Teacher decision making approaches on instructional classroom practice

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Abstract

Making decisions is one thing that every school does on a day-to-day basis. Though they are done at different levels they all contribute to the development of the school system as a whole. The researchers sought to find out the decisional approaches employed by teachers in Harare primary schools on instructional practice in the midst of low academic achievements by students. The descriptive survey approach was employed in this study. Closed-ended questionnaires and structured interview questions were developed. These were pre-tested to determine their validity and reliability. These were administered to 50 teachers and 10 school heads respectively. Document analysis also complemented the aforementioned research instruments in data collection. The researchers concluded that teachers' participation in decision making in their schools was very little. Areas where heads involved teachers were centred on classroom practice. It was also found that teachers employed participatory decision making approaches when conducting classroom activities. This approach was perceived by teachers as contributing to the success of their classroom practice. From the findings of the study it is recommended that Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education officials and school authorities develop mindsets that understand the critical role teachers play in the education fraternity and thereby capitalise on their skills through participatory decision making.

Key Words:
Decision making approaches, instructional practice, participatory decision making

Introduction

Schools, as organisational systems are set up to provide quality education to learners. Organisational systems are made up of different parts that interrelate to produce a product, in the case of schools, a learned student. To make the systems work properly, policies are put in place to guide all who operate within the confines of the schools. These are set up to ensure the smooth flowing of work processes. These policies are put in place by politicians, governing bodies, and education officials at education ministry head offices. The policy group set goals, formulate policies and approve budgets whereas teachers are part of programme teams that prepare programme plans and programme budgets and implement the programmes on a day-to-day basis (Caldwell, 2006). Even though the greater percentage of the education system is made up of teachers, they are rarely involved in the processes of setting up policies. Teachers are not at liberty to decide what is best for them. To discuss conditions of their service, teachers in Zimbabwe have to do this through a representative body, the Apex Council (Agere, 2018). Whether the council truly represents the teachers or whether teachers
have faith in the council, they are not at liberty to decide who they want to represent them on the negotiating table.

Policies made in higher offices for schools directly affect school processes and have an impact on teachers either positively or negatively. Because teachers are the ones who work on a day-to-day basis with learners, they should be seen participating in decision making processes on issues that concern their work, be it at school level or Ministry level. Hiatt-Michael (2008) states that collective effort is needed in schools if school goals are to be met. Involving teachers is not tantamount to giving them complete authority but rather affording them the opportunity to express their sentiments.

Classroom instructional practice involves the teaching and learning process which takes place in the classrooms between the teacher and their students. Teachers plan materials based on the curriculum and classroom activities. To encourage initiative in teachers, they should have the autonomy to extract teaching activities from the official document for their students.

The Training Manual on Teacher Professional Standards (2015) pointed out that teachers are the backbone of any education system. This shows the importance of involving them in core decision making processes at school and in curriculum planning and development.

Teacher creativity and innovation needs maintaining in schools if pass rates are to be raised. Eakle (2012) advocates that emphasis should be placed on creativity and innovation in schools and less control should be exerted on teacher and student decisions in the teaching and learning environment. This points to the fact that the school administration should not exert too much control on teachers as this impedes on their initiative and innovation which are vital elements in schools. Teachers should be given the latitude to make decisions that help make learners understand.

Over the years the Zimbabwe Education Ministry introduced a number of policies meant to improve the academic performance of primary schools in Zimbabwe. For example, there was the Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) introduced in 2015 and funded by the Global Partnership for Education. Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Performance Lag Address Programme Teacher’s Manual (n.d.) advocates that PLAP was meant to develop teachers so that they would in turn help children lagging behind. The focus was to strengthen the reading and numeracy of grades 3 to 7 learners.

Another programme introduced by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education was the Teacher Professional Standards (TPS) (2015) whose purpose was to offer direction, development and evaluation of teachers. A number of training workshops for teachers were held in 2015 and 2016. This was in recognition of the critical role teachers’ play in preparing learners for a successful and productive life, (The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Training Manual on Teacher Professional Standards, 2015). The manual further indicated the importance of teachers where it stated that the effectiveness of teachers had a powerful impact on learners and the learning achievement. Involving teachers in decision making enhances teacher commitment to the school and improves the quality of decisions the school makes (Kipkoech & Chesire, 2011; Lin, 2014).

