A Study of School Teams: Democratically Functioning or Malfunctioning

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Abstract

Shared decision making is a democratic process that is widely touted as a way to improve school effectiveness. However, research shows that schools and districts do not use shared decision making well. This qualitative study focused on the functioning of shared decision making teams to explore ways in which team members understand and implement both the process of sharing decisions and the purpose of those decisions as part of democratic communities. Findings revealed that principals who authentically shared decision making acted as equal participants or advisors on call. Overall however, equity and social justice as a democratic purpose was a missing element. The data was void of any substantive examples in which team members focused specifically on equity issues.

Objective/Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study which focused on the functioning of shared decision making in school teams was to explore ways in which team members understand and implement both the process of sharing decisions and the purpose of those decisions as part of democratic communities.

Theoretical Framework

While the previous literature in educational leadership placed decision making in the hands of a chosen few, namely individuals with positional power, current theories indicate that decision making is better in the hands of many. For example, Ogawa and Bossert (1995) found that when leadership and decision making are interpreted as organizational rather than individual entities, all members of the organization can be decision makers at different times. Robertson, Wohlstetter, and Mohrman (1995) found that the more principals shared power and facilitated decision-making, the more instructional innovation increased.

Therefore, current literature now stresses decision making as a shared practice (Crow, 2006; Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2005; Murphy, 2002). Based on the assumption that increased shared decision making will improve schools, organizational restructuring models introduce school-based management, collaboration, and participatory decision-making all of which dramatically alter the way schools make decisions. Theories and models for organizing schools now include shared decision making in some way or another.

Democracy adds the concept of equity to shared decision making. Quantz, Cambron-McCabe, and Dantley (1991) caution that shared decision making is only part of democracy and that the way (process) decisions are made cannot be separated from the intent (purpose) of the decisions. If purpose is omitted from democracy, then certain groups could vote for the inequitable treatment of other groups—and all in the name of democracy. To be democratic, decisions must be more than shared; they must be committed to issues of social equity (O′ Hair, McLaughlin & Reitzug, 2000). Democratic decision makers design schools that increase students' social awareness of inequities and develop behaviors of activism that challenge the status quo. While leaders in democratic schools have the skills to share decision making, they also understand the need to examine the use of power and strive for the elimination of inequality.

Purpel (1988) explains that one would expect to see two elements in a good school: first, the vision would be to teach students how to contribute to a democratic society, and second, the use of power within the school would follow procedures and principles that are democratic. In other words, in order to teach democratic principles, schools must also use them, and this is best

observed in how schools use power and share decisions (Apple & Beane, 1995; Glickman, 1998; Oakes, Quartz, Ryan & Lipton, 2000).

As this study searches for ways to improve the quality of the educational enterprise through shared decision making, it also crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries. Shared decision making is not exclusive to education. For example, we in educational leadership have learned from the field of organization and management theory whose research has included theories on organizations that are moral, (Quinn & Jones, 1995) and trusting communities (Gozdz, 1993) and that foster intra- and inter-organizational cooperation and collaborative decision making (Smith, Carroll & Ashford, 1995). We learned from an interesting qualitative study in the semiconductor industry, how a consortium could turn strong competition to cooperation (Browning, Beyer, & Shetler, 1995). The authors attributed this remarkable transformation to the development of a "moral community in which individuals and firms made contributions to the industry without regard for immediate and specific payback" p. 113. Employees saw their mission as a moral one as they met side by side, from president to clerical staff, to develop new organizational structures that fostered collaborative decision-making. Just as we learn from other disciplines, what is learned about shared decision making in educational leadership can be shared across multiple fields.

Methods and Data Sources

This study is part of an ongoing evaluation of a partnership between school, university, union, government, business, and community organizations focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning, specifically for mathematics, in a large, urban school district. This study explored ways in which school teams in the district functioned to make decisions.

The methodology used for this exploratory study was qualitative. Data consisted of text narratives obtained from observations of team meetings and informal interviews with personnel as described below. An observation protocol developed as part of the larger study was used to guide observations. Interview protocol questions were open-ended and focused on team functioning including areas as decision types, team and leader selection, and climate. Analysis of the text data was through thematic unitizing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Categories emerged throughout analysis (Constas, 1992) through interpretation of the data.

This study is part of a larger, ongoing study of a district community partnership that focuses on improving teaching and learning in mathematics. Data for this study were collected from 11 schools across the district. These schools were ethnically, racially, and geographically diverse. Some schools served grades K-5, others served grades K-8 and one served grades 6-8.

Each school had a "Learning Team" (LT) that was mandated by the district central administration. The purpose of LTs was to focus on curricular issues. Guidelines suggested that LTs represented the school population and included the principal, key administrators (e.g., assistant principals and curriculum specialists), the district-funded literacy coach, teacher level members such as the grant-funded Math Teacher Leader (MTL), and classroom teachers representing each grade level. Though this composition was fairly typical among the schools in this study, LT makeup was not mandated by the district. Guidelines also suggested that teams conduct regularly scheduled meetings—typically immediately after school weekly or biweekly. Team members were not paid; however, in one school, the team met during school hours.

