

Involvement of Teachers in School-Based Decision Making Processes of Choice of Subjects

N. Wadesango¹, E. Mutekwe², A. Ndofirepi³, C. Maphosa⁴ and S. Machingambi⁵

¹Walter Sisulu University, East London Campus, Republic of South Africa.

²University of Johannesburg, Educational Studies, Johannesburg, South Africa.

³University of Witwatersrand, School of Education, South Africa

⁴University of Venda, Republic of South Africa

⁵Mangosuthu University of Technology, Republic of South Africa

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⁴University of Venda, Republic of South Africa

⁵Mangosuthu University of Technology, Republic of South Africa

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this empirical study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of their participation in school based choice of subjects. This was necessitated by complaints from teachers about their insignificant participation in this critical and strategic decision making area, at the same time accusing their school heads of dictatorial tendencies. 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 school based curriculum issues were the prerogative of the heads and their deputies. 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 teachers should not be regarded as mere

recipients of the imposed curriculum but should be partners in the curriculum development process.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum can be defined as a sequence or series of coursework, within a particular area or content focus. Carl (2002) sees curriculum development as the encompassing and continual process during which any form of planning, designing, dissemination, implementation and assessment of curricula may take place. According to Carl, this process may occur in various areas of the curriculum, ranging from national and provincial levels to schools and classrooms. He stresses that it is within this process of curriculum development that the teacher can and should become involved. Dawn (2003) postulates that the development of curriculum becomes a value-laden process of determining what should be taught within the institutions of schools, given the social, cultural, political and environmental influences upon this curriculum development process. In his study, Dawn (2003) found that teachers perceived themselves as a bridge between other teachers and the state standards. The study further established that teachers perceived the curriculum development process as a process one could not undertake and accomplish without the group dynamics. Teachers, therefore, wanted to participate in the development of school based curriculum. Engaging in the curriculum development process was deemed a necessary ingredient that helps to create a sense of ownership and investment in the curriculum developed.

According to Bolstard (2004), another way to describe School Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) is in terms of a shift in curriculum decision-making power and authority from centre to periphery. In this regard, SBCD is described as:

--any process which-----on the basis of school initiated activity or school demands regarding curricula-brings about a redistribution of power, responsibilities and control between central and local educational authorities, with schools acquiring the legal and administrative autonomy and the professional authority enabling them to manage their own process of development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 1979).

The above definition implores the need to involve in the curriculum development process people who directly deal with students. Cornbleth (1990:5) sees curriculum as what actually happens in classrooms, that is, 'an ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers,

knowledge and milieu'. This view places the teacher at the center of the whole curriculum development business. Sharpes (1988:11) actually states that curriculum is: "...what the teacher does and what the teacher knows, and who the teacher is: the teacher's behavior, knowledge and personality."

The above assertion underlines the fact that the quality of curriculum implementation depends on the quality of the teacher hence the importance of teacher involvement in curriculum development. On the other hand, Swanepoel and Booysen (2006) observe that some teachers may not be interested in additional responsibilities in curriculum development. In such a situation to involve teachers maybe available yet the teachers themselves may not be willing to get involved.

Fullan (2002) further observes that the teacher has to be fully involved in curriculum planning in order to fully understand the curriculum. Such understanding enables the teacher to reduce the gap between the intended and the actual curriculum, the intended is the planned curriculum whereas the actual curriculum is what happens at implementation. This discrepancy is largely due to teachers' different ways of understanding and interpreting the curriculum handed down to them. Ramparsad (2001) observes that most curricula innovations in Africa and a few other European countries are initiated 'top-down' hence teachers are often not consulted and only play an important role in the implementation of the curricula. Teachers, however, need to be involved in all the stages of curriculum development (Oluruntegbe 2010). Ramparsad (2001) also underscores the importance of teacher involvement in curriculum development at all levels from school to national level. Kruger (2003) recommends that principals need to support the teaching programme and provide resources that teachers need to carry out their tasks in curriculum development.

