
Collaborative decision-making and school-based management: challenges, rhetoric and reality

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Abstract

School-based management has increasingly become the agreed-upon model around the world for the operation of schools, particularly those in large public education systems. A critical element of the model is devolving enhanced levels of decision-making from the centre (eg the head office) to the schools. While the rhetoric surrounding such actions is usually acclaimed as a positive step for teachers, parents and the wider community to be involved in decisions that affect their children, the challenges particularly for school leaders to achieve these ends is often overlooked. Further, the reality – that is, the nature, extent and impact – of collaborative decision-making appears to be variable in practice.

This paper draws on two research studies to examine the above issues. The first, a longitudinal study on the impact of school-based management on primary principals in Queensland, identifies particular challenges for principals in terms of their skills and capacities in moving to more collaborative and inclusive decision-making regimes. The second follow-up study of two primary schools operating under school-based management examines in more detail how, and in what areas of the school (its planning, operation, curriculum), parents and teachers are actually engaging in school-level decision-making. ‘Gains’ for schools as a result of greater community involvement, and factors both facilitating as well as mitigating against teacher and parent involvement, are identified. Challenges for principals are also noted.

Background

School-based management (SBM) is generally the agreed-upon organisational model for delivery of education in many education systems around the world. In Queensland Australia, the focus of this paper, SBM was introduced in a systematic and formal sense in 1997 as a key element of a system-wide reform of government schooling. A major element of the SBM model was enhanced devolution of decision-making to the local school level. As a result, the nature and extent of school decision-making has changed, now characterised by greater participation of both teachers and parents in local school processes. However, not surprisingly in reality, the nature and extent of teacher and parent involvement varies across schools. In addition, the changes have also resulted in major challenges for school leaders to move to a 'new way' of doing things that requires participation of and collaboration with teachers and parents.

This paper endeavours to examine some of the important issues surrounding the rhetoric and reality of such moves to enhanced decision-making by teachers and parents in schools. In particular, it identifies the skills and capacities required by principals to operate in more participative and collaborative regimes. This is achieved by looking at some of the findings of a longitudinal study of the impact of SBM on primary principals. Having considered these 'new' skills and capacities of principals, the paper then explores through follow-up studies the 'reality' of school-level decision-making from the perspectives of parents, teachers and the principals. Implications and issues for further consideration are discussed.

Overview of relevant literature

SBM as an organisational delivery model for schooling has been well documented in the literature over the past decade or so (eg see Barrington 1997; Brown 1990; Levacic 1998; Whitty et al 1997). Of particular interest here is what this literature says about the impact of such models on principals in terms of their skills and capacities (eg see Caldwell & Spinks 1992; Cranston 2000a, 2000b; Harold 1998, Southworth 1999, Williams & Portin 1997) and what has been researched regarding aspects of decision-making practices and processes as a result of SBM reforms (eg see Australian Council of Education Centres 1999; Mulford et al 2000).

(a) School-based management (SBM)

Definitions of SBM vary as do the rationale for its implementation (Barcan 1992; Smyth 1993; Whitty et al 1997). Murphy (1997) offers a view of SBM that is relevant here, arguing it is '(p)rimarily a strategy to decentralise decision-making to the individual school site ... (it) facilitates the empowerment of parents and the professionalism of teachers. ... shared decision-making among key stake holders at the local level becomes a defining characteristic' (p 39). This is consistent with the SBM model originally conceived in the Queensland context of this paper; viz as being based on effective partnerships among members of the school community.

The Queensland model was designed to give schools greater autonomy to: manage resources; determine the delivery of educational resources; increase

flexibility and local responsiveness; take greater control over the direction of the school; ensure the delivery of quality educational service to students; and respond to community needs (Education Queensland 1997a). This greater autonomy, it was claimed, would bring with it several benefits for students, teachers, support staff, educational administrators and school communities (p 6). Above all, it was aimed at improving 'student learning outcomes' (p 4). While some of the characteristics of the Queensland model changed some years later (Education Queensland 1999a, 1999b) the essential elements and focus remained.

Most schools and systems operating under SBM regimes legitimise staff and community involvement in decision-making through legislatively constituted governance bodies such as school councils. Queensland is no exception to this, with school councils providing 'the legislated opportunity for stakeholder participation in school direction setting' (Education Queensland 1999a, p 7). The last phrase here is important as it sets a framework whereby the school council should engage in strategic decision-making, such as approval and monitoring of strategic documents, but not in operational areas such as specific issues related to teaching and learning practices.

In summary, the rhetoric of the literature suggests that under SBM, school communities (eg parents, teachers) have the opportunity, responsibility and accountability for many more decisions that affect them than they held previously. Research to date indicates that this has occurred to some extent in some schools, but points to the whole area requiring further examination (Cranston 2000c; Dimmock et al 1998; Payne 1994).