Observations were made of two regularly scheduled LT meetings for each school included in the study in spring, 2006 and are in progress for 2007. Two of the three authors conducted observations of 17 of 22 LT meetings across 9 of 11 schools. The other observations

were conducted by a graduate student in public administration and a former public school teacher. Observations took place approximately one month apart in the Spring of 2006. Interviews were held with at least one member of each LT, and typically immediately followed the observation. Given the timing of the observations, many of the meetings focused on developing the schools' annual learning plan. This afforded ample opportunity to observe decision-making processes and a variety of influence and power structures within the teams.

Results and Discussion

Findings and interpretation indicated that while the district-wide organizational design of the LTs was conducive to shared decision making, in most cases it did not function that way. Levels of functioning emerged according to the following categories.

Knowledge Bases

Overall, LT members had an excellent understanding of the needs of their schools and the kind of teaching that leads to improved instructional outcomes for all students. However, what many, along with most of the principals, did not know or understand were democratic process and purpose.

Varied Use of Democratic Process

Although by design, principals were members of the LTs, each principal decided her or his role on that team. In most of the schools, principals ran the meetings and in those schools, team members deferred to the principal for decision making. There was only one voice, the principal's.

Principals as equal participants. In some schools, however, roles were different. In several meetings observed, teacher level staff members ran the meetings, and the principals acted as *"equal participant."* They were typically quiet, and their participation was primarily as informant.

Principals as *advisors on call*. In a few schools, the principal acted as "*advisor on call.*" These principals did not attend LT meetings but stopped in to check if teachers needed anything, and after providing needed resources and information, left the teachers to make decisions on their own.

Structure of Meetings

The formats of the meetings varied. Although each meeting conducted by principals was unique in several ways, overall they can be referred to as semi-structured chats/rap sessions. The amount of time spent on discussing each issue was unrelated to the importance of the issue. Discussions were off task frequently, and agendas went uncompleted.

In the schools where the principals acted as *"equal participant,"* meetings were highly structured and efficient. In the schools where the principals acted as *"advisor on call,"* meetings sometimes appeared chaotic. In one case, the field notes indicated that

> The structure for leadership was loose, and it was sometimes difficult to ascertain who was leading the meeting. Everyone talked out of turn. Of all the LTs observed, these teachers were most collaborative, focused, hard working, and productive. Their goals were clear. They worked on students' needs from wall posters that they had developed during a previous meeting. They made considerable progress on creating a school improvement plan in the same amount of time that several of the other teams took to develop a schedule to work on their plans (typically in the summer or Saturdays when they would be paid).

Factors of Control

Each school LT had a different tenor that appeared directly related to the role, approach, and style of the principal. Observations revealed that through behaviors and language, only a few of the principals understood how to help LT members understand democratic organizations.

Parameters for Decision Making

In almost all of the schools, topics before the teams were broad. When asked about issues, one team member replied, "We do everything in this school, from soup to nuts." In several cases, these decisions were more appropriate for the School Governance Councils.

In the schools with the principals as *"advisor on call,"* the focus was narrow. Consistent with district policy, LTs were to focus specifically on curricular issues. Interactive discussion will show how this appeared to be a major factor in the way teams could successfully function.

Democratic Purpose: A Missing Element

Throughout all of the observations, there were only a few examples in which teachers talked specifically about equity issues. Team members did not describe curricula centered on social action and the common good. They did not mention challenges to the status quo. There was no evidence of social critique. This void makes one question if or how they have been exposed to democratic schooling.

In a study of administrative beliefs, Doyle (2002) found that administrators believed they were practicing democratic leadership when they simply authorized voting. They did not understand democracy as a complex process nor know how to facilitate shared decision making. Results of this study reveal that principals do not implement voting adequately, nor do they understand the purpose of democratic ideas. While the district imposed organizational structures that had the potential for democracy, administrators did not demonstrate the skills to implement these organizational mandates.

Discussion and Implications

The implications for development are great for both preparation programs and ongoing professional development for current administrators. Principals, and other personnel, do not understand what they need to do to facilitate shared decision making. All too often, school administrators believe that they are empowering staff and students when they allow opportunities for input no matter how insignificant, restricted, or ambiguous those opportunities are.

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Learning Team Observation Protocol

School: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

Number present: _____ Meeting leader: _____ Observer: _____

Meeting Summary

Team Functioning: Areas of Observation Focus

Leadership -There is a clear team leader -The leader's authority is apparent -Leader has team members' respect	Leadership comments:
Participation & Representation -team members actively participate -multiple viewpoints are represented -conflict is not counterproductive	Participation & Representation comments:
Organization & Structure -there is a clear agenda -the meeting is organized and well-planned -objectives are appropriate for time allowed	Organization & Structure comments:
Results & Actions -the meeting has clear outcomes -results are relevant -next steps and action items are clear	Results & Actions comments:
Overall Functioning	Additional Comments:

Note: Additional interview questions focused specifically on mathematics curriculum and instruction.