Abstract

Noting that several new programs have afforded teachers increased opportunity for participation in educational decision making, the paper examines practical and ethical arguments which support this trend. The practical arguments, which are based on the promise of increased educational productivity (e.g. student achievement), are found to be plausible but in need of confirmation through research. The ethical arguments are an application to teachers of the doctrine of workplace democracy, the notion that workers have the right to participate in making decisions that affect their work. It is concluded that both types of arguments must be considered in the development of policy.

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Increased Decision Making Involvement for Teachers: Ethical and Practical Considerations

As early as 1903, John Dewey lamented the fact that he was not aware of a "single school system in the United States" where "methods of discipline and teaching and questions of curriculum, textbooks, etc.," were decided by teachers themselves. This situation has remained largely unchanged as major educational decisions have usually been handed down to teachers by a variety of political (e.g., state legislatures), administrative (e.g., district office personnel), and private (e.g., textbook companies) decision making bodies.

In recent years, however, some preliminary steps have been taken to increase the level of teacher involvement in educational decision making. School site councils, teacher centers, various collaborative [team] teaching and planning programs, and teacher union insistence on increasingly broadly based negotiations have provided some teachers with new opportunities to participate in the making of decisions which affect their work. The object of this paper is to explore the question of whether it is desirable to continue such programs and to further expand opportunities for teacher involvement in educational decision making.

Typically, the rationale for attempts to promote increased educational decision making opportunities for teachers has rested on the notion that, ultimately, such a course would have a positive effect on the productivity of schools. That is, it has been posited that if teachers participate more in decision making, students will reap certain benefits. This position is usually based on two theoretical arguments.

The first argument rests on the belief that a sound awareness of student needs is a prerequisite to effective educational decisions. It holds that by virtue of their daily contact with students, teachers are the only professionals who can accurately gauge the particular needs of students at a given school. Therefore, the argument concludes, they have a unique contribution to make to the school decision making process.

The second argument is psychologically based. It holds that people who are involved in making decisions will have a greater stake in those decisions than those who are not. They will be more likely

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to comply with decisions they have helped to make and to feel positively about the organization they help to govern. The conclusion is twofold: First, teachers who help make decisions will try harder to make those decisions work out well. Second, if teachers try harder, students presumably will benefit.

Despite these arguments which suggest that teacher involvement will lead both to better decisions and to more effective implementation of decisions in the school, the connection between educational productivity and teacher decision making is by no means established. In thinking about productivity in education, a distinction needs to be made between student outcomes and teacher outcomes. Student outcomes — such as academic achievement, socially desirable behavior, and self-esteem — represent the primary goals of schooling. In recent years, a variety of studies have suggested that the primary goal of any production process can be enhanced by attending to the needs of workers.[1] Thus, certain teacher outcomes — notably job satisfaction, mental health, and collegialism — may be regarded as *secondary goals* of schooling, potentially contributing to the achievement of primary goals. In addition, with more than 2 million public school teachers in the United States, these secondary goals constitute important ends in themselves even if they are unrelated to the attainment of education's primary goals.

Research that directly addresses the relationship between the degree of teacher decision making and student outcomes is almost non-existent. A few studies of teacher involvement in a specific type of decision suggests that the relationship may be positive. For example, studies on the training and utilization of teacher aides, have concluded that, when teachers participate in making decisions concerning the use of aides, students benefit.[2] Other studies suggest that there may be negative outcomes. Ronald G. Corwin in *Militant Professinalism* (1970), found that schools with a higher degree of centralized decision making (high bureaucratic schools) tended to have fewer student behavior problems.[3] Several other studies have yielded results which support the contention that the relationship between teacher involvement in school decision making and student achievement may be positive or negative — varying with grade level, subject matter, and type of instructional grouping.[4] Given the scarcity of relevant research, the lack of any clear trend in the findings and the significant time and resources necessary to establish a link between student outcomes and any other factors, it seems safe to conclude that the relationship between teacher involvement in decision making and student outcomes will not be well understood for quite some time.

Teacher Outcomes

Research on the relationship between teacher involvement and teacher outcomes is more plentiful and somewhat more conclusive. Concern over teacher outcomes stems, in part, from the work of human-relations theorists who are as committed to the emotional health and well-being of workers as to productivity. J.R. Galbraith in *Organization Design* (1977), offers a typical reaction of such a theorist to advocates of classical management. He addresses himself specifically to the negative impact of division of labor.

> The first problem was the possibility of motivational limitations of efficiency. Once the task has been divided into pieces and the planning and control decisions taken away, have we not created a situation which deprives individuals of any personal work satisfaction? What will motivate them to assume such roles and devote their time and energy to the subtask? If decisions are made by individuals who do not perform the work, why will the doers adopt behavior selected for them by others?[5]

Michael J. Vavrus does a fine job reviewing the literature on teacher job satisfaction and pointing out how complex this construct can be.[6] Job satisfaction involves mental health, motivational, and morale factors. In his own research, Vavrus finds that recently trained teachers enter the profession expecting a higher degree of decision making involvement than their more experienced colleagues report. The latter group reflect a higher degree of alienation from their work, a disturbing finding

given the fact that seniority is supposed to yield greater job satisfaction and influence. It appears that teaching may not necessarily hold out the promise of increased authority to those who choose to make it a career.

