

Understanding the Influence of Gender on Degree of Teacher Participation in Decision-making in Schools

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to establish gender disparity in teacher participation in decision-making in high schools in Zimbabwe. The literature review for this study aimed at providing the necessary theoretical framework put forward by theorists and researchers within which the same issue of gender disparity in participation in decision-making in schools was discussed and analyzed. 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 were collected through face to face interviews, documentary analysis and observation of two staff meetings per school. The research findings indicate that all teachers were involved in decision-making but their degree of involvement varies according to position, seniority and expertise from issue to issue and from school to school. It was also noted that teacher participation was greatly influenced by the importance of the matter at hand and not by gender of participants.

INTRODUCTION

Educational reforms have had similar characteristics all over the world since the 1980s. Typically, decentralization of education delivery has been prevalent in reforms in the North and in the South. Also common and also implemented to a varied extent are local participation and local influence, which has increased in many countries (Cawelti 1987). Many scholars have researched into the area of decentralization. According to McGuinn and Welsh (1999), decentralization is about shifts in locus of control. In its true sense, decentralization is about the transfer of authority from the higher level to lower one. In the context of this study decentralization of education is the devolution of the decision-making process from the central office to the school level. Muwuo in European Union Documentary (EUD) (ZBC 24/04/01) asserts that “decentralization is borrowed from the European counterparts. It focuses on strengthening the state by strengthening society”. In support, Rondinelli and Cheema (1983) posit that decentralization is the transfer of planning, decision making, or administrative authority from the central government to its field organizations, local administrative units, semi-autonomous and par-

astatal organizations, local governments or non-governmental organizations.

Sociologists have also advanced that both the neo-liberal and Marxist theories have also dominated the discourse on the need for the state to decentralize some of its functions so as to involve the people or committees at lower levels in the social sector (Giddens 1996; Hargreaves and Hopkins 1997; Wagner 1999; Ainove 1999; Fullan 2001). Interestingly, the two paradigms tend to share a consensus on the justification of the involvement of local communities in the provision of public services in schools. Therefore, the decentralization of the decision making process is historically supported in varying degrees by both the capitalists and the socialists as literally expressed below:

In the heydays of classical economics when efficiency and efficacy of free enterprise (liberal) and of the invisible and (Marxists) were romanticized, Adam Smith and his colleagues had admitted the need for some government involvement of locals in the supply of social services. The production of which had failed to attract enthusiasm and support by local authorities (Okorafor and Nwanko 1996: 12).

Therefore, it was hoped that decentralization, as a democratization process would specifically promote and perpetuate public interest in the provision of services to schools (Sandbrook 1996). The results being that service delivery is tailor made to meet the specific needs of a spe-

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cific school and its consumers (pupils) are likely to enjoy better services. The underlying assumption is that local communities can identify and solve their problems alone, thus preparing a fertile mental ground for efficiency and better quality services.

Types of Decentralization

Many different authors use different terms to identify different degrees or forms of decentralization. They refer to three major forms of decentralization that is deconcentration, delegation and devolution (Sayed 2002). According to Rondinelli and Cheema (1983), deconcentration involves the redistribution of administrative responsibilities only within central government. Accordingly what is often called decentralization in some countries is merely shifting of workload from a central government ministry or agency headquarters to its own field staff located in offices outside of the national capital, without also transferring the authority to make decisions. Rondinelli and Cheema (1983) and Naidoo (2002) define delegation as a form of decentralization in which decision making and management authority is delegated to organizations (temporarily) that are not necessarily under the direct control of central state departments. Delegation of functions from the central government to such organizations such as public corporations, regional planning or area development authorities and special project implementation units represent a more extensive form of decentralization than administrative decentralization). According to the same authors, devolution seeks to create or strengthen independent levels or units of government by which the central government relinquishes certain functions or create new units of government that are outside its direct control. It is an arrangement in which there are reciprocal mutually-beneficial, coordinate relationships between central and local governments-that is, the local government has the ability to interact reciprocally with other units in the system of government of which it is part (Rondinelli and Cheema 1983).

The Rationale for Decentralization

Advocates of various forms of decentralization have offered a long list of rationale for decentralization (Naidoo 2002). Rondinelli and

Cheema (1983:81) identified a variety of arguments that have been made for decentralization in developing countries namely: decentralization of authority to officials who are working in the field and closer to problems allows officials to disaggregate and tailor development plans and programs to the needs of the people at the regional and local levels. Decentralization has the potential of cutting through enormous amounts of bureaucratic hurdles that are supposedly attributed to central planning. Decentralizing functions to the local levels allows for utilization of indigenous knowledge and experience, as well as local sensitiveness to development challenges.

