

Do Teachers Participate in School Decisions which are within their Zones of Expertise, Experience and Interest?

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ABSTRACT Teacher participation in school based decisions which fall within their zone of acceptance leads to teacher-empowerment, autonomy and accountability. When teachers are involved in the decision-making faculties which fall within their zone of expertise, experience and interest, they will be motivated to carry out the tasks and will have a greater ownership of the school. The study investigated if teachers were involved in decisions which fall within their zones of acceptance. The study adopted a qualitative/interpretive research methodology and used the case study research design as the operational framework for data gathering. Data was collected through interviews, documentary analysis and observation of two staff meetings per school from 5 secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The population sample comprised 5 secondary school heads and 25 secondary school teachers. The results of the study indicated that teachers were active in the process in certain issues while heads made unilateral decisions in critical issues.

INTRODUCTION

A number of educational reforms have been implemented all over the world and Zimbabwe was no exception. Democratization and decentralization are concepts that are rooted in the neo-liberal philosophy which advocates for the enhancement of equal opportunity for all people to make their own decisions and develop their own skills, interests and personalities (Brouillette 1997; Sayed 2002). In Zimbabwe, there have been some debates on democratization and decentralization which led to the development of policies meant to increase teacher participation in decision-making in schools. However, despite these developments, teacher participation in decision-making in Zimbabwean schools is regarded as insignificant.

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).

Benefits of Participation

The following benefits entail the importance of participation in decision-making in education (Kumar and Scuderi 2000; Shedd and Bacharach 1991; Technikon 1998; Juru 2002; Khoza 2003).

Participation enables teachers to become active participants in school management process. As a result of this, teachers will have a wider and greater ownership of the school, its vision and priorities. Teachers will then be motivated to carry out the tasks; participation leads to a higher level of meaningful involvement by teachers and teacher teams in the decision-making process. This implies that teachers will be determined to carry out the tasks; participation accords teachers opportunities for professional development in decision-making skills.

The above authors further assert that participation is a proactive approach to information-sharing among teachers and it makes teachers become good decision-makers; participation nurtures teachers' creativity and initiative, empowering them to implement innovative ideas. This makes decisions more likely to be acceptable and more likely to be implemented because they reflect and serve the interests of the people responsible for putting them into action; participation results in increased trust between senior management and the teachers. According to them, this results in the development of more inclusive partnerships among heads and teachers. There is harmony, trust, competence and joy in such an environment; participation is good for the schools' long range planning; participation improves the quality of managements' decisions since there is greater diversity of views and expertise as inputs to decision-making and participation enhances effectiveness, efficiency and

productivity by improving the schools ability to respond rapidly to problems or opportunities in its environment.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of shared decision-making (SDM) centres on the mindset that decisions that impact on the school should be shared by the members of the organization (Hoy and Miskel 2005). In a school setting those members would be the principal, teachers and the parents. Policies are thought to emerge from a complex process of discussion. The major questions that arise are: Under what conditions should teachers be involved in decision-making? To what extent should they be involved? How should they be involved? The Putting It Together (PIT) model of SDM is useful in answering these questions.

According to the proponents of this model, subordinates accept some decisions because they are indifferent to them. There is a zone of indifference in each individual within which orders are accepted without conscious questioning of their authority. This zone is also called the zone of acceptance (Hoy and Miskel 2005). The key concept in this model is the zone of acceptance. There are some decisions that subordinates simply accept and, consequentially therefore, in which they need not be involved. However, in certain decisions which fall within their zone of expertise and experience, they want to be involved. Failure to involve the staff members can result in disgruntlement and then the decision will not be fully implemented. Heads of schools therefore, should identify areas in which teachers have a personal stake and make an attempt to consult them when dealing with such issues.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive methodology because it allowed the researcher 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 researchers recognised several nuances of attitude and behaviour that could not have been noticed if other methods had been used. 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 more participants who are then investigated in considerable depth (Thomas and Nelson 2001). Purposive convenience sampling was adopted in the selection of participants for this study. This type of non-probability sampling method seeks information-rich cases which can be studied in depth (Patton 1990). A sample of twenty-five secondary school teachers and five substantive school heads from five secondary schools constituted the study. Since school teachers were scattered all over the district, convenience purposive sampling was employed in order to come up with the actual participants for this study.

RESULTS

The study identified four key areas of decision-making in schools and investigated if they fall within teachers' zone of acceptance.

Selection of Prefects

Prefects are elected to represent the school. They must fulfill important functions around the school by preventing students from causing damage to school property both inside and outside the classroom. They are expected to set standards which are an example to all students within the school. They actually assist with the smooth running of the school and maintenance of discipline. Therefore, there is need to select students of high calibre who will not be a disgrace to the school. During the selection process, it is important to consider attributes like self-discipline, maturity, reliability and sensitivity. Therefore, this is a very important area in decision-making.