In support, Dawn's (2003) study established that teachers perceived the process of SBCE to contain elements of negotiation and deliberation, and as a process that is influenced by and occurs over time. Teachers indicated that they didn't want to be left out of this process. They also wanted their input to be taken seriously by management. They did not advocate for centralized curricula. In the same vein, Bolstad (2004) asserts that decentralizing curriculum development to schools could make curricula more relevant and meaningful for learners. Print (2003) concurs with Bolstad in that: *...an on-site (i.e. within schools) resolution in curriculum terms, of problems with the existing curricula. This resolution is carried out by teachers, with or without*

outside advice, as they are considered to be those educators most aware of student needs. A study also conducted by Wadesango (2011) established that teachers who are allowed to participate in the decision making processes in terms of important matters such as curriculum development are reported to reflect a high level of organisational commitment. Moreover, teachers who are encouraged to participate democratically in decision making process are reported to be more positive and committed to the school as an organisation. They show enthusiasm for the school, pupils and parents. They are willing to take on projects or to work as teams and are creative and innovative as they have co-ownership of their participatory decision making. Brennen (2002) observes that decentralized approaches allow for greater flexibility, and makes it possible for better decisions to be made because persons at the scene of the action are more closely related to the problem. However, Ainley and McKenzie (2000) contend that while decentralisation of curriculum decision-making is desirable, central authorities should be responsible for defining curriculum and monitoring quality.

Bolstard (2004) giving a speech on “*a shift from curriculum prescription, to curriculum with a purpose*” advocated that while decentralization of curriculum decision-making was the catchcry of the 1970s literature, literature from the 1980s and 1990s reflected concerns that the new national curriculum statements were needed to provide coherent direction for the goals and purposes of school education. Once again, underpinning these concerns was the idea that the world was changing, and so too should school learning. He further asserts that the role of national curriculum should be to specify the outcomes that students are supposed to gain from their school learning, with the means to attaining those ends being determined by teachers and schools. Teachers are not supposed to be marginalized in such a critical decision making area. Criticism of the marginalisation of teachers in decision making is that imposed decisions lack clarity at implementation. In support Wadesango (2009) argues that subordinates find it hard to execute decisions made without their knowledge. This may be because teachers do not have a clear picture of what exactly is to be done. They may lack that desired critical mass in the form of competence, skills, knowledge, aptitude and attitude that is required to have a perfect decision. This confirms the results of a research carried out in Israel by Eggleston (1999) of Haifa University which indicated that policies and innovations dictated by heads on teachers are not fully implemented by teachers due to a number of factors, which amongst others include misinterpretation of the requirements. In a related study, Maphosa and Mutopa (2012) found that

teachers in Zimbabwe were not involved in crucial issues in school-based curriculum development and their efforts did not result in significant curriculum improvement. Swanepoel (2008) raises a concern of the worldwide situation in which teachers facilitate and implement curricula that are planned without their participation or active involvement. Teachers have to be actively involved in curriculum planning since they are the implementers and implementation is made more effective if the implementers understand the curriculum and the spirit behind it (Obanya 2002).

Two main tendencies regarding teacher participation in curriculum development can be distinguished:

- Firstly, teachers are regarded as merely the recipients of the curriculum that is developed by specialists elsewhere. The teachers' curriculum function remains limited to the correct application of what has been developed by these specialists. This so called top-down approach is detrimental to the process of taking ownership of the curriculum
- Teachers are partners in the process of curriculum change. There should therefore be an opportunity for their voices to be heard before the actual implementation, in other words, they should be given the opportunity to make an input during the initial curriculum development processes (Carl 2005).

Carl's sentiments clearly bring out the need for greater participation by teachers in school based curriculum innovations if they are to be effectively implemented. In fact, effective implementation of any decision depends largely on the acceptance and support by other people. It is important to consider other people's concerns because if people are angry regarding the way decisions are taken, such decisions will not proceed smoothly. Their feelings and perceptions account for the success or failure of the decision. Within the South African context, there are certain requirements concerning the teachers' roles and competencies (Republic of South Africa 2000). These seven roles, namely those of (1) learning mediator (2) interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials (3) leader, administrator and manager (4) scholar, researcher and lifelong learner (5) community, citizenship and pastoral role (6) assessor (7) learning area and subject specialist give a good indication of what the national education department expects from teachers regarding their possible curriculum function (Carl 2005 in Republic of South Africa 2000). These roles imply that teachers in certain countries are regarded as mere recipients of the curriculum, not as partners in the curriculum development process. It is against this

background that the study sought to establish teachers' perceptions of their participation in school based curriculum decision making processes in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive methodology because it allowed the researchers 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 & 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.

