

Students' Participation in Decision Making and its Implications for Educational Leadership

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Abstract

The ability of any school principal to bring about positive changes in his or her school depends, in part, on the extent to which those who will be affected by decisions taken in his or her school are involved in the process. In line with the above, this paper is a survey carried out in Awka Education Zone of Anambra State, Nigeria and the focus is on how students can be integrated in decision-making in schools. Four research questions guided the study. All the secondary school principals and students in the zone formed the population of the study. Sample was selected through stratified random sampling and a 20 – item researcher-developed instrument was used to collect the data. Mean Ratings were used to answer the research questions. The findings indicated that students were rarely allowed to participate in decision making. Both principals and students perceived that students' participation in decision making will facilitate supervision of teachers' attendance to classes and as well, enhance quality educational leadership. Relevant recommendations were also made based on the findings. The purpose of study therefore was to investigate students' participation in decision making as a strategy for effective educational leadership in secondary schools in Nigeria. The significance of the study therefore lies in the contributions which the study will make in helping the leadership of secondary schools understand the importance of, and the areas the students could be involved in making decisions in schools since students are the main reasons for school policies activities. There is no doubt that the study will impact positively on the ability of school principals to make effective bottom up, participative, consultative, team and task oriented decisions in their schools.

Keywords: students participation; decision making; educational leadership; secondary education; instructional programme

INTRODUCTION

The new dimensions in educational system lay more emphasis on practical and technical subjects; training for self-reliance and attitudinal change towards appreciation of the dignity of manual labour (Sifuna, 1990). Coupled with the changes in the education system, is a changing society where for example, there are more enlightened students due to technological and social changes (Barth, 1990; Fullan, 1999). Fullan (2003) acknowledges that the context of school environment has changed tremendously such that the styles should change too. Indeed in Nigeria there are surplus students in secondary schools, colleges and universities. The changes in the educational system call for rethinking, reformulating and restructuring of educational policies both at national and school levels. At school level, the changes in education are a challenge to head-teachers and other educational administrators who might be harboring the traditional approaches to leadership which according to Jones (1985) are autocratic and bureaucratic in nature. For effective decision making in schools, those in authority will not be expected to act like technocrats in different areas of school leadership. Rather, they are expected

to display modern leadership styles, which are contrary to the traditional leadership styles. 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 (Bell, 1992). Due to the growing appreciation of the need for valid, knowledgeable inputs in decision making from various organization levels, the need for involving stakeholders in decision-making is paramount (Wekesa, 1987). Among other groups, very important groups to involve in making decisions in schools are students who are the main reasons for school policies activities. Further, the decisions made in schools affect them and as students, they are better suited to make the correct decisions having in mind what is required of them as students.

Different writers have argued in favour of participatory decision-making. Bachelor (1980), Armstrong (1984), Dwivedi (1988) and Maritim (1988), observe that involving subordinates in decision making improves the quality of the decision and the effectiveness of the organization which leads to achievement of the organizational goals.

Tyree (1969) arguing in support of students involvement in decision making says: "if we accept the tenet that in a democracy those who are affected by decisions should participate in making decisions, the demands of the professional staff form a significant part in the decision making process in the School system... The days of the head teachers' paternalism are fast coming to an end and in a democracy the school, like government, is of the people and by the people (p.35)."

Halliday (1993) attributes lack of self-esteem and commitment partly to lack of participatory management styles, which he claims are poorly understood or applied in Africa. Nigerian students are no exception in this situation because they are at the end of the educational pipeline. They seem to be mostly recipients of decisions and instructions to be implemented at school level of decisions made either at National, state or local government levels (Maranga, 1993). At the school, the head teacher is placed in a position of responsibility and authority where all major decisions; curriculum and instruction, management of student discipline, school organization and staff personnel matters, financial matters, school and community relations among others are centered on his/her office. This makes him/her wield a lot of power in line with the view that, 'I have the responsibility I must have the power' (Musgrove, 1971). To assist the head teacher in decision making and policy formulation and implementation is the Board of Governors, which deliberates on important decisions like hiring of support staff and budgeting for the school. This kind of structure leaves out the inputs of the recipients of the school policies, the students, in making decisions.