(b) Roles and responsibilities of principals

The literature is convincing in its evidence that the roles and responsibilities of principals change under SBM regimes. Over a decade ago in the English context, Brown (1990) noted that '(t)he role most affected by decentralization is clearly that of the school principal' (p 79). More recently, Levacic (1998, p 337) argued that 'local management has had very significant effects on the work and the role of the head teacher'. Research in the United States reveals similar results, with Williams and Portin (1997, p 2) reporting that 'principals feel there have been significant changes in their responsibilities during the last five years'. Similar findings regarding the impact of SBM on principals are evident in Australian and New Zealand (Education Victoria 1998; Wylie 1997).

In Queensland, changes for principals as a result of the impending SBM reforms were noted well before the reforms were ever actually implemented (Cranston 1994; Scott 1992). More recently the current SBM reforms were predicted to require that principals would need to operate differently from previous times (Sullivan 1998). These changes were acknowledged at a systemic level with the development of the 'Standards Framework for Leaders' (Education Queensland 1997b), which detailed in a competency framework the skills and capacities principals would require to operate effectively in a SBM regime. Drawing on the available research, these competencies encompassed six key roles: leadership in

education, management, change, outcomes, accountability and people and partnerships (pp 4-5). Although not independent of the others, the last role - people and partnerships - is of particular relevance and importance here.

It must be acknowledged that SBM has not been the only press impacting on schools and school leaders in recent times. Globalisation and technological changes, coupled with wider social, economic and political developments, all serve to make being a principal in these 'New Times' qualitatively different from that of a decade or so ago (Caldwell & Spinks 1998; Day et al 2001). The enormous challenges for principals are in fact not much different from those for leaders in any organisation today (Limerick et al 1998).

(c) Community involvement and decision-making

Within the dynamically changing context that schools now operate in, what is overwhelmingly evident in the research into the changes for principals is the enhanced focus on their people or interpersonal skills and capacities. That is, with the need to lead whole school communities and the inherent requirement for participation and collaboration among members of the school community in decision-making, planning and budgeting, the leadership skills and capacities of principals (particularly those of an interpersonal orientation, such as negotiation, consultation and conflict resolution, and building ownership of and commitment to decisions) emerge as critical.

For example, Sackney and Dibski (1994) noted that the majority of activities required to be carried out by principals needed to involve collaborative decision-making. This they saw as demanding sound interpersonal skills such as negotiation, conflict resolution, persuasion and collaboration. Again in the English context, Bell et al (1996) noted that principals needed 'continually and increasingly to involve staff in collective decision-making' as key aspects of their job (p 254), whereby consultation, collective decision-making and delegated responsibility were stressed (p 258). Clearly, there are marked contrasts in roles and responsibilities for principals compared with earlier times where the principal was the main - and in some cases, only - major decision-maker in the school.

Again in the context of school leadership and greater community involvement in schools, Blase and Blase (1997, p 139) noted the importance of 'facilitative leadership by school principals in initiating, implementing and sustaining viable forms of teacher empowerment and shared decision making at the school level'. Importantly, they pointed out the need to think in terms of notions of 'power with' and 'power through', rather than the more traditional hierarchical 'power over' notion that probably most closely aligns with how principals operated in the past.

Two recent studies in Australia provide further insights into community involvement and decision-making in schools. The first, a large-scale Australia-wide study, investigated the nature and characteristics of parent involvement and whether such involvement had any impact on students' learning (Australian Council of

Education Centres 1999; Cranston et al 2000). This study confirmed that parent and wider community involvement in schools had increased in recent years. In some instances, this involvement was significant at both strategic and operational levels where participation and decision-making concerned planning, budgeting and input to curriculum issues. In other cases, participation was reported at still only somewhat superficial levels.

This study also identified a set of factors facilitating/impeding community involvement as well as a set of principles for effective parent-community involvement (Australian Council of Education Centres 1999). These informed the focus of the interviews conducted in the second research study discussed later in this paper. They reflected what the relevant literature had revealed in other countries, such as the attitude towards and willingness of the principal to facilitate participation by the school community in decision-making.

A recent study in primary schools in Tasmania examined the decision-making processes as perceived by principals, teachers and school council members (Mulford et al 2000). The study identified structures and processes through which decision-making was shared among the school community members. While variation existed across schools as to the extent and types of decisions in which the community engaged, the research concluded that teachers and community members needed to be moved 'beyond comfortable congeniality, conformity, and occasional involvement in decision making, without responsibility that actually goes with making the decision, to collegiality and a constructively critical professional learning community' (Mulford et al 2000, p 75). Perhaps another way of stating this is to argue that the entire community (teachers and parents) need to engage in real decisions about teaching and learning in the school if real educational improvement is to result.

