

# Teacher Involvement in School Decision Making

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## Abstract

Owing to the global trend of educational reforms, teachers' new empowered roles in school had been discussed and advocated. As a review paper, the issues of decentralization will be raised at the outset as the theoretical perspectives for teacher empowerment, and subsequently teacher empowerment, benefits of teacher involvement, and barriers to decision making would be explored in this paper hence. This reviews of teachers' significant parts in school decision making intended to sustain the research on diverse participation in school administration.

**Keywords:** Teacher involvement, Teacher empowerment, School decision making, Local school management, School administration

## **Introduction**

The role of a teacher was to be a classroom manager responsible for student academic performance and daily behavior within the classroom. School matters outside classroom like policy planning and decisions making traditionally were not related to teachers but to school administrators like principals. However, owing to the global trend of educational reforms like school restructuring in the US, teachers' new empowered roles in school had been discussed and advocated (Cheung & Kan, 2009; Gaziel, 2009; Lucey & Hill-Clarke, 2008; Maeroff, 1988). As Hixson (1990) had maintained, the main projects of American school educational reforms included local school management and teacher empowerment programs. Local school management, also called shared decision making, was popularly considered to be the involvement of teachers in the processes of school-level decision making (David, 1993; Weiss, 1993). With regard to teacher empowerment, teachers' professional knowledge might have a great influence upon many an aspect of schools, including student learning outcome, effects of classroom management, and participation in school decision making. Aside from Hixson(1990), some scholars who do researches on school restructuring also supported the claim of teachers' involvement in the process of decision making pertaining to school critical policies or projects (Caldwell, 2004; Hansson & Gamage, 2008). Therefore, because of the significance of teacher involvement, in this paper, the issues of decentralization will be raised at the outset as the theoretical perspectives for teacher empowerment, and subsequently teacher empowerment, benefits of teacher involvement, and barriers to decision making would be explored hence.

## **Decentralization**

Decentralization in education referred to the process of devolving authority and responsibility pertinent to the allocation of various resources transferred from central government or school district to local schools (Zajda & Gamage, 2009). To be specific, decentralization could be defined based on the degrees of transfers of authority. As Rondinelli, McCullough, & Johnson (1989) had maintained, decentralization might involve deconcentration, delegation, and devolution (as cited in Zajda & Gamage, 2009). These three elements of decentralization were all concerned with the shifting of authority for decision making to lower levels whether they were represented in general or specific manners. Furthermore, associated with education, Weiler's (1993) theory of decentralization could be also divided into three models, redistributive, effectiveness, learning cultures included (as cited in Zajda & Gamage, 2009). The model of redistributive signified the relocation of the top-down hierarchal distribution of authority, its effectiveness was concerned with monetary resources and cost effectiveness, and its learning cultures designated the local need regarding cultural diversity and curricula adaptability. From the two researches on decentralization, apparently the transfer of authority for decision making about resources from higher level to lower level in a system was inevitable. As for local school management, decentralization could refer to the fact that a local school was able to have right to allocate resources transferred from higher education institutions, and it was of decisive importance that the decentralization of authority to the site-level without taking teacher empowerment into consideration would be insufficient to improve school performance (Cheung & Cheng, 2002). Besides, Leiberman & Lynne (1990)

also pointed out that though there was no single measure designed to give a clear definition of teacher empowerment, at least it should be considered a central fixture in school-based change. As for decentralization in education, teacher empowerment could thus been thought of as a fundamental component in the process of authority shift.

### **Teachers empowered to make decisions**

The decision making of school staffing, curriculum, or resource allocation had been conventionally made by school principals or members of administrative managerial teams. Teachers were usually excluded by school administrators in the process of decision making and not endowed with the obligation to implement school policies. Merely informed of the results of decisions made, teachers might not clearly understand why or how those decisions were made. As they seldom had opportunities to be involved in these crucial matters, their isolation within classroom might bring about the alienation or misunderstanding between them and school. With the advent of teacher empowerment, teachers were expected to be given authority to be the ones having access to decision making about school significant matters. Schools would encourage teachers to participate in school activities outside the classroom, such as textbook selection, curriculum development, learning assessment, student placement, personnel staffing, or professional development (Feir, 1985).