Biographical Data of Respondents

The biographical data assists in providing critical information on decision making in schools. For example, teaching experience as a biodata will also assist in determining whether the views of the respondents are congruent with their knowledge of the job at hand as well as the art of decision making. 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 calibre of the respondents.

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

Gender	Number	Percentage
Males	15	60
Females	10	40
Total	25	100

The table above 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 have 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. The sample was composed of 2 female school heads and 3 male school heads.

Table 2 Respondents' Teaching Experience (N=25)

Teaching Experience (yrs)	Males	Females	% Males	% Females	Totals
below 5	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
5 – 10	4	0	26.6	0.0	16.0
11-20	6	6	40.0	60.0	48.0
21-30	2	2	13.2	20.0	16.0
31 and above	3	2	13.2	20.0	20.0
Totals	15	10	100	100	100

Table 2 indicates that 48% of the respondents have extensive teaching experience that ranges between 11-20 years. Five of the respondents had over 30 years of teaching experience. However, there were other respondents whose teaching experience fell below 10 years. These numbered 4 out of the 25 respondents. It is also apparent that no respondent had less than 5 years

of teaching experience. The meaning one deduces from this data set is that the respondents were well experienced in the teaching profession.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

Choice of curriculum refers to courses offered at a school or all the subjects that will be taught during a school year. In Zimbabwe, the education policy stipulates that secondary education should consist of three categories of subjects namely compulsory, optional and tech-vocational subjects. Schools are required to teach all compulsory subjects which are English, Mathematics, Science, Shona or Ndebele. In addition to these compulsory subjects, schools are required to choose any two practical subjects as well as any two optional subjects from the recommended list.

The government does not dictate to schools the choice of optional or vocational-technical subjects to teach. Schools have been given the mandate to choose for themselves such subjects. There is no laid down procedure to be followed but the criteria is that the choice of additional subjects should be based on the location of the school, the availability of both human and physical resources and so forth. The policy also does not give specific guidelines on who should participate during the process but only empowers schools to make their own decisions. However, the fact that a school is an organization which comprises of many stakeholders is an indication that everyone under the umbrella of a school should take part in this decision making area. The responding teachers from four schools indicated that decisions on school based curriculum issues were the prerogative of the head and his/her deputy whilst in one school, teachers indicated that everyone was involved. Below are responses given by some responding teachers:

R1 *The headmaster is involved. Teachers are only told about the curriculum choices for each particular level. I want to believe that the deputy head could also be involved. You see, the fact that I am not being able to give you a definite answer is a clear indication that we are not involved in such matters. Trying to get a deeper understanding of how some of these decisions are made would tantamount to infringement of the rights and privileges of the school administration.*

R3 *I would say, this is the head and the deputy head because in most cases in this school, we are just told that this year we are going to offer commerce. Then as teachers we are just told this so and so is going to take those classes. There is no input from teachers.*

R6 Choice of curriculum is done by all staff members in a staff meeting. The head does not impose on teachers such decisions but we have to agree on what is best for the school.

Four of the five school heads concurred with their teachers on that decision on the choice of curriculum was a prerogative of school heads and their deputies whilst the fifth school head asserted that all teachers were consulted before a decision was taken. The following are some of the respondents' comments:

H1- I do not normally involve teachers when for instance I would like to phase out a particular subject and introduce another one. I sit down with my administration staff then we look at what the policy will be stating and this compels us to change the curriculum without any negotiations with staff members

H3 -Yes when it comes to selection of curriculum to offer, we do not involve teachers here because some of them may try to resist or rather block the innovations since they will be affected by the changes. So we normally do it as administrators and then announce the changes to the rest of the staff members.

H5- Oh, yes, Dr. Wadesango, everyone in this school is consulted if we want, say to introduce a new subject. We don't make such decisions as admin team alone but we sit down as a school and come up with a decision.

Thus teachers in four schools are not consulted in this decision making area. It is unfortunate that most of the teachers are not involved in this decision making faculty which this research considers to be very crucial in the running of the school. All the teachers from four schools concurred that decisions were only announced to them and the teachers are far from being happy about that. Most of the teachers felt that curriculum issues are an area of their expertise. One teacher (R10) made the following comment:

I hold a masters degree in curriculum studies and that it was absurd for the school head; a holder of a Bachelors' degree to come and dictate to me the curriculum to be implemented. I am the best qualified to advise the school head on what curriculum alternatives to take. My expertise and that of many other classroom practitioners is not valued in this school.