In the infants’ section (grades 1 and 2), the Early Reading Initiative (ERI) programme was introduced in 2015. This was a programme intended to capacitate infant teachers and supervisors with skills to effectively teach Early Childhood Development learners. The Infant School Early Reading Initiative Teacher’s Module Grade 1 (2015) advocates that the programme was meant to improve the service delivery of infant teachers focusing in particular on the teaching, supervision and
Despite the various workshops meant to improve teacher performance and student pass rates, the pass rates still remained low. This could be an indication that the workshops held did not have much impact on teachers. This could have been caused by lack of involvement of teachers in coming up with programmes meant to develop them. Hiatt-Michael (2008) further states that if curricular decision-making is made far off from the learner, it is unlikely for those decisions to reflect the needs and values of the learners and teachers. The researchers therefore, sought to find out the decisional approaches employed by teachers in Harare Metropolitan primary schools on instructional practice in the midst of low academic achievements by students. The focus was on schools in Mbare/Hatfield district. Mbare/Hatfield district is one of the seven districts in Harare – Metropolitan Province, with thirty-one primary schools. Concerning Grade Seven pass rate in the district, two private schools had a 100% pass rate in 2014; basing on subjects, 2015 only one private school had a 100% pass rate (Mbare/Hatfield District: 2015 Cluster ranking). In 2016 three private schools had a 100% pass rate (Grade 7 District ranking, December 2016). One of the private schools maintained a 100% pass rate. Nzabihimana (2010) is in agreement that high performance is experienced in private schools because of conducive working environments, low teacher–pupil ratio and considerable resources.

It was the researchers’ conviction that teachers were not involved in decision making in core decisional areas in their schools. The lack of teacher participation in core decision making affect school performance. Bhatia (2002) says neither magnificent buildings nor ambitious curricular can do wonders in schools without the involvement of competent heads and their teachers. Lunenburg and Ornstein (2008) advocate that the need for teacher empowerment led many heads to share decision-making with their teachers. This is crucial for the development of schools. In the world of today where teachers have high qualifications leaving them out in decision making processes means slowing down the rate of school development because valuable ideas in teachers would not be tapped. Eakle (2012) states that teachers are a force to reckon with as they can bring strong views to the decision making table because of their intellectual expertise, expert knowledge from subject area specialisation and knowledge from classroom and other experiences. Bhatia (2002) further states that teachers are pivots in the education system and therefore, need to be involved in decision making.

**Materials and methods**

**Research Design**

The researchers employed a descriptive survey approach to collect data about the decisional approaches employed by teachers on instructional practice. Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) defined a research design as an overall plan for collecting data so as to answer research questions. The descriptive survey method was chosen because of its appropriateness in measuring the characteristics of people. It enabled researchers to collect data on the opinions, behaviours and attitudes of the sampled respondents (Creswell, 2012). A sample of 10 primary schools were systematically selected from a total of 31 primary schools in Mbare/Hatfield district. The school heads of the sampled schools formed part of the respondents. From the ten schools, five teachers were then randomly selected from each school to have a sample of fifty teachers. The use of a sample lessened the time and costs involved in studying the whole population.
Research Instruments

Three instruments were used to gather data, these were close-ended questionnaires for teachers, structured interviews for heads and documentary analysis. The use of the three methods was in an effort to increase the credibility of results.

Questionnaires are widely used and useful instruments for collecting survey data (Wilson & McLeon 1994 as cited in Cohen et al., 2007). Chiromo (2009) defined a questionnaire as an inquiry which contains systematically compiled and organised questions that are sent to population samples. Closed ended questionnaires were personally hand delivered to and collected from respondents. This was in an effort to improve the quality of responses as the researchers were able to inform the respondents of the purpose of the research, confidentiality of their responses and their anonymity.

