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**Why Teachers Participate in Decision-making and The Third Continuum**

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**Introduction**

The question of why management, or administrative leaders, share decision-making has found answers in a combination of factors. These factors range from attempts to co-op workers into better compliance to a genuine desire to reach higher productivity through a more informed and wiser decision-making process as a result of empowered workers. The question of why workers, or in this case, teachers, participate in decision-making is more problematic. This article explores two parts of this question. First, the literature on shared decision-making from a historical perspective identifying ‘factors’ affecting teacher participation in decision-making. Second, these factors are discussed as ‘continuums’ of decision-making of which a third continuum is seen to involve greater influence by teachers as leaders in schools. In this regard I attempt to provide a better answer the question of why teachers participate in decision-making in schools.

**Why Teachers Participate in Decision-making and The Third Continuum**

**The Question**  
The historical discussion of participation in decision-making centres on many considerations. The main motivation was to increase productivity, more and better goods from a factory, or higher student achievement from more satisfied teachers in schools. Given the context of more recent events and the literature on leadership it also needs to be discussed why ‘teachers’ choose to exercise leadership in the context of shared decision-making. Part of the answer to this question can be framed historically from the literature as factors affecting teacher participation in shared decision-making in schools.

**Factors Affecting Teacher Participation in Decision-making**  
These factors show didactic motivations from rules for the inclusion or exclusion of teachers in decision-making to more meaningful belief in teacher empowerment. Typically the traditional idea of management involved deciding when and who to include was seen in Bridge’s (1967) view that leaders needed to administer tests of relevance and expertise in order to determine the “zones of indifference.”

* *Zone of Indifference--*test of relevance using expertise and relevance increased satisfaction, better implementation of decisions Bridges (1967) Decisional Deprivation levels of from deprivation, equilibrium to saturation variation of levels in participation to increase satisfaction Belasco and Alutto (1972) Zone of Acceptance range of acceptance decision involvement form clearly acceptable to clearly unacceptable Increase satisfaction, greater commitment, better decision Kunz and Hoy (1976).
* *Alienation*--measure of perceived influence on decision-making; alienation related to sense of efficacy increase sense of empowerment and self efficacy. Benson and Malone (1987).
* *Contested Ground--*political negotiated areas of shared decision-making from classroom to administrative redistribution of decision-making areas, better decisions Conley (1991).
* *Empowerment*--measure of actual influence in decision-making from empowered, involved, engaged to disengaged, increase sense of efficacy for low impact teacher (disempowered). Tashakkori and Taylor (1997).
* Commitment of Change capacity beliefs: personal goals, capacity and context belief, and emotional arousal process greater commitment to decisions and synthesis of individual and organisational goals Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1998).

Further to this was a shift to better understand the motivations of teachers as raised by Benson and Malone (1987) in their discussion of “alienation” and a teacher's sense of his/her ability to act on decisions, or efficacy. The aim was to motivate teachers, mostly at the bequest of administrators, to achieve organisational imperatives. That teachers shaped organisations as active participants while sometimes acknowledged was not overly apparent.

More recent assertions in the shared decision-making literature suggested that teachers must do more than simply participate. Teachers provide leadership. Thus it seemed obvious that teachers need to be empowered to do this (Taylor and Tashakkori, 1997). The evidence suggested that teachers, acting as leaders, had a greater commitment to change (Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach, 1998). Shared decision-making was seen as a means for teachers to lead in the school and beyond the classroom. Such extended influence and involvement enhanced commitment to systematic change as it enabled a more empowered and efficacious teachers (Smylie; 1992, 1995). Thus, sharing or participating in decision-making in its historical context had shifted its focus to empowering teachers to lead, not simply co-opting them into becoming better followers. For school administrators and teachers, this had implications. As Schlechty (1990) pointed out, school administrators in the future must see themselves as “leaders of leaders.”

While teacher leadership, in the context of shared decision-making, can be related to the factors affecting decision-making and can be shaped into a discussion of three related continuums. These continuums are related to teacher leadership and participation in decision-making in schools and are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

**The Two Continuums**  
The answer to the question as to why teachers choose to show leadership while participating in decision-making, simply put is because: they can, they want to, and they can make a difference. The reasons why can be related to three continuums of decision-making. The first two continuums were described by Taylor and Tashakkori (1997) and are illustrated in Figure 1. The first (because they can) was a continuum of actual participation. This ranged from very little participation typical of an authoritarian-managerial style, to an extreme democratic from in which teachers made all the decisions (Conway & Calzi, 1996). In the second continuum (because they want to) Taylor and Tashakkori (1997) attempted to deal with a teacher's varying level of actual desire to participate.