Responding teachers who were not involved in choice of curriculum felt that they needed to be involved in the activity. They felt that this could be done through meetings at departmental levels. For example, if the innovation involves the science department, teachers in that department should sit down and deliberate on the innovation. They would consider factors like

the availability of suitable manpower as well as the resources that may be required in order to implement the change then make recommendations to the school head. They further felt that decisions from the departments would then be discussed in a general meeting and everyone would then give his/her input.

Teachers went on to reflect that even if there were amendments to the curriculum teachers' opinions were not sought. The view was expressed by R8 who said:

Since teachers, are in constant contact with students, they know what is good and suitable for their students and hence their involvement in this critical area of decision making is not questionable at all. Here we are looking at a situation where the school wants to make some amendments to the curriculum so as to suit the available human and material resources. We have no qualms with decisions that originate from higher offices because these will be policy issues determined by our superiors above the school level. We can't question such decisions at all. But for home grown innovations, definitely we want a say.

Therefore in order for this research to validate some of the teachers' claims that they were not involved in the choice of curriculum some school documents such as minute books, heads' files and memos were perused through. In one school minutes read as follows: *It was agreed that the O" level curriculum was too wide since most of the pupils' performance is below average. A committee was selected by the house to stream down some of the subjects.* This was an indicator that teachers in this school were involved in the choice of curriculum. This also confirmed what was said by the responding teachers from this particular school that they were consulted in the area of choice of curriculum.

In another school, minutes read as follows: *The school head announced to the members of staff that the school had decided to introduce Human and Social Biology into the school curriculum. The reason was that most of the pupils were finding Integrated Science difficult. The head notified the house that the school had already communicated with the Regional Education Office and their decision was endorsed.* This scenario was an indicator that teachers in this particular school were not consulted in the area of choice of curriculum and this confirmed earlier assertions by some of the teachers that they had no say in this area.

The implications of introducing change without consultation can be disastrous. A broad spectrum of skills is needed to lead to effective management of innovation and change. Teacher consultation is a critical ingredient for the success of choice of which additional subject/s to offer

in the school curriculum. Teachers have to be receptive to change themselves. Problems occur when teachers who are supposed to be the implementers have not been adequately consulted about the choice of which additional subjects to take up and the subject/s are offered to them as an accomplished fact. Teachers may resist the change and consequently students who are always on the receiving side may suffer in that they may not receive adequate guidance in that particular subject and then fail the examinations at the end of their course. The general belief is that informed teachers tend to have higher levels of job satisfaction than uninformed teachers.

Discussion

The study found that teachers in the participating schools were not fully involved in the choice of the curriculum. Such a finding is consistent with assertions by Ramparsad (2001) that curriculum in most African countries follows a top down approach and teachers are not often involved in its planning and development and only see themselves playing a role in the implementation. The way they implement the curriculum is the way they understand it as Sharper (1988:19) states that: “Curriculum is in the mind of the transmitter, and can only be learned (in an interactive sense) from the words and actions of such a mind.”

The idea that teachers are not fully involved in choice of curriculum in four of the schools under study further appears to be a highly contested area. Some teachers have hopes of being promoted to headship. Such teachers feel neglected and undermined if they are not involved in decisions that they will be called up to make when promoted. School heads need to involve their teachers in decision making in this area if they are to gauge the competencies of their teachers in the art of decision making. A constant involvement of teachers in basically all the major areas of decision making will give the superior a better understanding of their teachers not only as individuals but also as groups of individuals.

Socialists like Karl Marx appear to hold fast the view that it is improper for the minority “school heads or Curriculum Development Unit” to make decisions for the majority “grassroots” (Nyozev 2003). Accordingly, such contradictions and distortions may see the majority (teachers) rise against the school heads. The finding of this study that teachers are not involved in the choice of curriculum is refuted by Gaziel (1998). Gaziel asserts that the school based curriculum decision making should be for the learner and the teacher made up of experiences of value. In his study, Gaziel (1998), responding teachers indicated that choice of school- based curriculum must

be made by the teacher and the learner together from a close and sympathetic appraisal of the learners' needs and his/her characteristics as a learner and that school heads should not impose such decisions since teachers know what is best for their students. However teachers in one school are involved in this area and they are quite happy about their role in determining the school curriculum. Garret (1990) notes that teachers are the best persons to develop curriculum and they are able to do that without the help of outsiders. Garret further observes that because of a centralised system of curriculum planning, teachers' knowledge and expertise in curriculum development remain largely untapped. It is also important to note that there are a number of problems that have been faced in different contexts as a result of leaving out teachers from the process of decision making in curriculum issues. Eggleston (1999) postulate that the effort to change curriculum issues through such progressive concepts as active inquiry and teacher impartiality often met strong resistance from teachers who experienced such innovations as externally imposed and irrelevant to their immediate problems.