What these two studies identify is that there is not only considerable variability in the nature and extent of the involvement of parents and teachers in decision-making of schools, but that the correlation between the rhetoric of policies and intentions and the reality of practices is also variable across schools.

This research

The research findings reported here for Queensland schools are based on two related studies, with the second drawing on some of the specific findings from the first. The first study helps set the scene in terms of identifying significant changes for principals as a result of SBM as well as the impact of the 'New Times' in which schools now operate. The second study then examined in detail the nature and extent of participation of teachers and parents in decision-making in two particular schools, the main focus of this paper.

Careful consideration of principals and their roles is important to an investigation such as the one here as it acknowledges that because of their position of power, it is the principals who essentially dictate how community involvement might develop in their particular school. While not underestimating the significance

of empowering teachers and parents through the development of multiple and shared leadership roles as noted later (Jackson 2000; Limerick et al 1998), it remains important not to forget Southworth's (1999, p 62) observation that principals 'remain 'pivotal players' in their schools. ... they are the centrifugal force in schools'.

The first study investigated the impact of SBM on the roles and responsibilities of principals, and the skills and capacities underlying these (Cranston 2000c). For the purposes of this paper, of particular interest are the study's findings relating to the greater involvement of teachers and parents in the school and its decision-making processes as a result of the devolution processes underpinning SBM.

The research is based on a longitudinal study of a sample of six primary principals in Queensland state schools as they implemented SBM. A series of semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted with the principals were the main data gathering strategies (Bromley 1986; Marshal & Rossman 1995; Stewart & Shamdasani 1990; Taylor & Bogdan 1984). The schools ranged in type and size from those in which the principal was the only administrator to those where a number of administrators were in place. The principals comprised a relatively diverse group in terms of background, experience and gender. Data from a number of district directors complemented that provided by the principals. School documentation was also examined to provide important contextual information.

Consistent with research from other education systems where SBM has been introduced, this study revealed that principals were required to demonstrate a wide variety of management and leadership skills and capacities quite different from those typically evident in the principalship in earlier times. It confirms what Southworth (1999, p 60) observed succinctly about the headship in England, viz that it 'is both more exacting and it is more visible than previously'.

Of relevance to this study is that principals were required to make increasingly complex decisions in collaboration with others in their school communities; decisions typically taken previously by those located away from the immediate school environment, for example in regional offices. Table 1 provides a summary of the changes in the roles and responsibilities for principals as they are relevant to teacher and parent involvement in the school.

Table 1: Changes in roles and responsibilities for principals (adapted from Cranston 2000c)

Decrease in	Increase in
- responsibility, as an individual, to take decisions, although number and variety of decisions increased significantly - time and opportunities to take decisions as an individual generally - involvement in low level management activities — delegated as possible to others	- need to work with, and through, representative committees and groups in a collaborative way to achieve agreement re decisions - need to delegate decisions to others as well as apply time management / prioritising skills - local accountabilities to school community members - in leadership of (a) school — through visioning, strategic planning; (b) people — attitudinal and cultural change; (c) educational — improved learning outcomes focus - operational climate of autonomous decision-making for the school

In general terms, what the table identifies is a shift to a more collaborative mode of operation within the school community, with principals indicating they were sharing responsibility and accountability for decision-making more and more with teachers and parents. In short, the principal was no longer the single decision-maker in the school. This change developed not only as a result of the establishment of the structures and processes inherent in the SBM model (eg the school council) but also out of a necessity to delegate, particularly to teachers, as the number of decisions needing to be taken at the school level increased. Another way of conceiving this latter shift is that of the empowerment of teachers within a clearly defined strategic set of operational parameters, as described by one principal.

You've got to be able to lead, to set the directions, to take others with you ... then give them the responsibilities and have the trust they will do it.

The issue of delegation of decision-making is an interesting one in so far as almost all principals in this study identified a tension between endeavouring to delegate decisions to, and empower teachers in, a culture where some teachers were reluctant to accept change and take on greater and/or changed responsibilities. It

may be that this tension was at a peak early in the implementation of SBM, ie during the times of greatest change for teachers. The tensions surrounding delegation were captured by one principal as follows:

Plenty of them (teachers) would rather I just went away and left them alone in their classrooms. And in part they have a point. They want to teach and that's their core business, but I ask them to sit on committees and make decisions. It's a fine balance I guess.

And another:

Can they do, should they do this ... are they competent? I don't know. Can I trust them, you know in the sense of them having a whole-school appreciation of the issues that they are deciding about, not just their own.

Regarding the nature and level of change for teachers and parents, one principal commented:

This is real learning curve for all of us. Now we've parents, teachers and not just me, talking about priorities and how we'll spend the dollars. We've all got to learn some new skills here.

