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BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE TEACHER PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEES AND SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Even if the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture has put in place the legal instrument in support of teacher participation in SDCs and SDAs, it must be borne in mind there are always barriers to teacher participation in these committees. Most of these barriers might emanate from the traditional mindsets with regard to the roles and functions of supervisors and supervisees which are conventionally viewed as separate. These traditional perspectives about decision-making process might be worsened by the beauracratic structures in the civil service that Zimbabwe inherited from the former colonial dispensation that was in place prior the country's independence. It must be acknowledged that any process of re-educating people takes time and in most cases people tend to be nostalgic about the past practices for no valid reasons except fear of change.

Keywords: Barriers, effective, teacher participation, school development committee, school development association

1.   INTRODUCTION

The need for teacher participation in school development committees/associations stems from the fact that teachers are a very key stakeholder in the schools.As Robbins (2003) postulates, because of their vast knowledge in many areas; teachers would readily provide suggestions for the development of their schools at no cost. Thus, it is imperative that teacher's involvement in the decision making processes of developing their schools be made a priority.

2.   THE BARRIERS

Beach (1980) advances the following barriers to successful participation in any organizational set up. The barriers could easily be applicable to schools as well.

2.1   Authoritarian personalities/tendencies;

2.2   Pseudo participation;

2.3   Manipulation of subordinates;

2.4   The power position of supervisors;

2.5   Incompetent subordinates;

2.6   Lack of direction from top management;

2.7   Pressure for conformity;

2.8   The 'group think' and 'group think' problem.

2.1 Authoritarian personalities

This becomes a barrier if the teacher and SDC or SDA chairperson has or have authoritarian / autocratic tendencies in their operations within the school. With such people, the very idea of consultation with subordinates is anathema. Such kind of leaders would not readily accept suggestions from teachers who are beneath them in the hierarchy. Longenecker (2007) argue that committee analysis represents a kind of insurance against a decision based on faulty reasoning or personal bias. The implication of this observation is that the running of the school organization should not be moulded along the worldviews of a few individuals at the top but should actively involve teachers. Robbins (2003) also echoes the same sentiments by saying that the greater the abilities of team members the greater the likelihood that the team will develop confidence and capability to deliver on that confidence. Robbins (2003) further elaborates saying success breeds success. In participatory decision making, teams that have been carefully selected and successfully used, raise the belief about future successes and are motivated to work harder. It is of interest to the researcher to establish through this study whether or not there are still remnants of such personalities within schools in Mutare District in Manicaland Province. The presence of such head teachers in SDCs and SDAs in schools in the district under study is likely to have a negative effect on participation towards teacher-efficacy.

2.2 Pseudo-participation

This is participation without genuine sharing of decision making. This is a strategy that is used by leaders who do not believe in sharing decisions with subordinates. This situation usually occurs when a change is legally introduced that is against the beliefs of the targeted implementer. In such a scenario, the head teacher and other school committee or association members would incorporate a teacher or teachers into the committees or associations knowing very well that they would not give the teacher/teachers much latitude to exercise their decision-making capacity. If participatory decision-making is implemented in a so half-heartedly manner in schools under study, the probability of achieving teacher-efficacy is likely to be very low in the district and likely the whole province.

2.3 Manipulation of subordinates

Manipulation of subordinates is another form of pseudo-participation. The head teacher and chairperson of the SDC or SDA may try to get those at the lower levels including the teachers to support pre-conceived plans or ideas that were developed without the subordinate's input. Such practices do not augur well with the spirit of participatory decision making and are not likely to contribute towards teacher-efficacy. The reason why this attitude is counter-productive, teachers who find themselves in this position may quickly see through the pretense. They are likely to resent whatever decisions have been made. Due to the feeling that they are or have been used, the teacher(s) are not likely to be motivated to ensure successful implementation of the plan. It is very important for a participant to identify himself or herself with a plan, project or procedure because it is through ownership that one is motivated towards attaining a logical conclusion. Longenecker (1977) observed the negative effect of manipulating subordinates by saying that a committee should be more than a rubber stamp. Members should be allowed to speak out on issues under consideration and committees and associations should be used to pull together the different capabilities and knowledge of its members. In essence participatory decision-making in school development should be effectively used as a capacity building strategy to ensure sustainable growth development of schools.

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2.4 The social loafing problem

Domination of participatory decision-making sessions by a strong personality can lead to another serious problem as noted by Clegg et al (2008). Social loafing is an attitude usually adopted by a member or members who feel and resent the patronizing attitude of the dominating person or group. The offended group exerts less effort in the process because they feel less accountable. There will be no feeling of ownership to whatever decisions that might come out of the process. Social loafing among members participating in decision-making can be addressed by having clear roles, responsibilities and accountability. In other words, team effort should be evaluated concurrently with individual performance.

2.5 The problem of "stand taking"

In group decision-making, participants may notice that a more vocal member or group may make clear their personal preferences. This situation is referred to as "stand taking (Donnelly et al, 1995). This is not a healthy approach to participatory decision-making because most problems have more than one solution. If a member or sub-group takes a stand or position on an issue and feels that a defeat means loss of face, the member becomes more concerned with winning rather than finding the best group decision. The essence of rationality in decision-making is therefore thrown to the wind.

2.6 The power position of supervisors

Some head teachers, SDC or SDA chairpersons are too conscious and very protective of their positions of power. This could be a threat to any changes of opening up decision making process to cater for participation by teachers. The situation can be worsened if most of the subordinates are timid and feel threatened by the superior. Participatory decision-making is also thwarted if the subordinates sense that the leaders are not fully receptive to their true feelings and suggestions, which is usually the case. Teachers should never, as participants in the decision-making process, operate under the 'thumb(s)' of the headmaster and chairperson of the SDC or SDA.