Where teachers are given an opportunity to participate in school decision making, these are indications that they experience greater job satisfaction and higher morale.[7] Harrell H. Carpenter looked at schools with different organizational structures and found that teacher job satisfaction was greatest where there were fewest "layers" of authority.[8] In the final evaluation of the Teacher Involvement Project, Emrick and Peterson (1978) state that teachers listed the following benefits of their involvement in school decision making: improved staff morale, increased communications with administrators and district office, more efficient use of meeting time, better sense of professionalism and job satisfaction, and protection of teacher interests.[9] Bridges (1964) found that teachers' attitudes toward principals were more favorable where opportunities for their participation were greater whereas Meyer and Cohen (1971) concluded that if teachers are made to feel more powerful they will experience higher morale, which in turn, will reduce the likelihood of teachers dropping out of the profession.[10]

Despite these indications of positive teacher outcomes, there are reasons for exercising care in claiming universal benefits from shared decision making. The body of research on the subject, though growing, still does not constitute a sizeable enough collection to permit generalizations to be made. As with any well-intentioned innovation, shared decision making conceivably can produce negative by-products.[11] No one, for instance, has systematically investigated the possibility that the time required for teachers to become involved in school decision making may result in less time spent on instruction or instructional planning, which in turn may contribute to decreased student achievement. Another possibility is that teachers, because they tend to function in isolation, may be poorly suited to school decision making. In other words, they may be unable to rise above the parochial interests of their individual classrooms.

Some of the existing research reinforces the need for caution in predicting the benefits of shared decision making and has found that job satisfaction was slightly greater among teachers in schools where collaborative decision making did not occur regularly.[12] Currently this group is trying to determine if their finding can be explained by problems in the process by which the experimental (unit) and control (non-unit) schools were selected. Others suggest that greater job satisfaction for teachers results from participation in making only certain kinds of decisions.[13] Teachers reported greater satisfaction from involvement in technical decision making (decisions related to instructional role) than from managerial or negotiation decision making as can be seen in a study of the impact of California's Early Childhood Education program (the precursor of the School Improvement Program), note that the presence of school advisory councils and greater opportunities for teacher involvement in school decision making did not produce more collaboration or coordination.[14] The influence of principals in the ECE schools, in fact, was perceived to be greater than in non-ECE schools.

In summary, it is too soon to claim a precise understanding of the relationship between teacher involvement in school decision making and either sudent or teacher outcomes. There simply are insufficient data on the subject. The number of experiments with extensive teacher involvement has been so small that it is not even clear how teachers would function in situations where they could share fully in making a wide range of school decisions. The potential effect of such a situation on school productivity is even less predctable.

Workplace Democracy

Despite the uncertainty concerning the relationship between participation and productivity, there is a much more fundamental reason for our interest in teacher involvement in decision making. Stated briefly, we believe that any employee group, teachers included, has a basic right to be involved in the decision making process of the organization for which they work. More specifically, we believe that it is imperative for teachers to gain a greater share of the authority to make decisions regarding their own work. In order to understand the justification for this belief, let us consider two analogies.

In recent years, many women have demanded increased involvement in the decision making processes of their families. No one, feminists included, has based this demand on the notion that families will run more efficiently or be more productive if decision making is collaborative (although we suspect that positive results will accrue). Rather, the argument has been that women should be involved in decisions affecting their families for the same reason that men should — because it is right. Similarly, on a much larger scale, the basic argument for a democratic form of government is not that democracy is more productive or efficient than other less collaborative forms of government, but rather that everyone has the right to be included in government.

When applied to workers, the doctrine which these analogies support is called workplace democracy. It holds that the fact that workers agree to exchange their labor for remuneration does not in itself justify the assumption by their superiors of total control of that labor. In this view, workers, despite their agreement to participate in an organized process of production, cannot be treated purely as means to an end. They retain the right to collaborate on decisions which relate to the utilization of their own labor.

We believe that the case for workplace democracy is at least strong enough to merit serious consideration of ways in which it can be applied to teachers. To support this belief we find it useful to distinguish between two possible formulations of the principle of workplace democracy. The first formulation, which we call the weak principle of workplace democracy, states: Workers have a right to control their own labor at least to the extent that production is not negatively affected. The second or strong principle goes further: Workers have a right to control their own labor even if productivity is negatively affected.

