

Involvement of Teachers in the Selection of Teaching Material: A Case Study of Five Rural Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this empirical study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of their participation in the selection and ordering of textbooks in their respective 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 study established that decisions on selection and ordering of textbooks were the prerogative of the heads of schools and heads of departments (HODs). It was further established that teachers wanted to be consulted in this area. They also wanted their views to be heard and acknowledged by the school system. The recommendation of the study is that school heads should involve their teachers in the selection of teaching material. Therefore school heads should refrain from centralizing the decision making processes.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational structures for shared decision-making are needed in schools. Such structures enable teachers to work with learners in teaching and advising, and also allow teachers to work jointly with others in planning and implementing instructional activities. Finally, these structures enable teachers and other stakeholders to work jointly with the principal in providing inputs to the decision-making process of the school. The new dispensation in educational leadership calls for shared decision making by all the critical stakeholders. Teachers are *inter alia* stakeholders of a school system hence should occupy the central space in decision making (Beckmann and Blom 2000:02; Daun 2003). The *prima facie* intent of this dispensational call is to increase the productivity of schools. With improved output, schools become more satisfying work places.

The Zimbabwean School Act 1995 (Section 29A subsection (I)), is a statutory body which ensures the participation of various stakeholders in governance of public schools. According to this Act, the governance of every public school is vested in its school development committee (SDC) and the principal of the school has formal legal authority in terms of the management of the school (Zimbabwe Act 1995). This implies that both the governing body and the principal are legally required to perform certain functions for which they are accountable (Beckman and Visser 1999).

Some schools in Britain have established certain structures such as advisory councils and curriculum committees to work with the principal in making school-wide decisions (Lipham 1997). Generally, these structures have resulted not only in higher levels of staff involvement in decision-making, but also in greater staff satisfaction, motivation adaptiveness, and instructional effectiveness (Speed 1979). Still so, simply establishing a structure does not make it effective, especially if the principal continues in making decisions unilaterally. Instead, a basic commitment of the principal and other stakeholders to a philosophy of shared decision-making is essential.

According to Mitchell (1998: 120), there is no research-based information that concludes that increased participation leads to increased performance. On the other hand Beckmann and Blom (2000), indicate that research supports a link between participation and commitment. Deeply woven in the fabric of participation is the assumption that it leads to greater efficiency, effectiveness and better outcomes (Leethwood 1996 in Beckmann and Blom 2000). According to McLagan and Nel (1995), studies show that 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 their research work conducted in Colombia on perceptions of staff on their involvement in de-

cision making, Steyn (1996), found that teachers wanted a say and not merely to adhere to autocratic decisions of the principal.

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; Hoy and Miskel 2005).

Taylor and Teddlie (1992) examined classrooms in thirty-three schools in the United States, of these, 16 schools had established school based management (SBM) programmes as part of a new pilot project initiative and 17 schools had served as a control group which had not adopted SBM. The 33 schools were from the same district. Taylor and Teddlie found that teachers in this study did not participate in critical school decisions. Identical findings arose in Weiss's (1992) investigation of shared decision making (SDM) in twelve high schools in eleven states in the United States (US) (half were selected because they had implemented SDM; the other half were run in a traditional principal led manner).

Weiss found that teachers in SDM schools were more likely to mention involvement in the decision making process (that is, composition of committees, procedures and so forth). However schools with SDM did not pay more attention to issues of curriculum more than traditionally managed schools and pedagogical issues and student concerns were low on the list for both sets of schools (Fullan and Watson 1999; Wadesango 201; Carnoy 2002).

Leithwood and Menzies (1998), cited in Fullan and Watson (1999), examined 83 empirical studies of school based management in Chica-

go. Building on Murphy and Beck (1995), Leithwood and Menzies identify two types of SBM namely administrative control (the principal is dominant) and professional control (parents and professionals are equals). Of the 83 studies reviewed, 28 were classified as administrative, 37 as professionals, 33 as community and 2 as balanced. Leithwood and Menzies' overall conclusion is that:

there is virtually no firm, research based about the direct or indirect effects of participation on students. The little research-based evidence that does exist suggests that the effects on students are just likely to be positive or negative. There is an awesome gap between the rhetoric and the reality of SBM's contribution to the student growth in light of the widespread advocacy of SBM (Leithwood and Menzies 1998: 67).