Concept of Decision-Making

Decision making is a process of making a choice from a number of alternatives to achieve a desired result (Eisenfuhr, 2011). This definition has three key elements. First, decision making involves making a choice from a number of options. Second, decision making is a process that involves more than simply a final choice from among alternatives.

Finally, the "desired result" mentioned in the definition involves a purpose or target resulting from the mental activity that the decision maker engages in to each a final decision.

In a similar vein, March (2010), defines decision making as administration. This definition suggests the importance of decision making in the administration of every human organization. From the idea expressed above, one can understand decision making as an important administrative process and fundamentally as a people process.

In the same vein, Aminu (2006) offers what he regarded as a more practical definition of decision making. He defines it as the process of selecting from several choices, products or ideas, and taking action. This definition stems from his belief that when people make decisions, they actually use their whole system, not just their thinking abilities.

Based on the definitions given above, the researchers therefore define decisions making as the analysis of a finite set of alternatives described in terms of some evaluation criteria. These criteria may be benefit or cost in nature. Then the problem might be to rank these alternatives in terms of how alternative they are to the decision maker when all the criteria are considered simultaneously. Equally, the researchers also conceptualize decision making as the act of determining a course of action following a more or less deliberate consideration of often competing alternatives. The above definition is based on the researchers' belief that decision making is an administrative function that pervades the entire task of the administrator from his definition of goals through the definition of tasks and activities to the evaluation and control of the performed activities. All these boil to the point that, in education, like all other organizations, decision making usually involves choice and entails cost.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Nigerians who have a stake in education expect schools to be effective and successful in a bid to achieve the educational goals. To effectively run a school, the head teacher is central in setting the tone of the school. The head-teacher employs management style, which ensures effective teaching and learning by teachers and children respectively. One of the hailed leadership styles is participatory leadership. In this style, the subordinates have a stake in decision-making; there is good communication and delegation of responsibility and authority.

Bloomer (1991) observes that centralized machinery, which plans, organizes, directs, supervises and evaluates its operations, is ineffective. However, Nigeria's educational machinery is highly centralized both at the national and school level. At the school level, Griffin (1994) suggests that any school head that wants to succeed must avoid falling victim to the sheep syndrome in which students are seen as a faceless herd to be led, directed and instructed without any creativity and knowledge to contribute to the success of the school. Wanjiku (1985) and Mwangi (1986) complain that head-teachers do not involve students in running their schools. Yet, Dimmock (1985) notes that effective schools include their students in taking important decisions that can affect the students. But, are these students involved in decision making to the level of their satisfaction in different school issues in Nigeria?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was based on human relations and the human resources models of management. These models form the dual-model theory advanced by Miles (1975). According to Miles (1975), managers subscribe to two of the three management models. The three management models are: the traditional model, the human relations model and the human resources model. The traditional model emphasizes controlling and directing. The underlying assumption is that members of the enterprise comply if tasks and procedures are specified and members are properly trained and paid (Cascio, 1989). The human relations model is modified and gives attention to social and egoistic needs. It recognizes the fact that fair treatment and pay are not enough. Managers here emphasize controlling although preventive steps are also taken to obtain the desired contribution of organizational members. The human resources model sees the manager as a developer and facilitator to help subordinates achieve performance aims. There is a great deal of participation in goal setting. Further, if problems occur, several factors rather than a single cause are advanced as potential reasons for the difficulties. Although self-direction and self-control are important to this model, the need for other control is also recognized. Extensive research by Miles (1975) led to the conclusion that managers actually subscribe to two models: one for subordinates and the other for themselves hence the adoption of the human relations and human resources models. The following is a summarized comparison of the human relations and human resources models on attitudes towards people, amount of participation and expectations as advanced by Miles (1975) cited by Sergiovanni and Carver (1980) and Cascio (1989).