Decentralization can also allow for more efficient communication and understanding of central government policies and programs to the local level. Decentralization facilitates accountability, transparency and representability in decision making and a decentralized government structure is needed to institutionalise the popular participation of citizens in development planning and administration (Rondinelli and Cheema 1983). Decentralization is based on an examination of a number of reforms. According to McGuinn and Welsh (1999:28), decentralization has been proposed to:

- ♦ Improve education *per se* directly, for example, by: increasing the amount of inputs to schooling. Decentralization also improves the quality of inputs to schooling. Decentralization increases the relevance of programmes or matching programme content to local interests and this increases the innovativeness of programmes. Decentralization also increases the range of options available to students thereby reducing inequalities in access to education of quality and increasing learning outcomes.
- ♦ Improve the operation of the education system, for example, by: increasing the efficiency in allocation of resources; increasing efficiency in the utilization of resources; increasing the match of programmes to employers' requirements and increasing the use of information about issues, problems or innovations (thereby improving efficiency).
- ♦ Change the sources and amount of money spent on education, by: increasing the overall amount of money spent on education and shifting the sources of funding from one social group to another.

- ♦ Benefit the central government primarily by: relieving the central government of external political problems; relieving the central government of internal bureaucratic headaches; relieving the central government of financial burden; includes policies to shift revenue generation to local government; increasing the political legitimacy of central government and reducing corruption at the national level.

The government of Zimbabwe adopted the policy of decentralisation as a means of: improving the delivery of services to the nation and ensuring equitable distribution of national resources; promoting democracy, public participation and civic responsibility in the development process; increasing efficiency and effectiveness in government and therefore enhancing service delivery and reducing the direct role of central government in the delivery of services (UNESCO 2001:62).

As a result of the decentralisation process, the Ministry of Education has devolved some functions to the regions, districts and schools. These functions include: standards control, staffing, human resource development, supervision, counselling, budgeting, liaison with the internal and external clients of the ministry. In terms of hierarchy, the regional office is the link pin of the head office and the district offices while the district offices link clusters and individual schools with their regional office (Wadesango 2009). The cluster plays the role of linking individual schools with the district. However, the relationship between schools and the cluster is fluid in that there is a direct link between the district office and individual schools. Schools have also been mandated to establish school development associations (SDA) and school development committees (SDC) so as to assist heads of schools in running the institutions. Therefore, certain functions have been devolved to SDA/SDC's (Matunhu 1997).

The study, therefore, sought to investigate if there was gender disparity in teacher participation in decision-making in schools. According to United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) (2005), the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 drew attention to the persisting inequality between men and women in decision-making. According to DAW, the Beijing Platform for Action re-affirmed that women's persistent exclusion

from formal politics in particular, raises a number of specific questions regarding the achievement of effective democratic transformation in practice. DAW further asserts that the Beijing Platform for Action emphasised that the women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for justice or democracy, but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account.

Theoretical Framework

Effective leadership is one of the most elusive keys to organizational success. For this to be possible, an effective leader balances the needs of the task, the team and the individual (Speed 1979). An organization becomes effective when the leader's style is appropriate to the prevailing situation.

Formal Models

According to Bush (2003), these models assume that organizations are hierarchical systems in which managers use rational means to pursue agreed goals. Heads possess authority legitimized by their formal positions within the organization and are accountable to sponsoring bodies for the activities of the institutions. A central assumption of formal models is that power resides at the apex of the pyramid. Goals are determined largely by the principal and endorsed without question by other staff. Internal promotions depend on the recommendation of the principal and appointments are made on the basis of qualifications and experience (Bush 2003). The formal models are not very much appropriate to a school situation where teachers are required to take part in decision making areas where they command the expertise and have a personal stake in the outcome. If teachers do not own innovations but are simply required to implement externally initiated changes, they are likely to do so without enthusiasm, leading to possible failure. These models focus on the school as an entity and ignore or underestimate the contribution of teachers. Principals according to this model possess authority by virtue of their positions as the appointed leaders of their institutions. This focus on official authority leads to a view of institutional management which is essentially top down. Where professional specialize, as in secondary schools, the ability of principals to di-

rect the actions of teachers may be questionable (Bush 2003).