In a longitudinal study of the Chicago school reform carried out by Bryk et al. (1998), cited in Fullan and Watson (1999), found that schools that encouraged involvement discussed with teachers and acted on new ideas. Accordingly, Bryk postulates that:

In schools making systematic changes, structures are established which create opportunities for such interaction to occur. As teachers develop a broader say in school decision making, they may also begin to experiment with new roles, including working collaboratively. This restructuring of teachers' work signifies a broadening professional community where teachers feel more comfortable exchanging ideas, and where a collective sense of responsibility for student development is likely to emerge. These characteristics of systematic restructuring contrast with conventional school practice where teachers work more autonomously and there may be little meaningful professional exchange among co-workers (Bryk et al. 1998: 128).

According to Epstein et al. (1997), cited in Fullan and Watson (1999), little has been said about the role of parents and communities. There is considerable evidence that engagement and rapport between the community and the school enhanced learning of students, but that such involvement, especially in disadvantaged schools is limited. Bryk et al. (1998), in the Chicago study found that successful schools, in addition to developing a professional community, also actively pursued the engagement of par-

ents and community resources. Bryk et al. further assert that these schools: maintain a sustained focus on strengthening the involvement of parents with the schools and their children's schooling. They also actively seek to strengthen the ties with the local community and especially those resources that bear on the caring of children. As these personal interactions expand and become institutionalized in the life of the school, the quality of the relationships between local professionals and their community changes. Greater trust and mutual engagement begins to characterize these encounters. In contrast, schools with unfocused initiatives may set more distinct boundaries between themselves in their neighborhoods. Extant problems in these relationships may not be directly addressed. The broader community resources that could assist improvements efforts in the schools are not tapped. These schools remain more isolated from their students' parents and their community (Bryk et al. 1998: 127 cited in Fullan and Watson 1999; Bush 2003).

The research findings in this section have been inconclusive about whether teacher participation actually has positive outcomes. It is this researcher's opinion that the lack of shared understanding among scholars of what teacher participation actually looks like is perhaps the reason for the lack of definitive evidence of its effects. However, it is hoped that this current study which is focusing on the extent of teacher participation in the selection of teaching material will be able to come up with clear evidence regarding the outcomes of participation. This researcher feels that the democratic argument for participation reflects the belief that, offering the opportunity to participate in the governance of a school is a moral imperative because individual teachers have the right to exercise some control over their work and their lives. In the school setting, this argument suggests that teacher participation is necessary to professionalise and democratize teaching. The above studies relate very well with this current study in that an investigation shall be carried out in order to ascertain among others, the outcome of teacher participation in decision making.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive methodology because it allowed the re-

searchers to get the data directly from the subjects themselves by sitting with the respondents and hearing their views, voices, perceptions and expectations in detail. This strategy contends that knowledge is subjective and ideographic, and truth is context-dependent and can only be obtained after entry into participants' reality. The researcher recognised several nuances of attitude and behaviour that could not have been noticed if other methods had been used. A case-study research design was adopted. 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). Data were collected from 5 secondary schools in Gweru Education District in Zimbabwe. The population sample comprised of 5 secondary school heads and 20 secondary school teachers. In order to get an in depth of the analysis of the shared decision-making concept, a series of interviews were conducted over a 2 months period of time. To get further insights in the teacher participation in the decision-making processes in schools, the author observed two staff meetings at each school under study. The author was interested in observing the interaction of the participants as they took part in the shared decision-making process. Finally, various shared decision-making documents that were related to the shared decision-making process were examined.