All the respondents concurred that this was an area where all teachers were mostly involved in decision-making. Below are some of the views of the responding teachers on the subject at hand:

- R2 This is where all teachers are involved. That means there is a very fair degree of involvement and participation of teachers in decision-making.*
- R3 Selection of prefects is done by teachers. In fact, when it comes to the selection of prefects, our school head is keen to involve*

every staff member. Preliminary selections begin at classroom level where individual teachers are asked to nominate students they considered appropriate for these posts. When that is done, all teachers meet to choose prefects for that year.

Teachers are quite satisfied with the involvement of everyone in this area of decision-making. They think that they know their students better than the school administrators do. Therefore, a stronger team of prefects could only be elected as a result of valid data being supplied about each of the prospective prefects.

In order to get a clear picture of the situation, it was necessary that school heads be interviewed to establish their position in so far as the decision-making process is concerned in the area of selection of prefects. All the school heads confirmed during the interviews that all teachers are involved in the selection of prefects. The heads added that at times the process involved students. It was brought to the fore that in such cases students are called to come up with a list of potential prefects. The school heads would proceed to verify it before ratifying the list. The amended list would then be brought before the whole staff for consideration. To this end, H1 had the following to share with the researcher:

Who is involved with the selection of prefects? The students are themselves. They also vote for their prefects through the senior master and senior woman, and then we look at the list that will have been presented by the senior master/ woman as a collective body of staff, then we agree looking at the other qualities like intelligence, discipline and other things.

The study views selection of prefects as an important aspect because these are the people that are going to assist staff members in the maintenance of discipline and order in the schools. In the meetings attended by the researcher, the process of selection of prefects was carried out by the whole staff in all the participating schools. Teachers were asked to nominate their choices from a long list given by students and those nominated were voted for by the whole staff in order to come up with the best calibre of prefects. The above observation was also confirmed by the information that was obtained from staff minutes as well as circulars in the heads' files. Staff minutes revealed that selection of prefects in all schools involved everyone. The researcher came across a memo which was in one

of the school heads' files impressing upon teachers to start thinking about suitable prefects for the coming year. However, teachers did not think that this was an important area in decision-making.

Ordering of Textbooks

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 H.O.D. The H.O.D normally consults 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 fall 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 minutes that were perused 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.

Meting Out of Corporal Punishment

Punishment is a penalty imposed for wrongdoing or a penalty imposed on an offender for a crime. However, the severity of the punishment must be in keeping with the kind of obligation which has been violated. There are, therefore, various forms of punishment in schools which include suspension from school for a specified period of time and expulsion from school then the student will not be allowed to come back to that school. At times the offender can be asked to carry out a mammoth task like stumping a big tree. However, the most common of all forms of

punishment in schools is corporal punishment which is used to inflict physical pain on wrong doers. Corporal punishments offer a more direct application of penalties for violating school rules.

All the responding teachers disclosed that decision-making on meting out of corporal punishment was, once again, in the office of the school administrators who are: the head, deputy, senior master and the senior woman. These are normally regarded as the top four. All the respondents agreed that ordinary teachers were not involved in this area though they would love to be involved. These sentiments were captured from the responding teachers:

R4: Mainly it's the senior staff comprising of the head, the deputy head, the senior woman and the senior master who are involved in student discipline. Teachers only identify problem students and then advice the head who finds appropriate measures to take.

R10: It involves the senior woman, senior master and the deputy head. These deal with disciplinary issues. Outstanding issues are taken to the head.

R11: Meting out of corporal punishment is done by the head, deputy head and senior teachers. Ordinary teachers are not involved at all.

However, a close scrutiny of the Statutory Instrument 84, Section 110, showed that teachers could also be involved in meting out of corporal punishment in schools. The same instrument goes on to give conditions under which teachers can participate in the meting out of punishment in their schools. The condition is that the exercise must be done under the watchful eye of the school head. An analysis of the responses from the school heads on the same question shows that teachers are not allowed to mete out punishment. However, they can be involved in the identification of the offenders. To this end, H3 made the following comment: *"It's the teachers who identify the culprits and they are brought to the head's office, those who need cans, the deputy head and the senior master do it in the head's office."*

In an attempt to justify the non-involvement of teachers in meting out punishment, H1 had this to say, *"If it comes to corporal punishment, the head is the only one authorized by the Government to beat students in Zimbabwe. Normally the disciplinary committee recommends to the school head."* This justification may not

be something to rely on since Statutory Instrument gives room for teachers to mete out punishment as alluded to earlier on. A follow-up was made with one of the heads in this study on why some teachers were being excluded from meting out punishment and he indicated that perhaps school heads refrain from involving their subordinates in meting out corporal punishment because it is a sensitive area. Teachers may injure students and it will be the school head who will be sued by the parents or guardians of the child.

