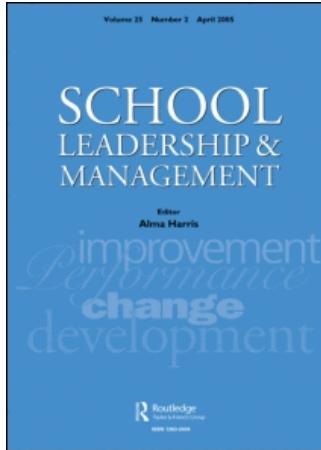


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Commonalities Between Perception and Practice in Models of School Decision-making in Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT *Collegial models of education management are becoming part of the dominant discourse in the literature relating to the theory of the management of educational institutions. There are, however, factors of pragmatism and ideology which question whether such collegiality is indeed attainable. This article examines issues of participation of heads of departments in whole-school decision-making processes and looks at whether such participation represents true empowerment. Through a series of structured interviews with heads of department and headteachers, evidence of three models of decision-making in secondary schools was established, together with commonalities and differences between perceptions of middle and senior managers as to the possibilities for empowerment inherent in each model. The evidence from the research suggests that while collegiality may offer many persuasive benefits, it is, in reality, difficult to attain to its fullest.*

Introduction

The increasingly broad range of national legislation and local policies and products of the dominant educational reform movements in both the UK and the USA, seem to reinforce a control orientation in school managers. Most of these reforms can be linked to a rational concept of leadership and bureaucratic models which foster tighter control through standardisation and accountability measures, for example, in teacher evaluation, curriculum and teaching methods (Wise 1988). Within this framework school headteachers and principals are seen as ‘administrators’, ‘technicians’, ‘implementers of programmes and policies’ and ‘enforcers of rules, regulations, mandates and procedures defined by external agents’ (Wise 1988).

Headteachers may construct decision-making processes that seem on the surface to be participatory in order to gain greater acceptance of decisions and greater teacher satisfaction. However, they may be reluctant to extend genuine influence to teachers, assuming that they do not have the expertise to make valuable contributions, or because they do not trust them to make decisions which are in the best interest of the school. Research suggests that this is very often the case (Bacharach *et al.* 1986).

Research on secondary school Senior Management Teams (SMT), a management strategy which has been established for about two decades, suggests that the rhetoric of power sharing, extensive delegation, collaboration and participative management that so often accompanies claims of having adopted a team approach is not necessarily matched by practice (Wallace & Hall 1994). One argument is that managers are interdependent, whatever their position in the management hierarchy, so every member of staff has a contribution to make because managerial tasks can only be fulfilled with and through other people. Gaining staff commitment to policy decisions is therefore necessary (Bell & Rhodes 1996). Conley and Bacharach (1990) have argued that site-based management will require not only more decentralised decision-making to the school building, but decentralisation and participatory management at the school building. However Ball's (1987) seminal political study of headteachers of British schools produced no evidence of facilitative/empowering forms of leadership. In a wide-sample study of open and effective traditional US school principals, Blase (1993) found only limited data related to facilitative forms of leadership and teacher empowerment.

Collegiality, or at least collaborative management, has become a part of one of the biggest international trends in education of recent years. Efforts to integrate the divergent findings and contested interpretations from research into shared decision-making in schools have demonstrated that the data are fragmented and fragile, the interpretations partial and provisional (Conley 1991). Despite more than a half century of research, credible evidence regarding the nature of participatory structures and processes in schools and their impact on individuals and institutions is thinner than one might expect, given the recurrent advancement of shared decision-making as a robust reform strategy (Leithwood & Menzies 1996). The value of working in collegial groups is both acclaimed as a way for teachers to benefit from the support and expertise of their colleagues (Weiss & Cambone 1994) and portrayed as a mechanism for teachers to pool their ignorance (Hargreaves 1984) and avoid the difficult issues that may limit quality decision-making (Argyris 1990). An exploration of this issue is one of the principal aims of the research.

Aims of the Study

- To seek to establish if delegation of whole-school decision-making reaches to, involves and empowers the middle management level.
- To look for evidence of alternative models of management for decision-making.
- To identify commonalities between the perceptions and the practices of headteachers and middle managers of the models that they are operating within.

Methodology

This research has evolved from our previous studies on the role of middle managers (Brown *et al.* 1998) in school decision-making. The middle management issue

was thrust into national attention by OfSTED, who were critical of the lack of development of the role.