The changes in roles and responsibilities for principals as summarised here resulted in principals needing to draw on and/or develop a broader and more complex set of skills and capacities than they held previously. This set, summarised in Table 2, represents a marked shift from that required of principals earlier when they operated in essentially hierarchal structures in which, as individuals, they made most of the decisions divorced from any significant degree of community input. Noteworthy about the set is that it reflects the quite different roles principals now play in schools, drawing strongly on interpersonal skills and relational abilities as they work collaboratively more and more with teachers and parents.

Table 2: Changes in skills and capacities of principals (adapted from Cranston, 2000c)

Enhanced skills and capacities
• Generally, various aspects of strategic leadership — people, school, educational • Leading, visioning, cultural change • Capacity to make meaning for others of these developments (educational and otherwise) • Capacity to manage and lead through uncertainty • Interpersonal, people skills — communication, collaboration, consultation, negotiation, persuasion, conflict management • Capacity to empower and delegate effectively, leading to multiple leadership roles

In essence, what the table identifies is that under a SBM regime, where the wider school community becomes engaged in the educational priorities impacting on the school and their children and where decision-making becomes increasingly shared among that community, principals need strong ‘people skills’. This is exemplified in one principal’s comments:

There’s no doubt we are all learning fast about working together. It’s a new experience for parents in some ways. We’ve started but we have a long way to go yet. I just hope it doesn’t end up being tokenistic involvement ... that’s just a waste of everyone’s time.

While all principals believed there had been considerable advancement in enhancing the involvement of teachers and parents in the school, they also identified a potential tension between these two groups. That is, some principals spoke about some teachers not wanting to involve parents more in the school, and certainly not in issues directly associated with the classroom. Some parents commented on the lack of skills (and in some cases attitudes) held by some teachers towards greater involvement of parents in the school. One principal observed:

Some staff are keen to get on and make decisions without thinking about others. Those who have had good partnerships with parents before are OK, but others are struggling with these notions of collaboration and consultation.

There is no doubt that as SBM was implemented, principals’ relationships with parents and teachers changed significantly. Despite this reported shift in decision-making by parents and teachers in schools, this research did not examine

the reality either of the meaningfulness of the decision-making or the impact of it on the quality of educational offerings in the schools.

Despite the lack of 'hard evidence' in regard to the nature and extent of the decision-making, most principals saw greater teacher and parent involvement as a positive development for their school. However, they acknowledged that one of the key challenges for them was to engage the whole community meaningfully in the school to a greater extent than previously, particularly in regard to decision-making at a strategic level. It was this lack of 'hard evidence' available from the first study that prompted the second follow-up study to examine the 'realities' of the nature and extent of parents and teacher engagement in decision-making. In particular, it sought the in-depth perspectives of not only principals but also teachers and parents with regard to decision-making.

The follow-up study involved two large primary schools in Queensland. Both schools have been operating under SBM for a number of years. Each school has a school council, comprised of parents and teachers, as the strategic decision-making body in the school.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with the principal, two or three teachers and two or three parents in each school. The teachers and parents interviewed were members of the respective school councils. As such, it was expected that they should have informed insights into the matters of interest in the study. The focus for the interviews included the:

- nature and level of community involvement in decision-making in the school;
- types of decisions in which the community tended to be involved;
- impact (positives, negatives) of such involvement; and
- role of the principal and others in engaging the community in decision-making in the school.

Contextual data about the school, such as organisational structures and relationships of decision-making bodies, were collected from a discussion with the principal together with a review of each school's annual report and strategic planning document. The data for each of the schools are initially considered separately, followed by a discussion of overall findings.

School A

This school draws students mainly from a lower socioeconomic background. The principal presents as an enthusiastic forward-looking educator, with the administrative team comprising the principal, three deputies and a registrar. The general staff profile is one of a relatively stable, experienced teaching body. The School Council has been operating for some three years. The school has established

a number of formal structures through which both teachers and parents can become involved in the school and participate in its decision-making processes. There is a strong sense that there are considerable opportunities made available through these structures for community involvement. In brief, the main bodies are:

- School Council – the strategic planning and monitoring body that has members elected by both teachers and parents. This group holds considerable responsibility for setting the broad directions in the school, allocating resources to support priorities and monitoring progress.
- Management Committee – comprised of the principal, deputies and year-level coordinators (teachers), it manages the operational (day-to-day) matters in the school.
- Parents and Citizens Association – comprised of the parent body of the school, it has a major brief of fundraising and general support for the school.
- Program managers – teachers identified for each key curriculum area who hold responsibility for developing an annual operational plan (including a budget). The School Council approves these plans.
- Class Parent Forum – comprised of parent representatives identified from each class. Collectively, members meet fortnightly with the principal or one of the deputies. The forum provides the opportunity for informal exchange of ideas and information and raising issues.
- Community Review Forum – comprised of 20 randomly chosen parents usually not represented on the bodies above. This group meets once a year with the aim of providing additional opportunities for parental input, particularly to program managers.
- Curriculum Committees – comprised of teachers, these work with program managers.