Teacher empowerment could include extrinsic power and intrinsic power (Wilson & Coolican, 1996). The extrinsic power concerned with the phenomenon that teachers had the status of affirmation, the knowledge they need, and the process of participatory decision making. The intrinsic power was involved with teachers' attitude and confidence in displaying their capacity of mastering their own work, and the representation of intrinsic power counts on teachers' own self-determination and sense of self-efficacy a lot. In this regard, the role of a teacher had been transformed into an active participant from a passive practitioner by the practice of teacher empowerment. In addition, Caldwell and Spinks' (1992) classification of teacher empowerment was similar to Wilson and Coolican's (1996). According to Caldwell & Spinks (1992), teachers' empowerment derived from two sources, authority and expertise. Authority meant the authority of school councils or boards shared with teachers while expertise dealt with teachers' acquisition of professional knowledge and skill about decision making. Wilson & Coolican's (1996) extrinsic power was related to Caldwell and Spinks' (1992) offer of authority to be involved and their intrinsic power was concerned with the possession of expertise to cope with decision making.

Lightfoot (1986) had further given teacher empowerment a clear definition that it was the power or opportunity that teachers ought to have, sensed by teachers themselves, and endorsed by school stakeholders, such as administrators, teachers, students, or parents. Obviously, teachers not only needed to recognize the necessity that they should possess the power to share the right of decision making but had to affirmed and assisted by those school interest groups who originally controlled the opportunity of policy making and resource allocation as well. It was not until decision making was given to teachers exactly from the hands of interest groups that teachers were capable of being authentically empowered. Moreover, teacher empowerment linked with local school management had been regarded as

a complicated construct, including six dimensions, decision making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy, impact (Short, 1994; Short, Greer, & Melvin, 1994). Decision making was listed in the first of the six dimensions on the ground of the very necessity of teachers' involvement in school decision making. As teachers were given opportunities to participate, the growth of related professional knowledge was required and the self-efficacy would be reinforced hence. Teachers were gradually affirmed as skilled experts who mastered in decision making, which might have direct impact on student learning outcomes (Gaziel, 2009; Rinehart, Short, & Johnson, 1997; Wall & Rinehart, 1998).

Whether the implementation of teacher empowerment was successful or not relied much upon the attitudes and actions of school leaders. In case a principal was involved in the practice of local school management, he or she might adopt strategies for teacher empowerment in order to decentralize power to teachers and to encourage them to participate in decision making, contributing to the enhancement of school performance and effectiveness (Cheung & Cheng, 2002). Eric Wan (2005) had proposed a strategy to implement teacher empowerment for school principals in an Asian school context. The strategy proposed was named "strategic mix," referring to the combination of several levels within a school in accordance with some models of school effectiveness. The three interrelated levels were "teacher level," "administrator level," and "school level," each of which contained human factors and operational factors. Teacher level was composed of psychological empowerment, motivations, professionalization, trust (human factor), and autonomy and information sharing (operational factor). As for administrator level, there were visionary leadership, empowering mentality, emotional leadership, trust (human factor), and decentralization, information sharing, collaboration (operational factor). In the regard of school level, it consisted of school culture (human factor), and changes in structures and processes and organizational learning (operational factor). It was a comprehensive strategy regarding teacher empowerment to direct a school leader to empower his or her teachers to have access to school matters. However, it was worth noticing that trust attributed to human factor, and information sharing attributed to operational factor were of great importance for their repeated appearances in the former two levels, demonstrating in case school leaders felt like empowering their teachers, they must have mutual trust with each other and share important information with unselfishness in the meanwhile.

### **Benefits of Teachers' involvement in decision making**

There had been several benefits of teachers empowered to be involved in the school decision making. First of all, staff in an organization empowered for the development of self-managing teams might draw forth work commitment and initiative of them (Cheung & Cheng, 2002). Likewise, teachers at school empowered could contribute to the increase of teachers' commitment to schools. According to some researches, the strong positive correlation between teacher empowerment and teacher commitment had been found (Caldwell, 2004; Cheung & Cheng, 2002; Gaziel, 2009; Somech & Bogler, 2002; Wan, 2005; Zajda, 2006). Teachers' participation in decision making would encourage them to understand how these were planned and designed. The involvement might promote teachers' commitment to these school policies and increase their motivation to implement them as well

(Smylie & Tuermer, 1992). This commitment derived mainly from teachers' responsibility for those decisions for their participation as decision makers. The decisions made by teachers could be easier implemented by them than before in that they were under obligation to enforce them in a satisfactory way. To take Asian countries for an example, teacher empowerment affected by the Confucian philosophy would cause productivity and high quality of teaching maintained by commitment to school (Wan, 2005). Owing to the principle of loyalty in the Confucian philosophy, Asian teachers empowered would be responsible for the decisions made by them and commit themselves to the completeness of them.

