have been in the field for more than ten years.

However, it appeared that in one of the schools the head did not consider teachers' teaching experience as an avenue for participation. Teachers in this particular school did not believe that their head at times consulted the more experienced teachers in certain areas. Teachers in this particular school were at one time told not to interfere with administrative issues as cited by T3 who had the following to say, "*Sometimes the head would even say, you teachers, you should know the business of*

teaching, leave the administration business alone". In this particular situation, teachers had seen police officers moving around the school as if they were looking for something. Teachers, therefore, wanted to know what had brought the police officers to their school. The head of this particular school confirmed his teachers' views by expressing the following sentiments: H1- "*normally everybody is involved here, as long as it's a teacher. A teacher is a teacher, everybody contributes"*.

In the staff meetings that were attended by the researcher, it was confirmed that in this school, major agenda items were dominated and dictated upon teachers by the school head. There was nothing to indicate that teaching experience was viewed as an indicator for one to participate in decision making. In fact in this particular school, it appeared that those teachers who appeared old did not contribute overtly to the discussions but were attentive as witnessed by their non-verbal communication. This section has established that generally most of the participating schools consider teaching experience in decision making in certain areas. Heads indicated that there were times when they face difficult and complex situations and in such circumstances, they normally consulted the more experienced teachers. The reason was that those people were matured and they were bound to give constructive advice.

DISCUSSION

The study established that teaching experience in four of the participating schools is a major factor for one to participate in decision making processes in critical issues. This finding concurs with the views of Hoy and Miskel (2005), who assert that expertise and experience must be considered in deciding who should be involved in reaching a decision. Heads of four schools considered experience when making decisions. Such teachers are consulted on one-on-one basis in certain areas in which they command the required experience. This confirms Dimmock's (1993) findings that teachers with most experience were active in the existing avenues of participation than their colleagues. In his study Dimmock found out that heads preferred consulting experienced members of staff to those who have just graduated. His findings also indicated that teaching experience was an accurate

indicator of participation in decision making in schools. However in one school there was no indication that experienced teachers were consulted more than their colleagues.

It was been established that teachers had the autonomy to make decisions in certain strategic areas in which they have the experience, expertise as well as a personal stake in the outcome. According to Gaziel (1998), autonomy improves teachers' sense of commitment to their schools. It encourages teachers to help and support each other in solving related problems and it makes the schools to perform better than non-autonomous. Participation of teachers in decision making has many benefits. According to Dimmock (1993), participation in decision making nurtures teachers' creativity and initiative there by empowering them to implement innovative ideas. Participation in decision making also improves the quality of management's decisions since there is greater diversity of views and expertise as inputs to decision making (Kuma and Scuderi 2002). Participation of teachers in decision making also enables teachers to become active participants in school management processes. As a result of this, teachers will have a wider and greater ownership of the school, its vision and priorities. Teachers will therefore become good decision- makers as participation in decision making is a proactive approach to information sharing among teachers (Shedd and Bacharach 1991).

It has emerged that most of the participating school heads had adopted the "Putting It Together" model of shared decision- making. According to Hoy and Miskel (2005), proponents of this model, if teachers do not possess experience in a certain issue, administrators should make unilateral decisions. This explains why participating school heads have been found at times to be making certain decisions on their own. The model also illustrates that if teachers have a personal stake in the outcome and the expertise to contribute, they would want to be involved and their involvement will improve the situation. In this regard it has emerged in this study that all participating school heads involved their staff in staff meetings to come up with decisions on certain issues. The participation will be genuine. Proponents of this model further state that if teachers have the experience but nor personal stake in the outcome, their involvement should also be limited as the admin-

istrator attempts to improve the decision by tapping the expertise of significant individuals who are not normally involved in this kind of action. Experienced teachers are to a large extent consulted as individuals in areas in which they command great expertise. These results indicate that the PIT model of shared decision-making is quite applicable in this study.

Heads in this study used a variety of leadership models in that there are times when they did not consult but made unilateral decisions. In this regard they would be using the formal leadership model. There are times when they consulted newly appointed teachers, the whole staff complement, experienced teachers or those with the required expertise. In this case, they would be employing the collegial leadership model.

CONCLUSION

The study established that most of the participating school heads consider teaching experience and expertise as avenues for participation. Participating heads confirmed that in certain cases, they sought for advice from the more experienced members of staff. Heads also confirmed that when they are faced with a sensitive situation, they approached the mature members of staff. It was also pointed out that when making decisions in certain areas, heads did not consult everyone but opted for those with the required skills and knowledge in that particular area. Such teachers would be consulted as individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that those teachers with greater experience be involved more on a one-to-one basis. It can also be done in a manner that groups people of the same experience share ideas of a decision to be made. Therefore the number and specific individuals to take part in a decision should be influenced by the nature of the problem at hand. This is not to sideline the junior teachers for they also require exposure in order to grow professionally and in their decision making faculty.

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