The principal noted that parents were not involved directly on curriculum committees; a decision taken by the school as ‘this is what teachers are expert in’. However, two members (a teacher and a parent) from the School Council are attached to each program area, providing parents with some input into the curriculum of the school. The principal also identified that there had been a major cultural change over the past few years towards the greater involvement of parents and teachers in decision-making. She noted that:

Previous, the annual operational plans were just handed to the teachers by the principal. They meant very little and had no real bottom-up teacher involvement. Parent involvement was pretty tokenistic through the P&C. The introduction of the School Council and thrust of SBM changed all that.

The principal considered there were many opportunities for both teacher and parent involvement in the school. However, many of them needed encouragement and some skill development to take on their enhanced roles in the decision-making process in light of the fact that this had been only minimal in the past. Most teachers now participated to some extent, although a few maintained a stance that they only wanted to teach.

In this school, teachers were expected to be on at least one major committee and one minor committee. It was important, the principal observed, that there remained a balance between teachers' commitments to committee work and program management activities outside their classroom and their overall workload; 'It is a dilemma. Some teachers complain about the extra work. But you could never take it back now, not now they've had a taste of it'.

The principal noted that professional development for teachers was linked closely to the annual operational plans that were essentially in the hands of the teachers. She saw this as an incentive for teachers to become more involved in these plans and that much of the professional development was critical in facilitating teachers' greater responsibilities in the school.

Some parents were seen by the principal and teachers as being 'marginalised' from the school and saw significant challenges in getting these parents more involved. Many of these 'perhaps feel alienation from school based on their own experiences'. Others, the principal believed, did not want to get involved for a variety of reasons including work commitments.

The principal considered the school was still 'maturing' in how the various bodies and processes aligned to work in the best interests of the school. Key factors influencing this developmental process included cultural and attitudinal issues and, in some cases, the skills of teachers and parents. She saw that with greater devolvement of finances from 'the centre' to the school, teacher and parent contribution to school planning would be even greater. Clearly the move to a SBM model of operation, whereby considerable finances and decisions about allocation of these had already been devolved to the school, had contributed to the current state of greater autonomy for the school in taking decisions about its priorities and its future, when compared with the past.

Both parents interviewed agreed there were many opportunities for parents to get involved in the school, at both strategic (eg through the School Council) and operational (eg P&C, Parent Forum) levels. Despite this, they indicated the number of parents actually involved was generally small, and those who were involved tended to be highly so. Both parents believed the School Council had provided parents with an ideal opportunity to have a major say in the school.

We are still learning about all this but it certainly is different from a few years ago. Now we have a real say of most of the important issues. But not all parents do actually get involved.

The level of involvement by parents had increased in recent years, particularly through the encouragement of the principal for this to occur and the opportunities she created. As a result, one parent observed the relationship between parents and teachers had changed, now developing into one more collaboratively oriented, rather than the earlier 'them and us'. However, another noted that a 'small number of teachers still would rather we weren't involved in the school', although this number was declining over time.

Parents acknowledged that the school has supported them to develop their skills through courses and seminars. This allowed them to understand better what was happening in education generally and facilitated more effective participation and contribution by them in decision-making processes. Both parents identified benefits for themselves and the school as a result of their involvement. They believed it 'sent positive messages to our kids that school is important', and felt they had a real say in 'where the school is going'. It also provided the school with a wider range of views from parents of a variety of backgrounds, giving the school 'a better idea of what the community wants of the school'.

One noted that on some occasions she felt as though decisions had already been taken by 'the school' and that they were really only being provided with information, not having their opinions sought. Another argued that parents often were inadvertently marginalised from having an input because of the jargon surrounding the issue. Educators, she noted, need to 'speak in simpler language so we can all understand what is going on'. She believed that this turned some parents off or made it confusing for them as to how they might get involved in the school. The second parent thought better decisions would be made if more parents were involved through better communication between the school and the parent body. The parents observed that teachers were highly involved in the school.

The three teachers interviewed (one a deputy principal) all agreed there were considerable opportunities for teachers to get involved in decision-making in the school, from a strategic level to 'real day-to-day things'. One observed there had been a marked change in recent years, with earlier experiences really just tokenistic:

The way it operates now I believe it is highly professional. We are treated like professionals and have a real say in what is happening. A professional culture has developed.

Previously, priorities were decided 'at the top'. Now teachers and many parents had an input into what was to be done and what funding was needed to support it. Most teachers were involved in some way, although a small number chose to remain isolated. All teachers saw the many professional development opportunities available as significant in the changes in the school, again contributing to the professional culture that had developed.