RESULTS

It emerged that most of the responding teachers indicated that the ordering of textbooks was done by the HODs in consultation with members in their departments. Some of the teachers indicated that at times the procurement committee consisting of all HODs met with the administrators and looked at the lists that would have been proposed by the departmental staff. The responses below tend to endorse the opinion:

R6 This involves the H.O.D and the administration. The school administration source the text books requirement from every HOD. The HOD normally consult the members of staff in his/her department to come up with the textbooks that are needed but then the final decision comes from the procurement committee and the administration which will then authorize the buying if funds are available.

R2 It is done by heads of departments after consultation with members in their departments.

R13 Ordering of textbooks is done by the subject teachers through the head of department. Meetings are held in each and every department especially at the end of each year and subject teachers come up with a list of recommended textbooks which will be forwarded to the administrators. However, it does not mean that all the recommended textbooks will be procured. This will depend on the availability of funds.

Most of the participating teachers expressed satisfaction with the way text books are ordered. They felt that this was one of their areas of expertise hence they appreciated the fact that they were consulted before books are ordered. They think that the ordering of books fell under their area of expertise. They appreciated the fact that their HODs convened departmental meetings in which members discuss and agree on which books to purchase. Thereafter, school administrators would then process the orders. However, one of the responding teachers reiterated the fact that each department must have its annual text book budget and that the budget must be controlled at departmental level. Other teachers felt that their school heads should only ratify the orders hence should not be involved in the actual running around looking for suppliers. It is of interest to note that these concerns were common in all five schools under study.

It appears that all teachers in this study indicated that HODs are the major players in the ordering of textbooks. In addition it was pointed out that HODs were required to sit down with teachers in their departments so as to come up with the best textbooks that they were supposed to use with their students. Their participation in this area is viewed as more critical considering that these are the experts in their particular disciplines. However, it appeared that HODs in some schools were not consulting teachers despite the requirement.

The study found evidence from the interviews conducted with the heads that confirmed teachers' views. The heads asserted that if funds were available, teachers would be asked to sit down in their departments, choose the books that they want and submit their requirements to the administration through their HODs. The following comment was made by one of the responding heads (H5) "HODs in consultation

with their teachers bring their orders to the office for consideration. Teachers are involved in their departments. They tell the HODs the books that are needed."

H4 supported H5 by stating that "The HODs, they are mostly involved. The admin is only there to carry out what has been suggested" In addition H1 pointed out that:

Ordering of textbooks? Yes, that's a very good question, but then because of the economic environment, we no longer have the money to buy the textbooks. However, if there is money set aside for that purpose, I consult teachers in the concerned department.

The school heads' sentiments imply that HODs are involved in the ordering of textbooks to a great extent and that they are required to consult all their departmental staff. Ordering of textbooks was on the agenda in three of the five schools under study. In two of the schools, the heads announced that the administration had seen the textbook requirements from the various departments but unfortunately due to financial constraints those orders were not going to be honored in the coming year. In the other school, the school head announced to the mathematics department staff members that an organization by the name of Plan International (PI) wanted to donate some textbooks to the school, therefore the department was asked to quickly submit to the office titles as well as the quantities per each title that they would require.

The minutes that were perused through also indicated that departments were given the privilege to select the textbooks that they would want to use. In one school, minutes read as follows: All departments were asked to write down all their textbook requirements as soon as possible and forward the list to the administration for action. There was also a memo in one of the heads' files instructing departments to submit their textbooks requirements. This confirms sentiments echoed by the participating school teachers and their school heads that textbooks were ordered by the administration in consultation with HODs who will be expected to sit down with their department members. However, HODs were not consulting their members in some of the participating schools.

DISCUSSION

It emerged in this study that all the five participating heads do not involve teachers in the

selection of textbooks but rather consult HODs. Teachers are considered to be professionals who are specialists in their own areas. They are likely to know better the textbooks that students must use. They know their personal competencies better. This paper finds it proper that teachers are fully involved in making such decisions. One imagines a situation where teachers are forced to make use of the textbooks that may not be the best in the market for that very discipline. The teacher suffers, students suffer and the community suffers the consequences of ordering or prescribing the wrong curriculum. In a research conducted by Hewiston (1998), it was discovered that respondents desired to be involved in shared or joint decision-making process. At each organizational level, teachers have expressed a desire, not to make decisions, but rather to influence or make recommendations. The problem for administrators is how to accommodate such requests.