Attitude Towards People

The human relations model accepts the fact that people share a common set of needs: to belong, to be liked and to be respected while the human resources model professes that people not only share the needs to belong and be respected, they also desire to contribute effectively and creatively to the accomplishment of worthwhile organizational objectives.

Secondly, people want to feel useful to their organization according to the human relations model. The human resources model has it that people not only feel useful to their organizations, but they are capable of exercising far more initiative, responsibility, and creativity than their present jobs, or work circumstances require or allow. According to the human relations model people tend to co-operate willingly and comply with goals if the needs to belong and liked are fulfilled. The human resources model professes that the capabilities to contribute to the achievement of the objectives represent untapped resources, which are presently being wasted.

Kind and Amount of Participation

According to the human relations model, the task of the school executive is to make subordinates know that they are useful and important members of the team; to explain his/her decisions and to discuss subordinates' objections to his/her plans. On routine matters, he/she encourages his/her subordinates in planning and in decision making.

The human resources model on the other hand advances the view that the executive's basic task in reference to subordinates is to create an environment in which subordinates can contribute their full range of talents to the accomplishment of the school goals. He/he allows and encourages subordinates to participate in important as well as routine decisions and he/she works to expand the areas where subordinates exercise self-direction and self control as they develop and demonstrate the greater insight and ability.

Research Questions

The following research questions were stated to guide the study:

1. To what extent do students participate in taking decisions on instructional programmes?
2. To what extent do students participate in taking decision on school human resources?
3. To what extent do students participate in taking decision on school infrastructural facilities?
4. How do principals and students perceive students participation in decision making?

METHOD

This study is a descriptive survey carried out in Awka Education Zone of Anambra State, Nigeria. The zone is one of the six education zones in the state. The population comprised 5545 respondents made up of 64 principals and 5481 students in public secondary schools in the area of study. The sample of the study comprised all the 64 principals and 549 students. The students' population was selected through stratified random sampling technique. The students' population was stratified based on the five local government areas that make up the zone and 10 percent of the students' population was drawn from each local government.

The instrument for data collection was a researcher-developed questionnaire. It has two parts. Part A was on the background information of the respondents while part B contained the questionnaire items organized into four sections. The instrument was duly validated by experts and the Pearson Product Movement statistic was used to determine its reliability. The reliability index of 0.84 was obtained and this high reliability index made the instrument

adequate for the study. Direct approach was used in data collection with the help of five research assistants – of one from each L.G.A. Mean was used to answer the research questions.

RESULTS

Table 1: Students’ Participation in Decision Making on Instructional Programme

S/N	Aspects of Instructional Programme	Mean (x)	Remarks
1	Students’ involvement in curriculum decisions such as planning the subject to be studied	1.82	Very Low
2	Students’ involvement in developing academic objectives of the school	2.40	Very Low
3	Consultations with students before introducing new subjects	1.86	Very Low
4	Discussion of academic objectives in a forum with students	2.34	Very Low
5	Initiation of instructional programmes together with students	2.21	Very Low

The results in table 1 indicate that students are not adequately involved in instructional programme decision. Their level of participation is still very low.

Table 2: Students’ Participation in taking Decision on School Human Resources

S/N	Aspects of Human Resources	Mean (x)	Remarks
6	Students’ involvement in making school rules and regulations.	2.30	Very Low
7	Students’ participation in arriving at disciplinary measures mated to erring students.	2.50	High
8	Senior students’ participation in the orientation and induction of new students.	2.60	High
9	Students’ involvement in negotiation in order to ensure school discipline.	1.88	Very Low
10	Students’ involvement in the provision of students’ welfare.	2.01	Very Low

The results in table 2 show that students’ participation in making decision on human resources is still not very high. They only participate high in arriving at disciplinary measures mated to erring students as well as students’ orientation and induction.