Interviews

Interviews involve asking sampled respondents questions on a particular topic so as to get answers to research questions. It is one of the most prominent ways to understand people. Cohen et al. (2007) says interviews are flexible tools for collecting data which enables the use of multisensory channels. The researchers used structured interviews to collect data from ten school heads. The aim was to ensure that all the interviewees were asked the same questions in the same manner (O’Hara et al., 2011). The researchers asked the same questions in the same order to all heads. To be objective, the researchers avoided influencing the interviewee’s responses.

Document analysis

Documents can be a rich source of data in research. The researchers used documentary analysis to supplement data gathered through interviews and questionnaires. Documents can be found in different forms that include personal notes, letters, diaries, policy documents essays, organisational memoranda and reports, biographies, government announcements and minutes. The researchers focused on records of staff meetings and staff development programmes held and how successful they were. They were regarded as portraying a correct picture as such records of meetings and reports are kept for accountability purposes (Punch, 2009).

Validity and reliability

A pilot test was conducted where two heads and five teachers participated in the pilot test. The recommendations obtained were taken note of and the necessary adjustments were made to the structured questions. This was done to improve the reliability and validity of the questionnaires.

Data analysis and presentation

The data were presented in tables and pie charts. Analyses of questions from all instruments were done in order to reach valid conclusions. The data from document analysis were presented in tables which clearly showed the number of meetings and staff development programmes held and the results. The findings from the three instruments were used to answer the research problem.

Ethical considerations

The researchers were conscious of the ethical issues that could arise from interacting with respondents. The researchers informed the respondents that they were randomly selected and that their responses would be treated as private and confidential, and used for research purposes only. The purpose of the research study was explained to them.
Findings and discussion

The results from this study are presented and discussed from the two perspectives of teachers and school heads from Mbare/Hatfield District primary schools.

Table 1: Distribution of teachers by sex (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information in Table 1 shows that there were more females (64%) than females (36%) among the respondents. The large number of qualified female teachers in urban areas as compared to males was probably caused by female teachers who transfer to urban areas to join their husbands.

Table 2: Teachers age groups (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31 to 35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 to 40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 and above</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the respondents (84%) were 41 years of age and above. Six percent (6%) were in the 31 to 35 age group. The information indicates that the majority of the teachers were of mature age.

Table 3: Professional qualifications of teachers (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master Degree</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Degree</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forty-six percent (46%) of the teachers held first degrees as their highest professional qualifications while 14% had certificates. All the teachers were trained to teach in primary schools.

Table 4: Age group of heads (N=10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 and above</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the school heads in Table 1 were mature people with eighty percent being above fifty-one years old. In that regard, it could be assumed they were stable enough to make academically sound decisions.

Table 5: Teaching experience (N=10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 and above</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teaching experience of the majority of the school heads (60%) in Table 2 ranged between 36 to 40 years. It is an indication that they were experienced people. In that way, they were presumed to have the capacity to make informed decisions.

Table 6: Highest professional qualifications of school heads (N=10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First degree</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sixty percent (60%) of the respondents in Table 6 had Master degrees and 40% first degrees of education. The results imply that the school heads were very well qualified for the posts they held. In that regard, they were assumed to be competent decision makers on the grounds that they possessed human, technical and conceptual skills of leadership and management.
The responses given in Figure 1 indicated that in 60% of the cases it was the head who enrolled children into a particular grade. Teachers were allocated children to teach by their heads without even consulting the teachers on their standing enrollments, heads kept these in their offices. The percentage of teachers (5%) who indicated that they participated in enrolling children for their classes showed that many teachers did not participate in the enrolment of children for their class. This lack of teacher involvement in areas that concern them could lead to demotivation of teachers. If teachers were demotivated, it would lead to negative impact on performance which in turn affects pass rates.

When it came to the selection of textbooks, the majority of the respondents (60%) in Figure 2 indicated that they participated in the selection of textbooks for their grades. The teachers indicated that they worked at grade level in choosing textbooks for their learners. Though teachers selected textbooks, it was the head who had the final decision on the quantity to be bought. This is in line to findings by Muindi (2011), who said decision-making on curriculum and resource allocation was done by school heads or selected members of the administration.