Too many heads of department saw their role as managers of resources rather than people. (OfSTED 1997)

The research took place in a random sample of 21 secondary schools based in the north west of England. The schools were located across a range of urban areas, drawing from catchments that included a mix of public and private housing. Two semi-structured interview schedules were developed, one for the middle management representative of the school and one for the headteacher. The headteacher interview was tailored to elicit details of his/her management model and view of the decision-making role of middle management within that model. The middle manager interview probed cross-departmental collaborative opportunities for shared whole-school decision-making, planning and systems for evaluation. The middle management interviews aimed to elicit perceptions from that group of stakeholders of the management decision-making model currently operating in each individual school.

In the first phase of the research (Brown *et al.* 1998), we looked at middle managers' access to real power in whole-school decision-making through a series of structured interviews. These middle manager interviews enabled us to develop a typology of school management. Three distinct patterns emerged in the styles of decision-making in schools and these were classified as types A, B and C for the purposes of this research (see Data and Issues below). This paper correlates the responses of 12 headteachers to the paradigms presented by their middle managers.

Data collection and coding procedures were used to produce categories, themes and conceptual understandings inductively from the data (Blase 1990). Data were collected and coded according to qualitative research guidelines for grounded theory research (Stake 1995). In accord with theoretical sampling guidelines for grounded theory inquiry, a second phase of the project was planned to probe more deeply the dimensions of headteacher management styles. Field notes describing the context of the interviews were written systematically and coded. Constant comparative analysis was utilised to code the research data (Blase 1990). This procedure refers to line-by-line inspection of all incoming data to determine 'fit' to emergent categories and hypotheses or to create new categories and hypotheses.

A panel of four experts (2 senior researchers and 2 senior management experts from the private sector) was consulted when questions arose about coding or interpretation of the data. In addition, middle managers were asked to identify any other factors which were seen to impact upon participation in their schools. It must be acknowledged, however, that because the number of headteacher interviews conducted was small in relation to the number of managers in the study, conclusions emanating from this stage of the research should be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive in nature. Each respondent was interviewed on one occasion. Some of these interviews lasted as long as 2 hours with an average length of 70 minutes.

Participants were encouraged to talk about the school organisation, school culture, school activities and school issues from their point of view.

Data and Issues

The categories which emerged from the responses tracked a continuum, from schools which showed no evidence of a shared decision-making model (type C) to those which were already operating fully in this way (type A). Schools which evidenced some movement towards middle management access to whole-school decision-making processes were classified as type B. At school level, the responses of the headteacher and the middle manager were compared for correlation. The analysis of the interview data evidenced that each of the three types that emerged encompassed schools in the range of 500 to 1000 plus pupils, i.e. decision-making models were not linked or correlated to school size.

Type A Schools

Type A schools emerged as demonstrating:

- a commitment to (i.e. with evidence of the necessary systems in place) regular formal opportunities for collaboration with other heads of departments (HoDs) and colleagues from different subject areas;
- that their departmental priorities correlated closely with the School Development Plan (SDP), with themes and issues identified and agreed collectively;
- that heads of department were actively involved and consulted in whole-school policy and decision-making; and
- that the headteacher saw them as having a wider whole-school management role.

The four type A headteachers were completely committed to the importance of team management and sharing of expertise as the most effective way of achieving quality decisions. They believed that only by genuine shared decision-making could they ensure that the necessary changes were implemented which would move the school forward.

You need the collective support of your staff to implement any worthwhile change. so involvement in the decision-making process is vital.

After 3 years of development one of the above schools decided that its collegiate management model of decision-making was now so wide and inclusive that the title should change from Senior Management Team to School Management Team. This title was accepted as more appropriate for their management group which met weekly, included representation from all areas of the teaching staff plus a termly rotating place for any interested staff, and also plans student inclusion in the near future.

Kirby and Colbert (1992) found that headteacher authenticity (i.e. genuineness) was related to the ability of teachers to acquire information and skills about shared decision-making. According to these findings, empowerment is in large part

a function of external agents, in this case headteachers who are willing to share power with teachers as professionals, particularly with regard to instructional decisions (Blase & Blase 1997).

From our previous research (Brown *et al.* 1998), on type A schools, we found that the HoDs felt actively involved and consulted in whole-school policy and decision-making and perceived that the headteacher saw them as having a wider whole-school management role.

Team work is the crucial ingredient for this school to be effective. There is no mystique and feeling of intimidation. It is almost a collaboration of equals.