Hewiston (1998) asserts that, the administrator could identify other areas of active participation, such as building level curriculum committees, timetabling committees, streaming of students, the establishment of discipline policies, equipment and textbook selection. Such committees need not necessarily be permanent or extensive in powers, but rather be identified as offering additional avenues for teachers to be actively involved in the running of their schools.

The study presupposes that the school heads by themselves may not know the best books available for every school subject for they may not be good teachers in every subject being taught at school. Books are quite expensive these days and there is no prudence in wasting the hard earned money in buying the least preferred set of books. If by chance, the wrong textbooks are bought and forced on the teachers and pupils, the school is likely to suffer the effects of poor results.

School heads indicated that HODs are supposed to sit down with teachers in their departments and come up with the list of the required textbooks. This scenario whereby teachers are involved in the selection of textbooks confirm Vroom and Yetton (1993) findings that respondents in their study desired to influence or rather make recommendations in such areas like selection of textbooks since they regarded it as a critical area.

Studies have shown that participation in deciding matters of concern has positive effects on the participant (Brundrette 1998; Wadesango 2011; Hoy and Tarter 2003). For example, a study carried out by Guthrie and Koppich (1993) revealed that autocratic atmosphere generated a higher degree of tension than the democratic one. Thus, the leadership style in a given school has a lot to do with the performance of teachers. Chung asserts that: "the authoritarian leadership is characterized by the dominance of the leader who controls all aspects of the work, gives detailed orders and makes all decisions" (Chung 1988: 47).

Riley (1984) conducted research in the United States of America which analyzed the productivity and wellbeing of the school through subjecting one group (A) to authoritarian leadership style of decision making and group (B) to a style described as participatory. Findings of the study revealed that, those subjected to participatory style outdistanced those subjected to an authoritarian style in productivity and quality of human organization. The results therefore showed that it pays dividends to involve workers, like teachers in the decision making process. The prime advantage of involving teachers in curriculum decision-making process at school level is that they are able to respond to the idiosyncratic needs of pupils, and the community to which centralized personnel can never address them (Riley 1984; Bakkeness et al. 2005; Wadesango 2011).

Smith (2003) carried out a study in South Africa on the dawning of work plant democracy. The purpose of the study was to gather information on why South African companies were adopting employee involvement, what practices they were using to involve their employees and how effective organizations thought employee involvement was. The conviction was high that the changing business environment necessitated involving employees more in business decision making process in order to build enhanced and suitable competitiveness. Approaches termed participative management, worker participation, worker involvement, empowerment and terms associated with similar intentions and objectives became the focus of interest and attention (Wadesango 2009; Hoy and Miskel 2005).

Generally the findings appeared to indicate that the alignment and coherence between the

respective factors making up the key variable in employee involvement as major organizational transformation was poor within South African companies. The organizations surveyed indicated that most respondents initiated their involvement efforts in order to prepare for future environmental changes. In addition, employee expectations, skills, morale enhancement, strengthening of management and ethical reason become increasingly significant in triggering companies to adopt involvement as a strategic initiative. While top management still predominantly initiated involvement efforts, union and employees have begun playing a greater role (Smith 2003; Carnoy 2002; Bush 2003).

CONCLUSION

Teacher participation is a trend that 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 findings of this study have shown that teachers are insignificantly involved in decision making in the selection of teaching material. Therefore, the net effect of making a wrong decision may have serious consequences not only to the initiator but the school and the entire community and it is important for the school heads to avoid involving teachers in areas in which they lack the expertise.

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 for a 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. School based promotions need to be based on merit and experience of the teachers. The selection instrument should therefore be impartial. 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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