Second, teacher participation in decision making presented crucial information closest to the sources of problems of schooling, improving the quality of decisions effectively (Johnson & Boles, 1994). Traditionally, teachers passively accepted the decisions made by those administrators, obliged to implement the policies or projects which they did not participate in at all. These decisions might be questioned for they had no access to the classroom realities or even not practicable. Teachers were the very ones who taught and instructed students in the classroom and who were responsible for their learning directly. They could realize the authentic need of students' learning within the classroom instead of those administrators outside it. Thus it was of vital importance for a school leader to empower teachers to support with each others to acquire knowledge and skills to meet the needs of student learning, which would improve the quality of decision making (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992).

Third, from the perspective of critical theory, supposing teachers were more empowered, they would hold the more important status quo (Richardson & Placier, 2001). Teachers were traditionally viewed as the silenced in the process of decision making due to their less chances to be involved in crucial school matters. Voiceless as teacher were always seen, it was not true that teachers had no voices for the operation and management of their own schools. Thus it would be the oppression of the hierarchal administrative school system that kept all of teachers who were important members of school voiceless (Freire, 2000; Giroux & McLaren, 1994). In case schools became more democratic organizations by encouraging teachers' participation in decision making in the manner of school restructuring, school then would transformed into the sites for reconstructing society, further resulting in the equity of society eventually (Richardson & Placier, 2001).

As noted previously, there would be three strengths of teachers' involvement in school decision making, including the enhancement of teacher commitment, the improvement of quality of decision making, and the contribution to the school restructuring. These three strengths revealed the three levels of changes toward teachers, decisions, and schools. As to the teacher level, the involvement could help them be engaged more in school matters. As for the decision level, the participation of teachers would effectively monitor which and how school decisions should be made. As to the school level, teachers' roles as active participants were able to lead to the successful restructuring of schools.

### **Barriers to teachers' decision-making**

In addition to those benefits, there were likely to be two barriers to teachers' decision making as well. At the outset, the first barrier was teachers' capacity for their involvement. According

to Lawler's (1991) organization theory of high-involvement management, teachers needed to be empowered by four basic elements, comprised of power, knowledge, information, and reward (Johnson & Boles, 1994). It was necessary for a teacher to have all of the four critical elements as participating in decision making concerning school management. Providing a school principal just provided authority and time for teachers to participate in the meeting, there was no guarantee that teachers were able to acquire enough knowledge and information how to work together (Wehlage, Smith, & Lipman, 1992). In other words, teachers empowered needed to understand both the knowledge with regard to decentralized school governance and the information about the operation and outcome of school policies (Johnson & Boles, 1994). This revealed the need for teachers' training about their participation in school budget, curriculum, and staffing decisions (White, 1992).

Second, as empowered the authority of decision making, teachers had to change their beliefs and attitudes toward their roles outside the classroom and learnt to how to think in new ways regarding what was possible (Cambone, Weiss, & Wyeth, 1992). Sometimes it was not easy for teachers to adapt themselves to the new strange circumstance which they were not familiar with at all. Some may felt that they did not prepare well for the acceptance of the new roles to join in the groups of making decisions. Others might complain that schools would increase their workload by means of their involvement in decision making instead of incorporating it into their work (Zeichner, 1991). These two misunderstandings reflected the lack of the appropriate belief and attitude toward involvement in teachers' mind, which needed the retraining and in-service activities for teachers to construct new attitudes and roles fundamental to the new style of decision-making (Chapman, 1990)

Indeed there were still other limitations to teachers' decision making, such as the school political pressure, the lack of time, the vagueness of shared decision making models, the discord between teachers and administrators, (McClure, Woo, Lugg, Ree, & Ross, 1998; Spencer, 2001; White, 1992). Nevertheless, the two barriers mentioned above represented the very readiness of teachers as the authority of decision making was transferred to them. With the capacity to deal with decisions, teachers had to be informed enough by means of the offer of professional knowledge and information. As for the self-efficacy regarding decision making, it was essential for teachers to have confidence in performing the new roles well.

## **Conclusion**

It had been a global trend to invite teachers to join in school boards or to participate in influential meetings through the movement of school restructuring. It was believed that teachers would gradually have more input, influence, and autonomy to make school decisions as school administrators (White, 1992). However, even though the globalization of teacher empowerment, it must be noticed that the cultural diversity might had a great impact on teacher empowerment. As Davison & Martinsons (2002) had argued, we had to take teacher empowerment into consideration in terms of its suitability to a specific cultural context, whereby it could authentically be put into practice rather than be a propaganda slogan in the educational reform.

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