These headteachers believed strongly in setting structures in place to provide opportunities for wider participation in the management of the school especially in key areas such as planning, assessment, monitoring and evaluation. Expert headteachers, like corporate entrepreneurs, 'get their projects done by crafting coalitions and building teams of devoted employees who feel a heightened sense of joint involvement and contribution to decisions' (Kanter 1983). Different types of group structures provided a variety of opportunities for teachers to become involved in their school's management. Working parties or curriculum groups with cross-department and voluntary representation were highly favoured ways of widening involvement. Minutes of these meetings were distributed to all staff with agreed action points. Good communication and systems of information sharing were identified by type A headteachers as vital for ensuring cohesion of purpose.

The statements about putting formal structures into place which were made by these headteachers reinforced and correlated with the opinions given by their heads of departments (HoDs).

We have working parties who report back to faculties after consultation with the senior management team and collaborative policies are produced and implemented.

In each type A school it was evident that the headteacher treated the HoDs as integral elements of the school management team. HoDs were included in all aspects of the development of the SDP from the initial stages as a collaboration of equals. The headteachers believed that through cross-department dialogue and sharing of expertise, quality whole-school decision-making resulted. In each school all meetings, working parties and development groups were deliberately organised with the chairperson being selected on a rota basis:

Rotating the chair emphasises the importance of each team member, helps build team spirit, encourages members to experiment with unfamiliar roles, and enables me to contribute more effectively in other ways.

The HoDs confirmed their headteachers' statements:

Working groups have a joint approach or moving chair, or chair which is not senior management.

Each Type A headteacher stated an important part of his/her role as the setting of high goals for the staff in management. They viewed this as a major factor in raising standards of teaching and learning. Monitoring and evaluation were seen by the headteacher as important processes for quality control. Each school had a reciprocal process of evaluation between the SMT and HoDs where they regularly met to review each other's work. Words such as dialogue, collaboration, problem-solving, enabling, valued, open, empowerment, respect and trust were used by the headteachers and the HoDs in these schools. The headteachers' interviews highlighted the philosophy which underpinned the direction in which they believed their schools to be moving. The HoDs' interviews generally confirmed these beliefs together with expressing a real sense of job enjoyment, satisfaction and motivation.

Type B Schools

Type B schools demonstrated:

- less frequent formal opportunities for collaboration with other heads of department;
- that heads of department believed that they were viewed by the headteacher as having whole-school management roles and involvement in whole-school policy decision-making;
- some involvement in the School Development Plan (SDP) other than their own department's aspects; and
- positive perceptions of the management model's development towards a more co-operative horizontal model of decision-making.

We interviewed 4 headteachers from schools allocated a B designation after the HoD interviews. Three of these had been in post for 3 to 4 years after internal promotions. The other had become headteacher of the combined school when her own girls' school (where she was headteacher) was amalgamated with the boys' school to create a mixed comprehensive 5 years before. Therefore, all headteachers were relatively new to their present posts.

When asked about their management philosophy, one headteacher (who had previously been deputy head in this school for 8 years) declared it to be: 'An open-door policy of management. Lots of discussion and lots of corporate decision-making.' He explained that he had inherited a traditional top-down hierarchical structure which had developed over the 4 years. He had introduced daily staff briefings and a staff newsletter disseminating information. Two headteachers commented on problems with communication, with one giving a telling insight into the 'us' and 'them' mentality which still existed in the type B schools (Ball 1987):

Too many people felt excluded from the important decisions which were affecting them in their departments. It was evident that we (SMT) needed to listen to their complaints and include them in the decision-making process.

The headteacher of the amalgamated school had also inherited a hierarchical

structure which she felt ‘prohibited any middle management involvement in decision-making.’ She explained that there were lots of tensions and frustrations between the two staff teams at the amalgamation, mainly due to communication problems. Staff complaints filtered down to the SMT who took these problems to the headteacher. Together they concluded that staff criticism of the management of the curriculum and pastoral meetings as ‘mere information sessions’ was valid. After discussion about these communication problems, it was decided by the whole SMT to set up a more collaborative system of management which integrated the management teams of both schools into one unit. It is worth noting that this process of integration had evolved over 5 years.

There was a need for improved communication and acceptance that middle management should also have a whole-school role. A structure was put into place to facilitate better communication and to involve middle management in the whole-school decision-making process. We realised that it was important to be seen to have listened to them.

Many academic researchers have advocated a collaborative approach to management on grounds of effectiveness.