All the participating teachers from the five schools felt that they needed to be allowed to mete out corporal punishment. They felt that students would not respect them if they did not have the authority and power to mete out punishment. They felt that it was not proper for them to be allowed to mete out punishment only in the presence of their school heads as expressed in the government statutory instrument. They questioned the logic in failing to allow teachers to mete out punishment when they are given the authority to teach children. They further argued that they were professionals in one hand and also parents. They expressed the view that they always met out punishment to their own children in the interest of moulding them into disciplined citizens of the country. It was, therefore, surprising to them that in some cases they were viewed as operating in *loco parentis* and yet denied the powers to exercise the provisions of *loco parentis* when it came to disciplining the children. The situation prevails in all five schools.

The staff meetings that were attended during the course of the research did not have this item on the agenda. Sets of minutes scrutinized indicated that teachers were not allowed to mete out punishment. In one set of minutes, the school head was said to have re-emphasized that he did not want to see anyone practising corporal punishment. In that meeting, teachers were reminded to adhere to regulations. In another set of minutes, the following statement was recorded: *The head again told members of staff that corporal punishment was one thing that was to be left to him or the deputy head. The head called upon teachers to desist from doing this and to respect the presence of the head and deputy head if they had been found doing inflicting corporal punishment. He further went on to say that teachers should not blame him when he summons them to his office to charge them if they be found executing corporal punishment.*

It was observed in the minutes that all five schools under study did not permit their staff members to execute corporal punishment. It is the researcher's interpretation that since most of the participating schools use disciplinary committees to formulate discipline policies, the same should go for meting out punishment. These committees should also be allowed by school administrators to be fully involved in this issue at hand. The head of one school indicated that teachers in his school contributed to the formulation of discipline policies but surprisingly, the same head does not allow teachers to mete out punishment.

This is despite the fact that the Ministry of Education allows every member of the school as an organization to carry out this caning as long as it is done in the presence of the school head. Any teacher who has identified a culprit should be allowed to mete out corporal punishment and this should be done in the head's office as per Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture requirements. Teachers feel that this is an important area where they are not fully involved. My view with regard to this issue is that teachers should be allowed to inflict corporal punishment but the whole exercise should be supervised by the school administrators. Corporal punishment should not be abolished as what is being advocated by some pressure groups but should be meted under strict conditions.

Streaming of Students

Streaming of students is grouping of students by similar academic ability. Streaming is where students are graded into form classes according to ability. Movement from one class or level to another by a student entails movement to a different level in all subjects and perhaps a change of subjects also. Many countries have abolished this practice. The reason was to avoid branding students as overall achievers or non-achievers/failures according to form classes. However, Zimbabwe still subscribes to the practice. All the twenty responding teachers agreed that they are fully involved in deciding how to stream their students. However, all of them feel that the exercise does not require any specialized skills, for streaming of students is usually based on overall form positions. Their participation in the area does not influence the outcomes as they do not consider it to be a critical decision. Below are some of the sentiments of the respondents:

R8: *All staff members are involved in the decision-making process. This is done in staff meetings. Each teacher tables the mark schedules from their classes. These are the schedules that are used when streaming students*

All the twenty teachers agreed to the fact that they are fully involved in decisions on streaming students. One of the school heads (H4) stated the following:

We are very democratic here as you can see that all the teachers are involved in decision-making as far as streaming of students is concerned. You see streaming is a very important task. We have to be very accurate, fair and transparent to make sure that every child is properly placed."

The other school head (H1) made the following comment: *"We regard streaming as very important because it means the future of the child. Any mistake can ruin the entire life of the student in terms of career development."* The sentiments expressed above reveal that there is a difference in what teachers and their school heads consider to be critical decisions. Staff meetings attended by the researcher confirmed the assertion that all staff members get involved in the streaming of students. As this was the end of year, school heads in all cases advised class teachers in the meetings to quickly compile end of year reports so that streaming of students would be done before they left for holidays. Minutes reviewed also indicated that at the end of each year, teachers would sit down and allocate students to relevant classes based on their end of year performance.

DISCUSSION

The study established that there is a disparity in the areas of teacher participation in decision-making in the five schools.

Streaming of Students

It was established in the findings that all teachers in the participating schools take part in the streaming of students. Teachers are assumed to have a better understanding of their children's abilities and capabilities. They spend a greater part of the year interfacing with the learners. Given this outlook, it is naturally acceptable that teachers get fully involved in decisions that are

directly related to children like streaming of students as was found in this study. It would not be proper to find the streaming of pupils being done outside teachers' influence. If such practices are encouraged, what is likely to emerge is a ruinous streaming exercise. Under such circumstances pupils could easily be streamed inappropriately and end up taking a wrong combination of subjects. This may impact on the children's careers.