The greater involvement of teachers was seen by one teacher as leading to developing positive relationships, enhanced collegiality and ownership of decisions among teachers, although some needed 'to learn how to collaborate and negotiate!' However, this skill development enhanced the professionalism of teachers as they

adopted many of the skills used by those in other professions outside education. One teacher reflected that some of her colleagues had been on a 'steep learning curve and still were' as the culture of the school changed to be more inclusive and collaborative. In this, some teachers have also needed to be more accepting of parents and their ideas.

The teachers agreed the principal had been a positive influence in generating a more collaborative culture in the school, welcoming input and involvement of both teachers and parents. One teacher observed that if an outsider attended a School Council meeting, it 'would be impossible to tell who were the teachers and who were the parents'. Despite this, teachers observed that parent involvement was variable, with some highly involved in the School Council for example, while many other parents had no involvement. However, all teachers agreed there were considerable opportunities for parent involvement and some had taken up these opportunities with positive effects:

We now hear what parents think about issues. And this is important, after all it's their kids. As long as they don't get on these bodies to check up on us. There has to be trust and openness all round.

Overall, this school has developed a variety of structures and processes to enhance teacher and parent involvement in the school in recent years, although involvement by parents in direct classroom teaching-learning matters is minimal, except at a strategic level through the School Council. The nature of parental involvement is quite varied but ranges from the strategic to the operational, and is much greater than it was previously.

There are clearly many opportunities afforded for involvement, with most teachers - but many fewer parents - taking up these opportunities. There is some wider community involvement in the school. For example, the school draws on a considerable range of local people as volunteers to support their literacy and mathematics tutoring programs. Other involvement is demonstrated through sponsorship arrangements and visitations by guest speakers.

The enhanced teacher professionalism identified by one teacher resulting from teachers' greater say in what was happening in the school has been facilitated in large part by the attitudes and skills of the principal. She is considered welcoming and open to ideas, as having good interpersonal skills and being genuinely committed to greater involvement by both teachers and parents in the school. She seems to have played a major role in shifting the school culture to a more collaborative inclusive one in recent years under the structural influence of SBM, which has provided the school with greater say over its future and its funding decisions to support local priorities.

School B

The second primary school looked at in depth draws students mainly from middle-class backgrounds, with a significant percentage of these being of Asian origin. The staff profile is one of a stable and experienced group of teachers, many

of whom have been at the school for a number of years. The School Council has been operating for three years. The administrative team is comprised of the principal, four deputies and a registrar.

Like School A, this school had established a number of formal structures through which both teachers and parents could become involved in the school and participate in its decision-making. These offered considerable opportunities for community involvement. In addition to these formal bodies, the school had regular Information Evenings and a comprehensive set of written communication procedures for parents.

Similar to School A, parents were not directly involved on curriculum committees in the school. However, they did have some input through a major curriculum renewal project conducted in the school. The parents were quite comfortable with their limited level of input to the curriculum, because teaching was, as one parent noted, what 'teachers are paid to do. It's their responsibility'.

The four deputy principals chaired the Curriculum Committees, membership of which is comprised of teachers representing their particular interests and expertise. These committees identify priorities and budget allocations, which are then taken forward by the deputies to a management meeting with the principal, where final priorities and budget are determined. One teacher observed that he believed teachers had real decision-making responsibilities in the school. Another took a contrary view, suggesting that with the deputies and principal having the final say, teacher input was really more advisory in nature.

I'm not sure if this is because we're not trusted or if they think we don't have the big picture ... maybe that's true, I guess someone has to see the whole picture before deciding about particular areas.

The principal saw the curriculum committees and the School Council as genuine opportunities for teachers to get involved. However, he noted that teachers took up these options with varying levels of enthusiasm.

Some teachers are very professional and want this degree of involvement ... others just want to be left alone in their class and avoid all this. Then it can become a workload issue with some getting overloaded with responsibilities because they volunteer all the time. Some want more say but are not prepared to give up the time required.

Teachers also agreed with the 'workload issue'. For them, it became a matter of balancing their time sitting on committees and carrying out their classroom responsibilities:

Where do you put your energies? I can't do it all. I've been on the School Council now for two years but have to have a break and get back to concentrating on teaching.

The principal noted that for some teachers, the changes in their roles was something they did not yet understand in so far as being part of the school's decision-making processes. He saw this as part of a 'new professionalism'; one that required greater commitment and greater openness to parents and the community. Some teachers were willing to have teachers work in and visit their classrooms, while others were reluctant for this to happen. Parents agreed, one observing that some teachers still liked 'to keep us out'.

It's a matter of trust. They have to understand that I am not there spying on them or checking up on them. But that I want to help if I can. They're the expert, I just want to help in some way. It works well where there is a good trusting relationship between parents and teachers.

The principal, teachers and parents all agreed that the level of teacher involvement in the school had increased in recent years. Where once the principal was at the 'top of the tree and had all the power', now teachers were having a much greater say in what was happening in the school. A teacher of twenty years experience noted:

The principal's role is now a much more collaborative one ... a mediator, balancing, ... negotiator. But at the end of the day the buck stops with him.