High Actual  
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Low Desire ------- High Desire  
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Low Actual

**Figure 1: The Two-Axis Continuum**

The first continuum spanned actual participation of teacher in decision-making. The first continuum has a long history. In studying actual participation Bridges (1967) related shared decision-making as sharing decisions by staying outside the teacher zone of indifference. He described the zone of indifference as the area in which "an administrator's decision will be accepted unquestionably" (p. 51). When to include teachers can be determined by "applying tests of relevance and expertise in determining whether to include teachers in decision-making" (p. 51). Belasco and Alutto (1972) build on Bridge's work by focusing on decisional participation to understand teacher satisfaction as per levels of participation. Belasco and Alutto (1972) define decisional deprivation as "the discrepancy between current and preferred levels of participation" (p. 44). This was divided into three categories for analysis, deprivation (wanting more decision-making), equilibrium (satisfied with current levels), and saturation (wanting less). Each level of satisfaction has ramifications for teacher participation. Teacher satisfaction was defined "as a willingness to remain with the current school organisation despite inducements to leave" (Belasco and Alutto, 1972, p. 44). Teacher satisfaction was seen as important to teacher performance and commitment as the educational organisation relied on "a willingness on the part of organisational members to both dependably prosecute their current assignment and adapt to changing future conditions" (p. 45).

Teachers feeling they were decisionaly deprived reported lower satisfaction levels. Saturated and equilibrium teachers were more satisfied but not necessarily willing to increase their participation. Therefore, to simply increase participation in decision-making in absolute terms may be counter-productive. Belasco and Alutto (1972) argued "the data suggest the necessity for a management strategy which recognizes that a similar decisional participation approach will have a varying impact on satisfaction levels" (p. 56). Allowing teacher participation in decision-making purports to result in a more satisfied teacher with greater commitment to organizational goals. This assumed a ready desire on the part of teachers to participate.

In the second continuum, teachers' desire to participate was considered. Kunz and Hoy (1976) discussed teacher zone of interest in decision-making. They defined the "zone of acceptance" in decision-making the "willingness of a subordinate to hold his own criteria for making decisions and to comply with orders from superiors" (p. 49). In this regard, a teacher may not necessarily be indifferent as implied by Bridges (1967) use of the term zone of indifference. There existed limits, or a range of acceptability from "clearly unacceptable to those that are unquestionably acceptable" (p. 49). Conley (1991) added to this discussion by describing teachers' interest areas. She described what could be seen as a changing decisional buffer zone, between what could be classed as traditional teacher decisional areas and the traditional administrative realm, as "contested ground". The issue of whose decisions are whose, what decisions to make, and who decides, needs careful consideration. Conley (1991) stated "more research is needed regarding contested decisions (as) increasing teacher participation in the intermediate may engender conflict" (p. 242).

In trying to better understand a teachers' desire to participate in decision-making Taylor and Tashakkori (1997) used four categories of teacher involvement in decision-making; empowered (those that were involved and desired to be involved), disenfranchised (those that were not involved but desired involvement), involved (those that were involved but did not desire it), and disengaged (those that were neither involved nor desired to be). The study attempted to resolve what was seen as a lack of understanding of the nature of teacher participation dimensions. They claimed "several studies note that teachers prefer involvement in some areas over others" (p. 612). Taylor and Tashakkori (1997) found that the best discriminator between high participation and low participation groups was principal leadership followed by job satisfaction. In addition, they found that the variable most likely to discriminate among teachers as to their desire to participate in decision-making was a teacher’s sense of efficacy (as confident they can teach effectively).

The issue of teacher disengagement and having low efficacy may be important in improving classroom instruction, as they are “disengaged teacher (low desire/low participation). A weak sense of efficacy likely translates into a preoccupation about professional adequacy (needs) opportunities to collaborate in lesson planning with peers who appear more successful may open the chance to learn more effective techniques or get advice” (p. 624). This may also relate to earlier concerns about worker alienation raised by Benson and Malone (1987) in accepting or rejecting one's ability to influence student achievement or commit to change. Teacher desire, or lack of desire, can be related to a teacher's commitment to change. The low impact teacher (disengaged or disenfranchised), while not necessarily complacent, may be unwilling, or see themselves as unable to act on change initiatives whether they view them as worthwhile or not.

