

## The Influence of Teacher Participation in Decision-making on Student Performance

Newman Wadesango

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

**KEYWORDS** School Heads. Decentralisation. School. Collegiality. High Schools

**ABSTRACT** The purpose of this study was to examine empirically the influence of teacher participation in crucial school-based decisions on student performance in Zimbabwean secondary schools. The study adopted an interpretive qualitative research approach utilising a case study research design. A purposive convenient sample of 5 school heads and 20 secondary school teachers formed the study. Together with observations of meetings during school visits, interviews were also conducted with the participants. The study established that the involvement of secondary school teachers in critical school-based decisions has a significant influence on student performance. This finding implies that if teachers are involved in strategic school decisions, this would be vital to improve not only student performance but also organisational performance. The study therefore concludes that a positive correlation does exist between teacher involvement in decision making and student performance

### INTRODUCTION

Wadesango (2011) advocates for shared decision-making if schools are to be efficient and effective in their operations. This approach decentralizes decision-making authority from the central office to the local schools, giving more control over what happens in schools to a wide array of school constituents that is administrators, teachers and other community members (Wohlstetter et al. 1997).

According to Edvantia (2005 citing Lambert 2003), shared leadership is based on the following assumptions: everyone has the right, responsibility and ability to be a leader; how leadership is defined influences how people will participate; educators yearn to be more fully who they are—purposeful, professional human beings; leadership is an essential aspect of an educator's professional life. Results from the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient of the study conducted by Nsubuga (2005) on the relationship between leadership style and school performance indicated that the more autocratic one becomes, the poorer the performance of the school and the contrary is also true. According to Nsubuga (2005), school leaders who use the authoritarian leadership style lead to poor academic performance, because they adopt harsh leadership styles, which are highly resented by their subordinates. Furthermore, the greater the use of autocratic principles, the poorer the learners' aca-

demical performance. The coercive style leader often creates a reign of terror, bullying and demeaning his subordinates, roaring with displeasure at the slightest problem. Subordinates get intimidated and stop bringing bad news in fear of getting bashed or blamed for it, and the moral of teachers plummets (Nsubuga 2005).

Pitner (1988) in Edvantia (2005) offers a theoretical model and the understanding of the possible link between school leadership and student achievement. The *reciprocal-effects model*, reflects the reciprocal nature of the interaction of leadership, intervening variables and student achievements, and suggests various interactions through which principals might exhibit leadership behavior in schools over time. Accordingly, any subsequent changes in the condition of the school would produce feedback that will in turn impact the principal's future leadership actions.

The reciprocal-effects model assumes that some or all of the relationships between administrators and student achievement occurs through interaction with features of the school organization (Hallinger and Heck 1976; Edvantia 2005). According to Edvantia (2005) citing Pitner (1988), this is consistent with the notion that principal behaviors are ultimately related to student performance through their interactions with other people, most notably teachers. Edvantia further postulates that theoretically, the principal is both dependent and independent variable. As a dependent variable, administrative behavior is

subject to the influences of other variables within the school, such as teachers, students, organizational culture and parents. As an independent variable the principal influences the actions of teachers, the school and student achievement (Hallinger and Murphy 1985; Leithwood et al. 1990).

Smylie and Hart (1999) in Edvantia (2005) found positive relationships between participation and teachers' reports of increases of students' responsibilities and enthusiasm for learning and problem solving skills. Leithwood et al. (2004) also published a review of the literature on how leadership influences student learning and concluded that there is an association between increased student learning and leaders who develop and rely on leadership contributions from a diverse constituent base within the organization. This is supported by Mualuko et al. (2009) that for effective decision-making in schools, those in authority will not be expected to act like technocrats in different areas of school management. Rather they are expected to display modern management styles which are contrary to the traditional management approaches. The modern styles are bottom up, participative, consultative, team and task oriented. The styles also include listening and responding to the real needs rather than telling and prescribing. Mualuko et al. (2009) observe that raising the flagging morale and motivation of teachers most sub-Saharan African countries is a major challenge because many teachers lack self-esteem and commitment to their profession. He attributes this lack of self-esteem and commitment partly to lack of participatory management styles, which he claims are poorly understood or applied in Africa.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative interpretive research methodology was adopted in this study since this research aimed at elucidating what the participants had to say with regard to decision-making in their natural settings. It was therefore imperative that a methodological perspective be adopted to allow the findings to develop "from the data itself rather than from preconceived, rigidly structured, and highly quantified techniques that pigeon-hole the empirical social world into the operational definitions that the researcher has constructed" (Creswell 2002:23). The problem iden-