A head who is a graduate in humanities lacks the specific competence to supervise teaching in mathematics. However, formal models may be appropriate where a decision has to be made without delay. These models are also applicable when dealing with issues of policy. However, one cannot use this model on its own to explain leadership and decision making at the school level because not in all areas a school head makes decisions on his/her own. In some cases, school heads may involve school management teams or those individual teachers with the required expertise or experience in a particular area hence the need to bring in collegial model.

Collegial Models

According to Bush (2003), collegial models include all those theories which emphasize that power and decision making should be shared among some or all members of the organization. Collegial models assume that decisions are reached by consensus rather than division or conflict. Collegial models assume that organizations determine policy and make decisions through a process of discussion leading to consensus. Power is shared among some or all members of the organization who are thought to have a shared understanding about the aims of the institution (Bush 2003). However, collegial approaches to decision-making tend to be slow and cumbersome. The process is time consuming (Bush 2003). Regardless of the above shortfalls, participative approaches are idealistic to school situations. They represent the most appropriate means of expertise which justifies their involvement in the decision-making. One cannot explain leadership and decision-making on the basis of formal and collegial models only because there is no harmony all the times. At times people will not be interested in achieving the objectives of the organization as they will be pursuing their independent objectives which may contrast sharply with the aims of other sub-units within the institution and lead to conflict between them hence the need to bring in political models.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research methodology. The study concen-

trated on the qualitative form since this research aimed at elucidating what the participants had to say with regard to decision-making in their natural settings. In this regard, it was 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

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher 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 honoured by safeguarding participants' identities.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF RESPONDENTS

The biographical data assists in providing critical information on decision making in schools. Scholars tend to think that perceptions are also influenced by gender, hence the need to profile the respondents with respect to their gender. It is assumed that a fuller understanding of these respondents attributes will make it easier to better understand why certain practices are in place within the administration of schools vis-à-vis decision making. To better understand the level to which teachers participate in decision

making, it is imperative that one gets a clear understanding of the caliber of the respondents.

Table 1: Gender range of the respondents (n=25)

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Males	15	60
Females	10	40
Total	25	100

Table 1 shows that there were more males who took part in this study than females. Since this was a purposive sampling, this may not necessarily mean that the schools in question had more males than females. It only suggests that these were the people who were considered to have a substantial amount of knowledge on the subject of decision-making in schools.

RESULTS

It is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents held the opinion that female teachers seemed to participate more in decision-making in their schools. The following are statements from some of the responding teachers (T) to confirm it:

T2 The composition of the staff in this school is such that the bulk of the teachers are female, so if there are any contributions, you would find that there are more female teachers who are involved.

T3 I wouldn't say there is a balance in the sense that in this school, we have women outnumbering men, so the women are the most vocal ones in any decision.

T4 There can't be a balance from the enrolment or from the teachers involved in the school; there are more females than males, so it shows that females are more involved than males.

The fact that the majority of the respondents asserted that female teachers participated more than male teachers could stem from the realization that three school heads out of five were males. It is generally believed that most males tend to give a sympathetic ear to females and this possibly explains why the majority of the responding teachers felt that where there was consultation male school heads involved lady teachers more. However, in one school responding teachers stated that there was a perfect balance in participation between male and female

teachers as echoed by R17: *“Teachers in this school are treated as equals and the head does not show any favouritism at all. There is a perfect balance in participation between male and female teachers”*.

During the interviews with heads of schools, it emerged that there was a balance in participation between male and female teachers as reflected by the following responses from the responding school heads:

Head 1: The school is predominantly female. We have 40 female teachers to 26 male teachers. So naturally the bigger number tends to be more vocal. However, it depends on whatever decision is to be made, normally our decisions are unanimous and the decision comes after debating and discussion.

Head 3: Right, with the genderisation of the education system, we can see now that there is a balance in participation in decision-making between males and females, why? Because we regard our female folk as competent enough to contribute meaningfully to any debate in any school environment but competence depends on an individual outlook. In terms of statistics within my school, it is a school of 23 teachers with 9 male and 14 females. So during debates, you find that most of our female teachers are now coming out dominantly in discussions hence the male folk are also not able to be out competed. So there is really a balance which is very pregnant and which is very vital for the sustenance of our institution and I am so happy that we maintain it.