Any attempt to apply the strong principle to public schools, that is, to profess a willingness to sacrifice student outcomes to the goal of teacher participation in educational decision making would no doubt provoke a great deal of controversy. Opponents of such a course would argue that since the promotion of particular student outcomes, individual or aggregate depending on one's point of view, is the reason that schools exist at all, it would be illogical to enforce a system of educational governance which detracted from these goals. Proponents would counter that a person's right to be involved in decisions which affect his work in inviolable and that there are numerous examples of less than optimal results accruing from the legitimate exercise of inviolable rights. Ultimately, the resolution of the issue would require a collective moral judgment, that is, public concensus concerning what is right.

The weak principle, on the other hand, is much less controversial. Operationally it amounts to nothing more than a preference for a democratic workplace unless a less democratic one can be shown to be more productive. We do not think that there is any reasonable case against this formulation of workplace democracy because any such case would call for a limitation of worker freedom which could not be justified by legitimate organizational goals. Furthermore, we believe that since teachers currently have a very low level of involvement in decisions which affect their

work and since the effect of increasing this level is currently unknown, even the weak principle mandates attempts to increase the decision making involvement of teachers.

In fact, many scholars have concluded that increased workplace democracy usually leads to increased productivity. In a review of studies relating to this issue, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (*Work in America*, 1973) found more than two dozen cases in which increased worker involvement in decision making had increased productivity and none in which productivity had declined. However, schools differ in a number of fundamental ways from the industrial organizations in which these studies took place and no specific research relative to this question has been reported for schools. Again, we readily admit that whether this direct relationship between workplace democracy and productivity will obtain in schools is open to study.

Less controversial is the notion that workplace democracy is in the best interest of any group of workers. Paul Blumberg, in *Industrial Democracy* summarizes the literature concerning the relationship between worker decision making power and job satisfaction as follows:

> There is scarcely a study in the entire literature which fails to demonstrate that satisfaction in work is enhanced . . . [by] a genuine increase in worker's decision-making power. Findings of such consistency, I submit, are rare in social research . . . The participative worker is an involved worker, for his job becomes an extension of himself and by his decisions he is creating his work, modifying and regulating it.[15]

These consistent findings give credence to the contention that any worker begins to feel estranged from his or her work when separated from the process by which work-related decisions are made. Perhaps the most eloquent exposition of this view is made by Harry Braverman in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). Braverman places special blame on excessive division of labor for the "degradation" of work in contemporary Western society and the "progressive alienation of the process of production from the worker."[16] This view is supported by another claim that "a worker who performs the entire task will be more willing and better able to assume responsibility for the control of his performance than will the worker who carries out only a portion of the task and whose performance may in various ways be dependent on the work of others."[17]

It seems to follow that workplace democracy is in the best interests of a democratic society as well as individual workers. Rejecting the belief that ordinary people are not sufficiently interested to become involved in decision making, Carole Pateman's *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970) contends that structural factors serve to discourage widespread participation in democratic societies.[18] Pateman argues for workplace democracy (as well as the democratization of other sectors of society) on the grounds that citizens learn to participate in their government by practicing participation on the job, in school, at home, and elsewhere. She notes that:

> People who have a sense of political efficacy are more likely to participate in politics than those in whom this feeling is lacking and it has also been found that underlying the sense of political efficacy is a sense of general, personal effectiveness, which involves self-confidence in one's dealings with the world.[19]

Phrasing the same idea slightly differently, Almond and Verba in *The Civil Culture* (1965) maintain that,

> . . . if in most social situations the individual finds himself subservient to some authority figure, it is likely that he will expect such an authority relationship in the political sphere. On the other hand, if outside the political sphere he has opportunities to participate in a wide range of social decisions, he will probably expect to be able to participate in political decisions as well. Furthermore, participation in non-political decision making may give one the skills needed to engage in political participation.[20]

These are further indications that strides toward the goal of workplace democracy are being made, particularly in Europe, China, and Cuba if distinctions are made between micro-political reforms ("changes in the internal decision-making of the work enterprise") and macro-political reforms ("modifications of the external or overall governance of the firm").[21] Among the reforms currently taking place around the world are the creation of autonomous work groups, worker councils, and

employee-initiated ownership plans as well as provisions for worker representation on corporate boards. The Israeli kibbutz and worker self-management schemes in Yugoslavia, China, and Cuba are further illustrations of situations in which workers make decisions about production and distribution.

In essence, then, there appears to be a growing awareness that workers in a variety of occupations should be directly involved in making work-related decisons. By virtue of possessing labor power, every worker deserves a voice in determining how that labor power will be used, in what kind of work setting, and under what conditions. Teachers are no exception. We believe that it is imperative that educational researchers, administrators, and teachers themselves begin to explore ways in which teachers can become more active in the governance of their schools. Furthermore, we believe that there is a great need for research into the relationship between shared decision making in education and school productivity. We hope that such exploration and research will lead to the development of a system of educational governance which simultaneously will maximize educational productivity and the extent to which schools are democratic places to work.

Notes

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