The results in table 3 indicate that students do not participate in decision making on school infrastructural facilities. Their level of participation as shown the ratings of 11 to 15 are very low.

Table 3: Students Participate in taking Decision on School Infrastructural Facilities

S/N	Aspects of Infrastructural Facilities	Mean (x)	Remarks
11	Students’ participation in taking decision of the school facilities	2.04	Very Low
12	Students’ participation in taking decision on the maintenance of classroom furniture.	1.82	Very Low
13	Students’ participation in taking decision on the maintenance of laboratory equipment.	1.34	Very Low
14	Students’ participation in taking decision on how to rehabilitate dilapidated school building.	1.08	Very Low
15	Students’ participation in taking decision on the allocation of school facilities.	1.96	Very Low

Table 4: Principals’ and Students’ Perception on Students’ Participation in Decision Making

S/N	Perceptions on Students’ Participation in Decision Making	Principals		Students	
		(x)	Rmks.	(x)	Rmks.
16	Students’ participation in decision making will facilitate supervision of teachers’ attendance to class.	2.52	Agree	2.74	Agree
17	Students’ participation in decision making will enhance quality educational leadership.	2.67	Agree	2.80	Agree
18	Students’ participation in decision making will guarantee staff and students’ commitment to school goals.	2.78	Agree	2.70	Agree
19	Students’ participation in decision making will lead to collective responsibility in ensuring school progress.	2.60	Agree	2.72	Agree
20	Students’ participation in decision making can lead to collaborative school leadership in which human efforts are recognized and rewarded.	2.88	Agree	2.90	Agree

The mean ratings of items 16 to 20 indicate the perception of both principals and students on students’ participation on decision making. Their mean ratings indicate the gains of students’ participation in decision making.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on the data analysis as presented in this study, the following summary of major findings is made:

1. There is low level of students' participation in instructional programme decision making.
2. Students' participation in human resources decision making is very low.
3. There is low level of students' participation in decision making on schools' infrastructural facilities.
4. Students' participation in decision making facilities supervision, enhances quality educational leadership, ensures commitment to school goals, leads to collective responsibility and collaborative school leadership.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that students' participation in decision-making in schools particularly in the areas of instructional programme, human resources and infrastructural facilities is still very low in Awka Education Zone in particular and Nigeria at large. The above findings were supported by Maritim (1988) who found that students are not fully involved in taking decisions on important matters in school. At the local scene, Aminu (2006) found that principals do not adequately involve students in decision making in schools.

The gains of students' participation in decision making at the school level were also discovered. Their involvement can facilitate instructional supervision; ensures commitment to school goals and ensure quality educational leadership. Earlier studies by March (2010) indicated that students' participation in decision making in schools resulted to teachers' and students high performance in school and commitment to school goals and vision.

The findings of this study have a lot of implications for educational leadership. For quality education leadership to be enthroned in Nigeria and as well, in any other country, students' participation in decision-making need to be encouraged. The students' contribution can act as a guide in taking final decisions on matters that affect students' well being in school.

The study has a number of limitations. The study was carried out in secondary schools and as a result, the findings may not be applied to tertiary institutions. Again, since only public schools were used, the findings may not apply to private schools because decision-making processes in both public and private schools are not the same. The above limitations do not invalidate the study.

CONCLUSION

The major conclusion of this study is that students' participation in taking decision at the school level in Awka Education Zone in particular and Nigeria at large is still very low. It is also concluded here that

effective students' participation in decision-making is very important in improving educational leadership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the eight of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Students should be actively involved in taking decision on instructional programme.
2. Principals are to encourage effective students' participation in taking decision on school human resources especially in matters that affect the students.
3. Students' should participate in taking decision on the schools' infrastructural facilities.
4. Active students' participation in decision making should be encouraged in schools to guarantee or promote quality educational leadership.

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