tified in this study demanded that the participants themselves be allowed to freely express their feelings, views and opinions. To this end, Ely (1991:78) 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 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.

## **RESULTS**

All the twenty teachers from the five schools under study indicated that their participation in decision-making varied from issue to issue. It emerged in this study that heads of schools made certain strategic decisions on their own without consulting any one and then communicated such decisions to staff as expressed by the following teachers:

*Respondent 8- It depends on what is being discussed. Some things are dictated by the Head, whilst others are discussed by the staff. But generally we are not involved in all significant issues even if the outcomes concern us. Such issues even if they are not policy issues, the head of school has a tendency of dictating to teachers what he wants done. Our involvement is normally required at the implementation stage in certain issues. At this stage we are actively involved.*

*Respondent 11-We are involved to some extent in the making of those decisions which are strategic and special and in which we are knowledgeable. The head of school normally consult us to make contributions in certain issues. There are however other times when we are not consulted but told what to do. So I can say it all depends on the issue at hand.*

The study found that teachers considered participation as the process whereby school heads engaged them in all areas of the school administration where these teachers command high expertise as well as having a personal stake in the outcome of the decision namely school-based promotion, choice of curriculum, ordering of textbooks, organization of fund raising activities, selection of prefects, formulation of school discipline policies etc. Teachers expressed the fact that they did not want to be involved or participate in decisions in which they had no personal stake as well as expertise. In fact they reckoned that school heads should be free to make decisions in areas in which their teachers did not have a personal stake and expertise. They felt that in some cases, they were only asked to implement decisions that would have been made by their school heads.

All responding teachers also asserted that participation in critical issues depended on the level occupied by one in the school hierarchy. It is evident from the teachers' responses that four of the participating school heads prefer consulting their deputy head, senior master, senior woman and to some extent heads of departments when dealing with critical issues. The following are some of the views from the respondents:

*Respondent 5: The deputy head, senior master and the senior woman and Heads of Departments (H.O.Ds,) those are the very people involved in decision making. We are involved only in a few instances like choosing of prefects, anything else is the preserve of the top four.*

*Respondent 16: Those in administration that is the senior woman, senior master, deputy headmaster and at times H.O. Ds. In most cases we are just told what to do. Some of the things are happening here without our knowledge. At times some of the issues are relayed to pupils first and we will only come to know about such issues through our pupils.*

If these people are the ones responsible for making institutional decisions as expressed above, then one is compelled to find out how such decisions are received by the subordinates. Respondents from all the participating schools hold the opinion that there are times when the school heads get views on how to deal with a particular problem from their management teams without consulting the rest of the staff. The senior management team consists of the head, the deputy head, the senior woman and the senior

master. These people are normally appointed by the school head in consultation with his/her deputy. Some of the teachers reiterated the need for them to be involved in decisions that lie within the frame of their interests and in those areas that directly impinge on their personal stake like teaching methodology and working conditions as well as remuneration. Thus, leaving school heads and their management teams to make such decisions could be premised on the assumption that the administrators know what is good and bad for the school and that they will always make sound decisions.