**The Third Continuum**  
I would suggest a third continuum (as seen in Figure 2 below) is apparent but not yet strongly identified in the literature, that of a teacher's actual influence in decision-making (because they can make a difference). Teacher’s actual influence on decision-making refers to the more concrete notion that a teacher’s contribution is having results. This is not to be confused with teacher efficacy, which deals more with the belief that a teacher can initiate change or make a difference. This is sort of a process- product orientation in that one might confirm the other and that successful influence should improve ones sense of efficacy.

High Actual  
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High Influence  
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Low Desire ------ High Desire  
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Low Influence  
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**Figure 2: The Third Continuum Axes**

The success of teachers in influencing decisions and the substance of these decisions may be crucial in having teachers actually become leaders in schools. Influencing the decision-making process shifts their participation in the direction of teacher leadership. Benson and Malone (1987) argued "teachers experiencing a high degree of powerlessness often develop a high degree of alienation which predisposes them to locate the source of student learning difficulties in the students themselves, or their home background rather than school methodology" (p. 244). Benson and Malone (1987) believed that research asking about teacher participation in decision-making could be improved by asking teachers "about their influence in decision-making, rather than involvement in decision-making" (p. 245). While teachers participate in decision-making their actual influence may be low, or high, i.e., there is a qualitative difference in participation, which may affect their sense of efficacy, empowerment or alienation. Benson and Malone (1987) concluded "from this sample, it appears that perceived influence on decision-making is more closely related to alienation than deprivation" (p. 250). Duke, Showers, and Imber (1980) raised the same concern writing "of the teachers interviewed, experience has taught these teachers that, most often, shared decision-making does not mean shared influence" (p. 104). Teachers' perception of their actual influence may affect their desire to participate in decision-making as well as to be leaders.

**Conclusion: Shared Decision-making in Perspective**

The evolution of leadership through shared decision-making spans the last hundred years. Teachers have evolved from what Murphy (1993) called the “junior partners” (p. 3) of the first half of the twentieth century. As teachers gain recognition and become more recognised as professionals, the “authority paradox” becomes more apparent creating a need for change to more distributed forms of leadership (Blase, 1993). Wheatley (1994) discussed new forms of leadership, pointed out a maintenance crew chief, a sergeant, but not the base commander, decide whether a particular aircraft will fly, or not. There are parallels in education. As teachers gain professional status and more specialized training, they gain authority, particularly in their areas of expertise. Leadership perceptions must reflect this. Teacher leaders are highly involved in decision-making.

Marks and Louis (1999) stated that “site-based decision-making accompanying decentralization can empower teachers to varying extents, ranging from nominal empowerment to full partnership or, very rarely, to full teacher control” (p. 710). I argue that high participation and high teacher influence represent a third continuum (teachers actual influence on decision-making as compared to desire and involvement) of teacher influence on decision-making, and thereby teacher leadership. Teachers’ actual participation and desires to participate might vary depending on individual teacher characteristics as well as the context in which they exercise this participation. Taylor and Tashakkori (1997) argued that teachers that were high in participation and desire were empowered. I argue that successful outcomes from practise in influencing decisions or in influencing others on matters of substance, moves teacher participation in decision-making towards the direction of teacher leadership in schools.

As schools seem less influenced by seemingly more remote school districts and teacher associations, there are changing expectations on teachers as leaders. They can expect to have more decision-making avenues in some areas and will be expected to take a larger role in school-based decision-making. However, in the context of control through accountability and the actual reduction in resources means that teacher leadership is often aimed to enhance student outcomes with less. In this way the district, school, and association have been encouraging greater leadership in a climate that has sometimes been volatile. A note of caution then, in that while much has been said about the benefits of greater teacher participation in decision-making and teacher leadership in schools, there are very real constraints. These consist of lack of time, lack of training and support, isolation, lack of expertise, lack of confidence in teachers' own ability, politesse, role ambiguity, resistance by administrators, lack of change skills, lack of real formal authority, losses in collegiality, uncertainty about excellence, innovation overload, information and decision-making overload (Anderson & Jacka, 1994; Bascia, 1996; Griffin, 1995; Leithwood et al., 1998; Hart, 1994, 1995; Conway & Calzi, 1996). Also noted, the “time taken for work outside the classroom likely interferes with the time needed for students ... (the lack of) training and funding for leadership roles ... Cultures of isolationism ... lack of role definition ... requiring them to take on responsibilities outside their expertise” (Leithwood, et al., 1998, p. 4). Despite these constraints, it appears that there is a consensus that all teachers should participate in decision-making. Quite simply, a truly meaningful shared decision-making process that encourages teachers, not just in participation but to lead, can overcome these obstacles and enhance teacher leadership opportunities and its benefits.

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