The researcher's view is that it may not be the numbers which really matter in terms of the individuals' level of participation in a discussion. Therefore, the sentiments forwarded by the responding school teachers may not be valid. Agreeably, in terms of staffing statistics, females outnumbered their male counterparts in the schools in question. It appears, because of this reason, female teachers tend to be more vocal not that they are consulted more than their male counterparts. Thus, being vocal is not synonymous with having a case to present. There are cases when people become vocal but without giving valid contributions or they may be vocal and nuisance. In which case, there will be no

substance being communicated at all. The researcher feels that the matter is not one of being vocal but a question of what teachers say about the practice of decision making. The fact that they are more vocal does not mean that heads are compelled to consult them.

In the meetings that were attended during the course of this study, it was observed that female teachers outnumbered their male counterparts. The assertion that lady teachers were vocal in staff meetings was also noted by the researcher. However, there was no evidence to indicate that their contributions were considered as valid by the school administrators or that their views carried the day. In fact the researcher observed that lady teachers were only too vocal but in all cases there was no preferential treatment by school heads. There was no evidence that heads consulted/involved specifically female teachers in making decisions on certain issues.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The research findings indicate that all teachers were involved in decision-making but their degree of involvement varied according to position, seniority and expertise from issue to issue and from school to school. It was also noted that teacher participation was greatly influenced by the importance of the matter at hand for example school finances or policy issues. The significance of the decision was conceived by the school head. Therefore, there was no clear cut measure or universally holding measure for categorising critical and non critical decisions. Right from the onset, this fluid working environment presents challenges. A teacher who transfers from one school 'A' to 'B' may find out that their level of involvement in decision making in different areas varies from school to school.

The study went on to establish that female teachers in all five participating schools tended to be more vocal in staff meetings. This is a sharp contrast with what normally takes place in other institutions. Bray (1999:42) says “because of societal expectations women are more passive and less inclined to participate in organisational decision making.” Thus the study refutes the notion that sex determines the level of participation in decision-making processes in schools. Through history, women have been marginalised.

However, the study fails to attribute the dominance of women to gender sensitivity drive only. This is so because the study found that female teachers outnumbered the males in schools under study. Their high numbers could be attributed to the fact that the study was carried in urban schools as well as in schools that are located in the periphery of cities. These schools are commonly regarded as buffer zones for those women whose spouses or interests are located in the nearest city. Such female teachers find themselves settling in these buffer zones because they will have failed to secure teaching posts in the city. This is one reason why they are so many female teachers in the participating schools. This research is of the view that it may not be the numbers which really matter in terms of the individuals' level of participation in a discussion.

Agreeably, in terms of staffing statistics, females outnumbered their male counterparts in the participating schools. It appears, because of this reason, female teachers tend to be more vocal not that their views dominate the decision-making process. There is no evidence to suggest that their views received first priority or that they were given preferential treatment than their male counterparts in issues of decision making. Most of the teachers feel that the matter is not one of being vocal but a question of what teachers say about the practice of decision making. In a research conducted by Chapman (1990), he found that principals consulted same gender teachers who were men. Perhaps this is one area that calls for further research. Studies conducted by Riley (1984) showed that women participate less than men and desired lower levels of participation.

The results of this study are also refuted by Olorunsola and Olayemi (2011)'s study which revealed that there was disparity in the involvement of male and female teachers in decision-making processes in Nigerian schools. Their study established that male teachers were more involved in decision-making in schools than their female counterparts. Their study was supported by Wadesango (2009) that women participation in high level economic decision-making remains low even in the developed countries despite educational advances for women in many parts of the world. Zimbabwe in this regard should therefore be given thumbs up for not marginalising women in decision-making processes in schools.

CONCLUSION

The issue of gender also emerged in this study. It was established that female teachers were more vocal in staff meetings. When the researcher checked the staff establishment in the participating schools it was found out that in terms of statistics, females outnumbered their male counterparts. This was also confirmed by the responding teachers as well as school heads during interviews. It appears because of this reason, female teachers tend to be more vocal and according to the researcher's interpretation, being vocal is not synonymous with having a case to present. Therefore, it was concluded that female teachers are just vocal but they did not receive any preferential treatment from heads in decision-making. Specifically school heads did not consult women teachers as a group or as individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the study has established that there was no disparity in gender participation in school-based decisions, heads of schools are encouraged to continue involving female teachers in critical decision-making processes.

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