Donnelly et al (1995) acknowledges this problem by saying that a dominating individual takes over because of strong personality, organisational position and reputation or status. These characteristics can inhibit group discussion; reduce creativity among other members from making positive contributions. Very few teachers would like to be caught on the wrong side of a head teacher who has a reputation of dealing ruthlessly against opposing views.

In some cases, the position power of head teachers might make them control information, right of access and right to organize. Such a situation does not facilitate participative decision-making in schools and therefore is a barrier to teacher efficacy. The reason is an individual's reaction to a comment or suggestion might provide the key to action by the group. Such leaders sometimes frustrate the whole purpose of participatory decision-making by engaging in Machiavellian tactics of subtly or overtly rewarding or penalizing subordinates in various ways. Schools that operate within such an environment are not likely to be conducive to participatory decision-making; therefore, the aim of achieving teacher-efficacy would remain elusive.

2.7 Incompetent subordinates

Gabriel (2003) asserts that some decisions in schools might fail to take off or fail at the end of the activity simply because the participants might be incompetent. If the participants do not have the required knowledge or technical skills, it means that they need to be staff developed or trained so as to equip them with the competence they require. It is for example pointless to assign a teacher who does not have the necessary information to be in charge of a poultry or piggery project for the school because the project would not prosper. It would become a non-profitable venture for the school instead of yielding the expected financial rewards. It then ceases to be an investment as per the original plan. It is better to select a teacher who has the necessary skills or if not available, to train the ones who are interested, equip them with the skills so that at the end, they are competent enough to achieve the objectives of the project. Andrews (2009) supports this view by emphasizing that training is important for individual growth, improvement and knowledge power. People who are trained experience social acceptability, contribute and acquire improved status. Andrews (2009) sums up saying that human capital is expensive and scarce, therefore existing staff should be made productive. The same is true of schools as organizations.

It is not economically sustainable for school development committees and school development associations to go out of the school looking for people with necessary skills each time they decide to carry out a certain project or activity.

2.8 Lack of direction from top management

Gabriel (2003) also identifies lack of direction from the top management as another reason for the failure of certain organisational decisions. When SDCs and SDAs engage teachers to participate in certain school activities, the head teacher and members of the SDCs or SDAs should not withdraw their own participation in return. In most cases they still need to give direction if this is necessary or to check to see if the activity is being carried out as per plan. There are chances that sometimes the participating teachers might do it half-heartedly so that at the end, the objectives are not fully achieved.

2.9 The pressure to conform to common beliefs

Last but not least important is the pressure that might be exerted on the participants by the superiors. When a school as an organization is not readily receptive to change, the dominant group, which might be within the SDC or SDA members would cling tenaciously to their common beliefs. These common beliefs might include decision making processes. Some members might not wish to embarrass other key members of the committee or association. To save face for all participants, the group that feels like opposing might just accept a conclusion or solution to a particular problem. This scenario is bound to influence the quality of decisions made and who should make particular decisions. There is bound to be some sort of rigidity as a way of preserving decisions which are most valued by the dominant group. Usually this pressure for conformity tends to emerge and develop in order to protect what the superiors might regard as the stability and security of the school. Donnelly et al (1995) however argue that conformity is optimal when it results in cooperation, efficiency and accomplishment of goals. This means that conformity could contribute towards diluting unnecessary conflict within group members. Donnelly et al (1995) also shares the view that if group pressure is excessive it interferes with goal achievement thus impeding teacher-efficacy through the participatory approach. Donnelly et al (1995: 360) advance some of the factors that may also contribute towards conformity among group members. The nature of the task given to participants can also contribute. A teacher who finds himself or herself faced with a difficulty, unfamiliar and ambiguous task is more likely to conform to the group norm. Another factor is that there is tendency to conform if the consequence of deviance is social isolation. Every person wants to belong somewhere and teachers are no exception to this need. They would do their best to remain in good books with the significant others rather than being an isolate or rejectee. Donnelly et al (1995) also argues that the more intelligent a person is the less likely that person is to conform to group norms. As discussed earlier in this literature review, intelligence was cited as an important attribute in members who participate in group decision making.

2.10   The 'group think' and 'group shift' problems

These problems are strongly linked to conformity in group decisions. In a 'group think' situation, group members are so absorbed in seeking concurrence that the norm for consensus overrides the realistic appraisal of alternative course of action (Robbins: 2003). This situation is said to have an effect on an individual's mental efficacy, reality testing and moral judgement. Robbins (2003) notes that where there is 'group think' there is incomplete assessment of the problem, poor information search, selective bias in processing information and failure to reappraise initially rejected alternatives.

In the 'group-shift case, some group members might shift positions regarding a problem under discussion. In some cases the conservatives may become more cautious and resist the proposed change more vigorously. The more aggressive members may on the other hand take on even more risk. 'Group-shift' is also a form of 'group-think.' Notwithstanding the barriers discussed above, there are also some motivational strategies that may be used to surmount them.

3.   CONCLUSION

The paper has discussed the various barriers that inhibit effective participation of teachers in SDAs/SDCs in Zimbabwean schools. These include authoritarian personalities, manipulation of subordinates, the social loafing problem, the problem of stand taking, the power position of supervisors as well as incompetent supervisors among others. If these barriers are not curtailed they pose serious threats to teacher participation in the business of SDAs/SDCs and yet teachers play a very critical role in contributing to school development.

GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH
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