Most of the responding teachers asserted that the acceptance of their suggestions depended on the gravity of the issue at hand as well as the validity of the suggestion. An interpretation of the responses given below would suggest that at times avenues for shared decision making are created but heads do not make an attempt to implement what would have been suggested by their teachers as echoed by the responses below:

*Respondent 8: Not always. It depends on what type of suggestion. If they have anything to do with administration, no, no, no. But if it has to do with fund raising, selection of prefects and other issues, yes.*

*Respondent 6: Sometimes yes, sometimes no, depending on the nature of the issue at hand. But as I have already said administrative issues are a preserve for the head and the deputy head so much that if you suggest anything, it is not taken into account, so we would rather live with our ideas. But however, the head is receptive to certain suggestions.*

The statements above by some of the responding teachers further illustrate the point that the acceptance of teachers' suggestions depended on a number of variables but the bottom line is that some of the suggestions are considered while others may not be considered in all the five participating schools. However, some of the teachers were not happy because they alleged that their decisions were not taken seriously in certain issues such as disciplinary issues and the fact that they were not involved in critical issues of administration and curriculum which involve their expertise and personal stake. They felt that their views needed to be taken seriously and that school heads take into account teachers' views. They further observed that there was no point in teachers making contributions that

were never to be taken seriously at implementation level.

The majority of the respondents asserted that in most of the cases certain decisions reached without their consultation were not successful because they were difficult to implement. Some of the reasons given are presented as follows: Most of them failed because they didn't have the backing of the teachers and it was difficult to implement something which you know you were not consulted. The participation of members would not be as active as if the head had consulted everyone.

(a) Usually they were bound to fail because the person who is supposed to implement those decisions will not be in a position to understand why that particular decision was taken. Teachers may not be really pleased with the decision that has been taken, so the commitment to the implementation would lead to failure because the person is not totally committed. In one school teachers had an ordeal to share with the researcher. They said that their HODs had unilaterally ordered text books that were not the most appropriate for an Ordinary ("O") level Science syllabus as well as having deployed an inexperienced teacher to teach an examinable "O" level class. When it was time for national examinations, most of the students failed. There was a 10% pass rate. This was catastrophic in a department that used to record an average of 40% pass rate. The school head was summoned to the District Education Office to explain the circumstances surrounding this dismal failure.

It emerged that the 2008 "O" level results showed a downward trend in one of the participating schools. Teachers attributed this to their limited participation in strategic issues such as teaching load allocation and choice of curriculum. One of the participants from this school made the following comment:

*Respondent 1: Results are affected by inadequate teacher participation in critical decisions such as teaching load allocation, choice of curriculum, student discipline policies and so forth. All these lead to a poorly motivated teacher and once one is not motivated, one cannot perform effectively.*

However, the study realized that this school is in a rural set up where most of the students walked 10 kilometers to school. This could be another factor contributing to low pass rate in that pupils get to school exhausted and this af-

fects concentration. There was also no adequate food in rural areas in Zimbabwe at the time the study was conducted. This implies that most of the students went to school on empty stomachs. However, results had been consistently high in one of the participating schools. Apparently this is the school where teachers have been involved in staff meetings in the decision making processes in strategic issues such as the formulation of a school budget, choice of curriculum, the formulation of student discipline policies as well as teaching load allocation. One of the teachers from this school made the following comment:

*Respondent 16: Our results have been so impressive. We have been receiving awards for being the best urban boarding school in this province. We attribute this to the spirit of oneness prevailing in this school. The school climate is very conducive. We are consulted in many important issues such as the teaching load allocation. Because of that involvement one teaches what one is knowledgeable in.*

However, it should be noted that this was a boarding school and the fact that pupils competed for places in this school might also mean that the school enrolled best students. This could also be another factor contributing to good results besides the participation of teachers in strategic issues such as mentioned above. In the other three schools where teachers indicated that they were always represented in various committees by their members and that their representatives always endeavour to consult them in issues such as textbook selection, choice of curriculum, disciplinary policies and teaching load allocation.

However, although some of the teachers attributed poor performance to their exclusion from taking part in critical decisions as elaborated earlier on, the researcher believes that there are other factors that can contribute to poor performance namely the economic situation in Zimbabwe which is no longer favourable for the attainment of institutional goals.