Regarding the decisional approaches that the teachers used in their instructional classroom practice, Figure 3 shows that seventy-five percent (75%) of the respondents indicating that they employed the participatory approach. The teachers indicated that they involved children in their class activities. The classroom activities included among others, the choice of class monitors, group leaders, drawing up duty rosters and time keepers. Involving learners in such activities motivates the learners and they felt that they are part of the class with their teachers accommodating them. The participatory decision making approaches employed by teachers in their instructional classroom practice showed that effective implementation of the curriculum could succeed if they include the learners in the learning process. In the same vein, for effective development of schools, heads should involve teachers in making decisions that affect school progress. By so doing, heads will be empowering teachers to make decisions that concern their work.

On the choice of topics to teach, Figure 4 shows 36% of the respondents agreeing and 8% strongly agreeing with the view that they had the freedom to choose and teach topics in the order they saw fit for their learners. Thus, a total of 44% had the
freedom to choose topics from the syllabus and teach them in befitting order without heads intervening. Fifty-six percent (56%) on the other hand, indicated that they did not have that freedom. Their heads’ dictated the order of topics for teachers. Heads wanted to be in control and to know what would be happening in every class. Though teachers would employ the participatory approaches in the implementation of the instructional classroom practice, their heads did not in their running of schools.

The majority of the heads (50%) in Table 7 indicated that teachers used the participatory approach in the instructional classroom practice. Teachers involved children in the teaching and learning activities. While heads acknowledge the participative approach used by teachers in the instructional classroom practice, it was upon the heads to also implement the participatory approach when dealing with school issues.

Results in Table 8 show that heads chaired the greatest number of staff meetings held (48%) compared to those by teachers (8%). Teachers were involved to a greater extent in staff development programmes. Deputy heads (40%) and teachers (35%) led the staff development programmes compared to heads (10%). Those led by teachers centred on demonstration lessons, sports reports and feedback from workshops attended. Crowther et al. (2002) advocate that where teacher leadership flourishes heads would have supported or encouraged the programmes
and the teachers to lead. This involvement motivates teachers and thus, the success of staff development programmes was evidence of preparedness on the part of teacher presenters. Heads should make use of the skills and talents that teachers have for the benefit of schools.

Conclusions

The researchers drew five conclusions from the foregoing findings:

1. Teachers employed participatory decisional approaches in their instructional classroom practice. This was seen to be conducive for high learner performance.

2. Teachers were partly involved in decision making in their schools. They participated more in areas related to classroom instructional practice such as lesson planning. Teachers were meant for the classroom so that is where most of their efforts were directed. They also participated as groups when identifying textbooks for grades, making contributions in meetings and when giving feedback on meetings attended. The enrolment of students, the order of topics to be taught, and quantity of resources to be procured were prerogatives of school heads.

3. The incessant control of teachers by heads negatively impacted on their initiative thereby hindering high performance in schools.

4. The chairing of meetings and setting meeting agendas was done by school heads and in some instances by Deputy Heads. Teachers’ participation was in staff development programmes where it was seen that in very few cases did they chair meetings.

5. Teachers’ participation in core decisional processes was very little. Their participation was more centred on instructional classroom practices.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings and recommendations, the researchers made a four-fold recommendation. First, teachers should be ready to share their brilliant ideas if given the opportunity to do so. This happens if participatory decision making exists in schools. Involving teachers in matters concerning their schools develops teachers’ decisional approaches and motivates them to perform high.

Second, workshops on management of human capital management are needed to enlighten school heads, teachers, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education authorities and policy makers on participatory decision making approaches in the education system.

Third, a major shift in perceptions on life at schools are needed by policy makers in order for them to understand the teacher’s job. This would develop their understanding on teacher involvement in policy making and crafting staff development programmes.

Fourth, education authorities should capitalise on the knowledge and skills teachers have for the benefit of schools.

References