As for School A, the School Council had been operating for a number of years. However, despite its history, the new chairperson saw it still maturing in its role in the school and how it aligned with other bodies such as the Parents and Citizens' Association. She also noted that members had to understand the relationship the Council held with the principal and that both teachers and parents needed some training to be effective council members;

We still have to work out the roles, the strategic and operational. On top of that, members have to be trained. New members need induction. You can't just sit around and hope it will work.

This parent also saw a need for training and skill development for the Classroom Parent Representatives. Again, she believed that if parents were going to make the most of the opportunities available and make a real contribution to the school then they would need some skill development. To this end, she had organised a six-day conference/workshop for parents which had proved highly successful.

Parents believed there were sound opportunities for them to become involved in the school. However, they noted that parents needed to be proactive and not wait for the school to communicate with them. The parents also noted that by getting involved in the school, parents were able to contribute significantly to a shared vision for the school, potentially leading to better educational opportunities for their children. However, one parent noted that the overall level of involvement across the eight years she had been associated with the school had declined. The number of parents was smaller, but they were more highly involved: 'A lot more mothers are working now, our lives are so much busier'.

One teacher noted that the attitude of the principal was a key factor as to whether decision-making was genuinely shared in the school. In particular, he saw the whole 'involvement thing' as being about power and that the principal needed to be prepared to 'hand some of it over'. It was then a matter of whether teachers took up the opportunities. They had to weigh up whether it meant real changes and having a say in the school and whether they could balance the extra workload with the additional time and responsibilities.

The principal indicated that he attempted to inform parents of developments in the school (and beyond) through the newsletter and various other avenues such as parent Information Nights. In this way, he believed they could contribute more meaningfully to the school and their children's education. However, he observed that, like one of the parents, the number of parents involved in the school was getting smaller. There was a 'hard core' who were active in the School Council and other bodies, but the number of parents contributing was diminishing. He cited requests for responses to surveys as an example, where the number responding was small despite his efforts to promote their importance. He also noted that the number of women involved in the school far outweighed the number of men.

Overall, like School A, this school has made steps to include teachers and parents to a greater extent in decision-making since SBM was introduced. The School Council has been important in this.

While the School Council remains the major formal body through which a wider representation of people can be involved, other strategies such as the identification of Classroom Parent Representatives also create opportunities in this regard. However, while these bodies provide the opportunities, the training of participants and maturation and gathering of experience are key factors in achieving the most extensive and effective involvement by parents and teachers in decision-making.

Messages from these two schools and discussion

The findings for these two schools regarding community involvement in school decision-making indicate that under SBM they have moved into different operational contexts, where teachers and parents have significantly enhanced roles in decision-making compared with earlier times. Before examining some of the key aspects of this involvement, it is useful to reflect on what can be synthesised as a number of 'gains' for schools as a result of community involvement – refer to Table 3.

Table 3: Gains for schools as a result of greater community involvement

Enhanced community involvement leads to
• Wider and greater ownership of the school — its vision and priorities • Greater diversity of views and expertise as inputs to decision-making • Development of more inclusive partnerships among teachers and parents • Enhanced professional culture among teachers

Each of these ‘gains’ must surely be considered by school communities, and particularly school leaders, as real positives for schools despite the additional time and effort that moves in this direction might take. While it is not claimed that these two schools have achieved some ‘ideal state’ with respect to the identified ‘gains’, collectively, they form potential powerful building blocks for developing the schools as learning communities. This must better equip these schools with the capacity to manage the increasingly complex and changing social and economic context within which they operate.

Table 4 summarises some of the key aspects underpinning community involvement in these two schools.

Table 4: Summary of key aspects of community involvement under SBM – the reality

Key aspects of community (teachers, parents) involvement
• Schools have developed a variety of formal structures to facilitate teacher and parent involvement • Opportunities for involvement by parents and teachers are much greater than previously available (ie before SBM) • Parents generally are not involved in decision-making about curriculum issues • Principals (and deputy principals) tended to maintain a final say over major issues for the school • Teachers generally have responded positively to the opportunities for greater involvement, although some (the minority) have been reluctant in this regard • A small number of parents now are more heavily involved in decision-making in the school than previously while the majority have only minimal involvement — those involved are positive and enthusiastic about their involvement • Mitigating factors for parents against involvement included: • lack of skills and comprehensive understanding of some school issues • pressures of time resulting from involvement versus work/home commitments • general reluctance (eg through lack of confidence) to become involved • Mitigating factors for teachers against involvement included: • pressures of time and workload resulting from involvement versus (other) classroom teaching responsibilities • attitude that it is not their (ie teachers) role • lack of appropriate skills, understanding of involvement - eg tension of collaboration versus my way

In considering these aspects, it is important to reflect on what have been identified as ‘mitigating factors’ for both teachers and parents working against involvement of these groups. These offer major challenges for the schools if they are to move further from the rhetoric to the reality of meaningful community involvement. Despite these ‘mitigating factors’ there is little doubt that each of these schools has endeavoured to develop more participative and collaborative community

decision-making processes. For some teachers and some parents, these still remain as opportunities rather than realities. However, each school's culture has changed under the SBM regime operating in the schools, moving to one increasingly exemplified by inclusiveness of community in decision-making rather than exclusiveness by the principal.