Research carried out in South Africa indicates that the school curriculum in the country reflects the views and ideas of academics and heads rather than those of teachers and pupils (Khoza 2003). The practice of teachers simply implementing curricula, which have already been developed elsewhere, probably also holds true for South African context. Curriculum 2005, for instance was developed on a national level in 1998 and teachers only became involved when they received training on the application of the new curriculum at classroom level. The same holds for the Revised Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (Carl 2005, Department of Education 2002). It appears that the same pattern was followed with the phasing in of the National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (Carl in Department of Education 2003) from 2006, namely the curriculum was developed on a national and provincial level before teachers actually became involved during the implementation stage. In a country like Portugal, Lima and Afonso (1995) reveal that owing to historical tradition in political and administrative centralization, school 'autonomy' that exists in what they term 'instrumental' terms in the process of curriculum implementation hence the process of transformation is never fully realized as promised.

Eddy (1997) stressed the need for a move away from an academic and discipline centred approach to curriculum decision making and development towards an approach that is teacher-centred. Such a teacher-centred approach to curriculum development calls for greater teacher-participation in curriculum issues. Wadesango (2011) asserts that externally imposed innovations

in curriculum issues are difficult to achieve. The learner's firsthand experience is consequently neglected despite its rich educational potential. The same author points out that research indicates there is widespread agreement in the United Kingdom that primary education has benefited in many different ways from the reduction of external constraints on the curriculum. In the British system, primary school teachers play an active role in curriculum development through teacher-centres (Matunhu 1997). In the study conducted by Carl (2003), results indicated that actual participation, according to the teachers is an illusion, because final decisions have already been taken elsewhere by the time they become involved. They experienced the curriculum as prescriptive and imposed upon them from the top-down (the so called divinely inspired curriculum). Responding teachers also felt that their opinions and needs should be accommodated beforehand, seeing that, in the main, policy makers and curriculum agents have already lost contact with classroom and school practice. In this respect they regarded their main curriculum function not as being limited to the school and classroom, but as one that particularly includes their contribution outside the classroom. In a study to ascertain teachers' awareness of their role in planning and implementing school-based curriculum innovation, Maphosa and Mutopa (2012) established that teachers were often comfortable in dealing with 'safe areas' in the curriculum which related to actual teaching and learning. In such a view they lacked awareness that they could be involved in curriculum development at a macro-level in order to bring about significant changes to the curriculum. In a study on the effects the decentralisation of curriculum decentralisation-making powers to schools in Australia, Sturman (1989) found that the freedom of teachers to make decisions about the curriculum is constrained by many factors such as their curriculum epistemological prowess. This further shows that the issue of transformation insofar as curriculum decision-making is concerned is only possible in instances where teachers are thoroughly knowledgeable on curriculum theory and practice.

Conclusion

It was established in this study that all participating heads make school based curriculum decisions unilaterally. It was brought to the fore that heads tend to make such decisions single handedly. Teachers desired more involvement in the school based curriculum development processes. They wanted to be consulted before a decision has been taken. It emerged that teachers were completely left out in this critical decision making area. The study concludes that

teachers who are encouraged to participate democratically in decision making process are reported to be more positive and committed to the school as an organisation. They show enthusiasm for the school, pupils and parents. They are willing to take on projects or to work as teams and are creative and innovative as they have co-ownership of their participatory decision making.

Recommendations

School systems must be restructured to give teachers more space to participate in shared decision making. The teachers who participate in the process must be provided with a clear designation of authority and role. It is further recommended that free dialogue be encouraged in staff meetings. Teachers should also be networked to resource centres in order to obtain the much needed support in curriculum development. Incentives should also be made available to teachers who come up with ideas that result in meaningful improvement in schools. In instances where schools are clustered, the cluster system should be used as a forum where teachers meet to exchange ideas that result in curriculum improvements. More so, teachers should be allowed to suggest as well as participate in the fine tuning of decisions regarding school based curriculum development.

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