### **DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

The study established that there is some correlation between level of teacher participation in decision making and students' achievement in "O" level examinations. The schools that had a low level of teacher participation in decision-making had low results in terms of percentage

pass rate. In support, (Beckman and Blom 2000; Wadesango 2011) postulate that deeply woven in the fabric of participation is the assumption that it leads to greater efficiency, effectiveness and better outcomes. The study identified a school in which there was a meaningful teacher participation in decision-making in areas such as teaching load allocation, choice of curriculum and formulation of school budget. An analysis of the school's performance in national examinations showed an impressed picture. The school's "O" level results have been increasing over the five year period. The percentage pass rate ranged from 89% -98%. Teacher retention was extremely high. The school climate was very warm and goal oriented. The school climate was conducive. This is the case that is holding at one school where there was greater shared decision making process. This finding concurs with Leithood et al.'s (2007) assertion that leadership is a very strong predictor of school performance. This is also supported by Wadesango (2011) whose study concluded that students' outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are distributed throughout the school and where teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them. By distributing powers, head teachers do not become weak but instead they become stronger as the institutions they head excel in performance.

The reverse holds quite true in one school where teachers were excluded from shared decision making in critical issues. Teachers were frustrated; there was lack of commitment to school duties. The school culture was not conducive to higher "O" level national examination achievement. Collected data revealed that this school was deteriorating in its performance at "O" Level examinations. The pass rate was ranging from 22%-28% over the same five year period. The study observed that this school tended to blame poor performance at "O" Level examinations to teachers' exclusion from taking part in the above named areas. In support, Beckmann and Blom (2000) assert that research supports a link between participation and achievement. However, on other hand Mitchell (1998) refutes this by positing that there is no research-based information that concludes that increased participation leads to increased performance as there are other variables to be considered.

In cases where there was an average shared decision making, "O" level results were also aver-

age in the remaining three schools. The pass rate ranged from 39%-69% over the same period of 5 years. Thus, there is ample room to convince that among other issues, there is a positive correlation between level of shared decision making and pupil performance at O' level national examinations. However, improved O' level examinations could be an outcome of other variables. Take for example, the school that excelled at O' level national examinations was a boarding school. It could be by its very nature, it managed to attract highly competent teachers and pupils who will have performed extremely well at grade seven. The fact that they enrolled the high-achievers from grade seven automatically puts the school at an advantage over day schools that are likely to enrol students, almost everyone from their feeder primary schools. However, Cole (2002) refutes this by arguing that even if an institution has all the financial resources to excel, it may fail dismally if the leadership does not motivate others to accomplish their tasks effectively.

Despite all that, shared decision-making could have a bearing on academic performance according to what emerged from this study. Therefore, the need to involve teachers in decision making has more benefits than otherwise. Merriam's (2001) study conducted in San Francisco found that the inclusion of all members of the school community in a decision-making process creates a climate where the democratic values of fairness, justice and equality are honoured, and this lead to greater efficiency, effectiveness and better outcome. Merriam's findings also confirm what came out of this current study that participation of teachers in decision making is likely to affect student performance. Namirembe (2005) also argues that many secondary schools still lack the necessary performance requirements, not only because of inadequate funds or even poor facilities, but as a result of insignificant teacher participation in decision making. Similarly, Odubaker (2007) conducted a study to investigate the influence of the head teachers' management competences on the management of Primary Schools in Uganda in order to improve the teaching and learning process. The findings established that the principal's management style was critical to improve the teaching and learning process.

Several benefits of teacher participation in decision-making have been identified. Kumar

and Scuderi (2000) assert that teacher participation in decision-making: enables teachers to become active participants in school management process. As a result, teachers will have a wider and greater ownership of the school, its vision and its priorities. This probably explains why most of the participating teachers are committed to their work. They are taking their schools as their second home. They feel to be part and parcel of their organisations; enhances effectiveness, efficiency and productivity. This could be another reason why the school that endeavoured to include teachers in most of the strategic issues have recorded an increase in student performance at national examinations and nurtures teachers' creativity and initiative, empowering them to implement innovative ideas. This makes decisions to be 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. This results in the development of more inclusive partnerships among heads and teachers and there is harmony, trust, competence and joy in such an environment.

Studies have shown that participation in deciding matters of concern has positive effects on the participant (Brundrette 1998). 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).