It is the dissonance between the fragmented, departmentalised context of the high school, and the prescriptions for shared vision—which challenge the leaders of secondary schools. To develop a coherent whole that would be more than the sum of its departmental parts, there is a need to start building bridges, supporting strong leadership within departments, but also creating a variety of committees, task forces and exchange programmes that will span them. (Siskin, 1997)

These type B headteachers’ awareness of communication problems and their need to develop more inclusive decision-making opportunities were also highlighted by the HoDs. Some structures were developing, for example:

We have monthly management meetings for HoDs and senior management where we can write papers for inclusion in the agenda.

However, when asked about their knowledge of other departments’ planning models, it was evident that there was still some distance to go for some of the schools.

No but it would be interesting.

When discussing whole-school planning, two headteachers, when referring to the SDP, mentioned half-termly faculty and staff meetings to set whole-school and faculty targets in the light of OfSTED action plans. In these schools, HoDs were included in these meetings where they reported back their departments’ views for input into the SDP. Two other headteachers said that there were no regular formal opportunities for collaboration either between HoDs or between HoDs and SMT but that there were working groups on whole-school issues which had open access.

I want HoDs to have a maximum understanding of how the SMT work

and this provides good in-service training/staff development for these HoDs.

These type B headteachers were perceived by their HoDs as developing more collaborative whole-school models. The HoDs when describing their involvement in whole-school aspects of the SDP remarked:

SMT write the initial draft but HoD input is encouraged.

On auditing whether HoDs had a whole-school management role, all the type B headteacher responses indicated a movement towards whole-school management involvement.

Being co-opted onto the whole-school planning group alongside the SMT gives the HoD an opportunity to get into whole-school decisions.

However, although the HoDs' measure of whole-school involvement in the SDP varied, they all felt positive about being included in the process and perceived that their headteacher viewed them as having a whole-school management role.

We are invited onto all the working parties about whole-school issues and can give our views at middle management meetings.

In schools where working parties had been started, teachers were beginning to appreciate the whole-school organisational perspective rather than the more limited departmental viewpoint. Dutch research has revealed that schools differ with respect to their policy making capacity. This appears to be highly determined by the extent to which teachers participate in decision-making processes (Slegers 1994). Thus, increasing teacher participation in major decision-making processes is considered as a way to transform schools into organisations with flatter structures (Hargreaves 1994; Smyth 1995). When considering whether their school management structures were hierarchical, the answers given by the HoDs underlined their optimism about the direction in which their management structures were moving.

Yes and no, because it is not intimidating, it is an accessible flatter model with a human face. You feel listened to and involved.

Type C Schools

Type C schools demonstrated:

- little formal collaboration between heads of department;
- little or no co-operative working with other staff colleagues;
- a wide divide between the role of the headteacher and the heads of department in decision-making;
- little evidence of whole-school committees for curriculum and management;
- no whole-school decision-making role for heads of department; and
- no consultation on whole-school decisions for heads of department.

'Some schools at the present time still tend to be characterised by a clear sense

of “them and us” of management and line of employer and employee’ (Ball 1987). Beyond that, senior management ‘indulges’ teachers by giving them only the illusion of autonomy within a certain sphere, as projected by the head (Townsend 1990). Ball (1987) does allude to inhibitions and losses of self-confidence that may be associated with teachers who are ‘frozen out’ of democratic decision-making.

This underlines the chasm which the C type HoDs perceived as existing between the senior management and themselves. Their responses underlined this feeling of isolation:

Any head of department collaboration is almost stumbled upon by accident.

All four of the type C headteachers had been in post for 10 or more years. Each had inherited a strongly hierarchical management structure. Each headteacher had retained the inherited structure with very few changes. When asked about any changes to the structure the responses given were either related to reductions or increases in deputy heads or senior teachers in response to rising or falling roll numbers:

Now we are on a split site so we needed a deputy head and senior teacher to be responsible for the other building.

These headteachers saw the HoDs as mainly having responsibility for their departments.

Departments have a great deal of autonomy.

Many researchers have decried this isolation as counterproductive to the purposes of schools (Hargreaves 1984; Leithwood & Menzies 1996). However, it would appear that these type C headteachers were either unaware or disinterested in these possible negative outcomes.

Departmental divisions confront reforms with powerful barriers to school wide communication and community. (Siskin 1997)

It would seem therefore, that what is required is to accompany the formal model with a model which identifies the workers as having a role to play, each with expertise to offer opinions which need to be voiced for the school to fulfil its aims and goals. When asked about their views on whole-school planning, one type C headteacher said he used the LEA template model throughout the school. Another explained that he was considering setting one up in response to a recent OfSTED inspection but the model was still in development. The remaining headteacher explained that each department wrote its own development plan. When asked about opportunities for HoDs to be involved in whole-school management decisions, 2 headteachers mentioned a school committee or council which included HoD representatives as well as senior management. One committee met annually and the other termly. In both cases the SMT set the agenda and chaired the meeting which both headteachers stated to be normal, accepted practice.