To begin and sustain the journey to a more participative and collaborative state, this research suggests that principals need to demonstrate particular skills, capacities and attitudes with regard to community involvement. These are consistent with the findings reported in the first research study earlier and are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Challenges for principals in achieving greater community involvement

Rhetoric becomes reality through principals
• being willing to share decision-making with others — issues of power, delegation and empowerment are important here • developing a welcoming culture, particularly for parents • developing trusting partnerships with parents and teachers • being willing to commit to the skill development of parents and teachers • striving to ensure that involvement is meaningful • endeavouring to engage, if not all, at least a representative cross-section of parents in decision-making • helping teachers balance time and workload issues resulting from involvement with their other (teaching) responsibilities in the school

For some principals and school cultures, these may pose major challenges. However, they seem essential if the rhetoric of greater community involvement is to become a more universal reality across schools. While again acknowledging that the two schools studied here are not offered as 'ideal' models regarding community involvement, they do represent two communities that have made both effort and progress in the journey towards greater engagement of parents and teachers in decision-making.

Concluding comments

It could be argued that for these schools, and with some of the limitations noted, the rhetoric and the reality of greater, meaningful parent and teacher

involvement in decision-making are indeed close. Significantly, a major lesson from both studies reported here is that principals must demonstrate leadership skills and capacities that facilitate such involvement. In particular, the 'capacity to empower, and delegate effectively, leading to multiple leadership roles' is clearly evident. In essence, they have, as Jackson (2000, p 76) might argue, embraced 'dispersed leadership arrangements ... expanding the leadership capacity' of their schools.

Principals need to demonstrate sound leadership and particularly interpersonal skills to create welcoming, inclusive and trusting collaborative cultures in their schools. For some principals and some teachers, such culture is a marked shift from that predominating earlier, where the principal dominated decision-making and teachers tended to keep parents at 'arms length'. SBM, underpinned by the devolution of decision-making about local priority setting and allocation of resources from the centre to the school, has been a key factor in moving to this changed state.

The factors identified as being critical to enhancing greater involvement of teachers and parents in schools are consistent with those identified elsewhere (eg see Australian Education Centres 1999). In particular, they draw on the facilitative leadership notions as discussed by Blasé and Blasé (1997) noted earlier. They also reflect what Jackson (2000) and others have called for in encouraging principals to 'learn that collaboration requires that they allow 'position' to be determined by the tasks at hand' (p 76). The factors represent challenges for some schools where the underpinning values and attitudes as indicated in Table 5 are not present.

Despite the relatively positive findings reported for these two schools, what is yet to emerge is evidence that greater involvement in schools by parents and teachers actually leads to improvement in student learning or even more generally in the quality of education available. Such links, while almost being self-evident, have not yet been established. This remains an important issue to pursue in the future as teachers as well as parents struggle to balance increasing demands on their time and energies. As one teacher asked, 'at the end of the day, does all this involvement lead to better education for my kids?'

Hence, while as reported here a more professional culture can develop among teachers as a result of their inclusion in decision-making, teachers' ongoing responsibilities to their classrooms and the 'core business' of schools, viz teaching and learning, must not be overlooked. Nor should the question raised by Mulford et al (2000) derived from Tasmania experiences: will school communities develop that 'value differences and support critical reflection and encourage members to constantly question, challenge, and debate teaching and learning' (p 75)? If such a state is achieved, then the links between greater involvement in decision-making and student learning might become more evident. Meaningful involvement will be the reality.

Importantly, while acknowledging emergent tensions of time and workload particularly for teachers, this research has identified no major 'losses' for schools as a result of greater teacher and parent involvement in decision-making. Rather, a set

of 'gains' has been identified (refer Table 3 earlier). However, it is important to note that some of the participants in this research indicated that schools were really going through a learning and maturing process in their journey towards greater parent and teacher involvement in decision-making in schools. Both teachers and parents acknowledged they needed skill development as part of this process. It behoves schools and policy makers to continue to monitor this journey if ongoing meaningful involvement is to be achieved that impacts positively on the learning of students, rather than resulting in greater in-school bureaucracy that is exclusive rather than inclusive of the school community. The challenges remain. The reality must reflect the rhetoric!

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