## CONCLUSION

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. It further established that unless school principals are well equipped with knowledge and skills in management and leadership, they would not be able to improve student performance significantly. This means that there is a strong relationship between teacher participation in school-based decision-making processes and student performance. In other words academic performance in second-

ary schools was explained by the prevailing style of leadership.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for teachers to actively participate in school-based decision-making processes in their schools so as to encourage, motivate and utilize their wide range of experience, expertise and personal characteristics and capability. Teachers should be participate more in critical decision making in their schools as an opportunity for training and to gain more experience and confidence as they execute their duties

### REFERENCES

- Beckmann J L, Blom MA 2000. Thoughts on accountability and democratic school management. *South Africa Journal of Education*, 17(4): 196-202.
- Brundrette M 1998. What lies behind collegiality, legitimization or control? *Educational Management and Administration*, 26(3): 305-316.
- Chung F 1988. *Socialism, Education and Development: A Challenge to Zimbabwe*. Harare: Zimbabwe Pub House.
- Cole GA 2002. *The Administrative Theory and Workers' Motivation*. Zaira: ZIA Press Ltd.
- Creswell JW 2002. *Research Design: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. London: Sage Publications.
- EDVANTIA 2005. *Shared Leadership and Student Achievement*. Charleston: Edvantia Inc.
- Ely PJ 1991. *Social Work with Groups*. London: Routledge and Kegan Pall.
- Guthrie JW, Koppich JE 1993. *Building a Model of Education Reform and High Politics*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Hallinger P, Murphy J 1985. Assessing the instructional management behavior of principals. *Elementary School Journal*, 86(2): 217-247.
- Hallinger P, Heck RH 1996. Reassessing the principal's role in school effectiveness: A review of empirical research, 1980-1995. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32(1): 5-44.
- Kumar DD, Scuderi P 2000. Opportunities for teachers as policy makers. *Kappa-Delta-Pi Record*, 36(2): 61-64.
- Lambert L 2003. *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement*. Alexandria: VA
- Leithwood KA, Beglet PT, Cousins JB 1990. The nature, causes and consequences of principals' practices. An agenda for future research. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 28(4): 5-31.
- Leithwood K, Louis K, Anderson S, Wahlstrom K 2004. *Review of Research*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.
- Mulford W, Sillins H, Leithwood KA 2004. Educational Leadership for Organizational Learning and Improved Student Outcomes. From< <http://www.books.google.co.za/books/about/Education>> (Retrieved 4 January 2012).
- Mitchell S 1998. *Reforming Educators: Teachers, Experts and Advocates*. London: Praeger.
- Merriam SB 2001. Democratization and the implementation of economic reform in Africa. *Journal of International Development*, 8(1): 23-34.
- Mualuko NJ, Mukasa SA, Judy ASK 2009. Improving decision making in schools through teacher participation. *Educational Research and Review*, 4(8): 391-397.
- Namirembe G 2005. Status of Education for Rural People in Uganda. *Paper presented at the Ministerial Seminar on Education for Rural People in Africa*, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 23-25 June 2005.
- Nsubuga YK 2006. Analysis of Leadership Styles and School Performance of Secondary Schools in Uganda. From< <http://www.education.go.ug/JournalArticle> (1)> (Retrieved 4 January 2012).
- Odubuker PE 2007. *Head Teachers Training Programme and Their Competencies in the Management of the Primary Schools in the North West District of Uganda*. Doctoral Thesis, Unpublished. Kampala: Makerere University.
- Pitner NJ 1988. *The Study of Administrator Effects and Effectiveness*. New York: Longman.
- Smylie M, Hart A 1999. *School Leadership for Teacher Learning and Change: A Human and Social Capital Development Perspective*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thomas JR, Nelson JK 2001. *Research Methods in Physical Activity*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. London: Champaign.
- Wadesango N 2011. Groupwork: Myth or reality in school based decision-making. *Groupwork*, 21 (1): 59-82.
- Wohlstetter P, Mohrman SA, Robertson PJ 1997. *Successful School-based Management. A Lesson for Restructuring Urban Schools*. New Haven: Yale University Press.