Final decisions are made by the SMT but departments have a chance to input.

One headteacher mentioned *ad hoc* working parties open to all interested staff and chaired by the SMT. The HoDs' perceptions of their opportunities for their whole-school decision-making were very different.

The Department plan is written separately, given to the SMT then it disappears—so what's the point.

When asked about HoD involvement in the SDP, the headteachers all agreed that HoDs wrote their department plan for inclusion in the SDP. Our sample felt that:

They contribute to the SDP by their Departmental Development Plan (DDP) fitting into the SDP priorities where appropriate.

When asked about the professional development of middle managers, these headteachers said that they did not have whole-school guidelines but did have job descriptions and appraisal procedures.

We use the money for professional development where the SMT have identified a weakness or an area to be targeted on the SDP.

Responses from these type C headteachers indicated static management structures which were reactive to external pressures rather than internally evolving and a middle management which was isolated from power-sharing and deprived of the potential for professional development.

Conclusion

Much of the work on school improvement and effectiveness in Britain, such as that of Hargreaves (1994) has either an open or tacit acceptance of collegial management styles as one of the keys to enhanced school development. Blum and Butler (1989) similarly emphasised the importance of collaborative management styles.

The research reported here confirms the work of Wallace (1998) 'that real life is not simple, and the sooner training catches up with this complexity the better'. He comments that he finds it ironic that yet another UK reform—preparatory training for aspiring headteachers which was introduced in 1997—has been framed very much in terms of school hierarchy. The training documentation focuses on the headteacher almost as a corporate manager (TTA 1997). Wallace (1998) states that:

... leading an SMT scarcely makes it onto this new training agenda. Yet team approaches emphasising equal contribution, with a contingent regression to hierarchy, may be where the degree of synergy lies that could really make a difference to the quality of school leadership.

We are of the view that there is sufficient evidence from the study to contend that middle managers are increasingly seeking a greater say in decisions about the school. In general, heads of department want bureaucratic approaches to leadership

to be replaced by distributed leadership throughout the school. We acknowledge that implementing 'distributed leadership' has to be worked through in ways appropriate to local contexts and that collaboration is not necessarily 'good' *per se* and can actually be as subject to illegitimate uses of power as the present hierarchical systems. However, it is not possible, and not even desirable, for one individual or that individual's chosen 'senior management cadre' to undertake every leadership task within a school. Good leaders who operated in this way recognised that teachers are more likely to become engaged in making changes within their own schools when more collaborative leadership models are the norm. As Gammage (1985) implied in his account of the good school, good leaders recognise the importance of relationships, enrichment and an interactive community. The style is also an inclusive one, for the reasons suggested by the findings from a North American study (Leithwood & Menzies 1996). Although the study focuses on teachers, the findings can also be applied to middle managers:

Teachers' willingness to participate in school decision-making is influenced primarily by their relationships with their principals. Teachers appear more willing to participate in all areas of decision-making if they perceive their relationships with their principals as more open, collaborative, facilitative and supportive. They are less willing to participate in any decision-making if they characterise their relationship with the principals as closed, exclusionary, and controlling. (Smylie 1992, quoted in Murphy & Louis 1994)

Instead of most of the school managers' time and energy being focused on control, it can be focused on facilitation of others' knowledge, talents and expertise (Dunlap & Goldman 1991). One lesson to emerge from our research was a significant one for headteachers and principals in that facilitative power does not imply abdication of control. Instead it emphasises the potential of maximising problem-solving capabilities by incorporating more of the professional skills available in educational organisations (Dunlap & Goldman 1991).

Collegial models of education management are becoming the dominant paradigm in the literature relating to the theory of the management of educational institutions. There are however, pragmatic and ideological factors which raise the question of the attainability of collegiality. Collegiality offers many persuasive benefits, but is in reality, difficult to attain to its fullest as our research has demonstrated. Issues such as the effectiveness of hierarchical and horizontal decision-making structures need further, possibly longitudinal, measurement based research located in the contextual history of the organisations under review. Only then can definitive statements regarding the benefits of the models be substantiated. At this point, the issue has been explored, cases examined and further research beckons.

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