A point at hand is where a child who has great potential in sciences is asked or put in a class that is Arts oriented. That child's future may be jeopardized for the child may fail to pursue his or her desired career parts at university level. In support, Davies cited in Riley (1998) points out that teachers command greater control and knowledge in matters that are classroom-based. It is therefore, proper that teachers be fully involved in such decision-making. Wrong decisions may also bring disharmony between the school and the community. The finding from this current study confirms Kumar and Scuderi's (2000) assertion that teachers work closely with students and have first-hand knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, they are therefore the most invaluable to develop and implement policies.

While tests are accepted as the best tools for streaming pupils, sometimes they fail to measure accurately the degree of attainment that a particular student will have reached. It needs the input of the subject teacher who will explain the possible causes of the child's low performance in a given test. Therefore, it requires this additional information for a meaningful streaming to take place, just relying on the score sheet may ignore certain valuable information about the child. Thus, the fact that teachers are fully involved in decisions on streaming students is a well-received position.

As a matter of fact, if teachers are fully involved in such an important component of the life of a school, then there is equal reasons for their expertise to be used in other decision-making processes which school heads consider being their prerogative. This is in line with the results of a study conducted by McLagan in Drake and Roe (1999), which concluded that teachers get excited and motivated if they are involved in decision-making in areas in which they command great expertise. However, teachers in this study have indicated that this is not a critical decision-making area.

Ordering of Textbooks

It emerged in this study that all the five participating heads involve teachers in the selection of textbooks through their 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.

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's (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.

Meting Out Corporal Punishment

It emerged in this study that all teachers in this study are not allowed to mete out corporal punishment even under the supervision of the school head as per statutory instrument requirements. Teachers, however, appear to think that they should be allowed room to discipline pupils. Ultimately teachers should be viewed as adults who act in loco parentis. Therefore, they must make meaningful decisions on meting out punishment.

The point is that if students get to know that teachers do not have authority to mete out pun-

ishment on them, teachers may not be respected by some of the students. Such a set up may affect learning since it is considered that in every normal setting, 20% of the people are likely to present disciplinary problems (Lipham 1997). Leaving all disciplinary problems to the school administration may also present problems because those who are authorised to mete out corporal punishment may fail to appreciate the gravity of the issue.

Teachers may not take delight in that. Agreeably, meting out of corporal punishment is an issue that lies within the teachers' zone of influence which is the classroom. The fact that teachers want to be involved in meting out of corporal punishment confirms findings of a study conducted by Chivore (1995) in Harare, that teachers wanted to be involved in the proper social and moral upbringing of students. They (responding teachers in Chivore's study) felt that students would not respect them if they did not have the authority and power to mete out corporal punishment.

Decisions in Areas Inside Teachers' Zone of Acceptance

The study also confirmed that there are certain decisions that are a preserve of the school head. Teachers have shown that they would not be bothered by situations where school heads make decisions in areas where their subordinates have less competence. This view augers well for this study. The above view is also supported by Hoy and Miskel (2005) in their model called Putting It Together which postulates that there is a zone of indifference in each individual within which orders are accepted without conscious questioning of their authority.

This zone is also called the zone of acceptance. According to this model, there are some decisions that subordinates simply accept, and therefore, in which they need not to be involved. If subordinates have a personal stake in the outcome and the expertise to contribute, then they want to be involved and their involvement should improve the decision. If subordinates lack the expertise, their involvement should be limited and occasional. They may also not want to be involved in areas where they have only a personal stake in the outcome but no expertise. 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 head to avoid involving teachers in areas in which they lack the expertise. The above scenario confirms Greenbaum et al.'s (1997) findings. After carrying out a pilot study in the United Kingdom, Greenbaum et al. concluded that workers feel reluctant or less concerned to participate in decision-making where they lack expertise or where they do not have a personal stake in the outcome.

CONCLUSION

While Shared Decision Making (SDM) enhances teachers' opportunities to influence decisions in the school, it emerged in this study that a number of teachers in the participating schools were active in the process in certain strategic issues such as selection of prefects, streaming of students, sports organization and so forth. Responding teachers also indicated that in certain areas such as formulation of a school budget, the raising of levies and regarding school discipline policies, they were represented by their members on those respective committees. It was however, indicated by the participating teachers that in certain issues, school heads made unilateral decisions depending on how urgent and complex the issue at hand was. The study established that most teachers wanted to be consulted in critical issues. They further wanted their views to be heard and acknowledged by the school system. Some teachers held the notion that it was one thing being involved in decision-making and yet another to get their decision taken seriously. Sometimes, they suspected that they were being manipulated by school heads.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends teacher empowerment in decision-making. This implies that teachers need the opportunity and space to participate in decisions which fall within their zones of expertise, interest and experience. Such involve-

ment provides fora through which teachers' creativity contributes to the running of their schools

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