

## **The involvement of teachers in school change: a comparison between the views of school principals in South Africa and nine other countries**

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*Previous international studies, in which the authors participated, have revealed that involvement of teachers in decision-making and responsibility-taking processes is crucial for their receptiveness towards implementation of current and future educational change. It is also evident that the role and responsibilities of school principals have changed significantly over the last decade or two. An indication was obtained of the views of South African secondary-school principals regarding the involvement of their teachers in processes of school change and these were compared to the views of school principals from other countries. The results for the South African sample, as well as those for the other nine countries, showed that there was fairly strong support for the involvement of teachers in most school-change activities. It also appeared that, in comparison to other countries, principals in the South African sample occupied a middle position in all of four clusters of possible activities, as well as for the mean questionnaire score.*

### **Introduction**

Over many years educational change has been a topical point of discussion, not only in South Africa but worldwide. Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan and Hopkins (1998:1) mention in this regard that "... everywhere, it seems, educational change is not only a policy priority but also major public news". The scope of interest in educational change and of actions in various parts of the world to promote fundamental changes in this regard caused Hargreaves *et al.* (1998:1) to remark that education change and reform "... have rarely had so much prominence within public policy, in so many different places".

Considerable research has been done worldwide on educational change. The following are examples of the many publications published during the past ten years on this issue: Ball (1999), Mortimore and Mortimore (1998), Frederics, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004), Leithwood and Jantzi (2000), Hargreaves *et al.* (1998), Williamson and Cowley (1995), Leszczynska and Olek (1997), Slabbert (2001), and Hargreaves and Bascia (2000). However, the published research shows that the implementation of educational change has frequently failed. Various reasons are given for the failures, *inter alia*, that initiators of change, such as politicians, do not keep in mind that successful implementation of change and its sustainability require, first and foremost, an inherent change in people (Slabbert, 2001:291). An aspect that has received scant attention, in this regard, deals with the effect of educational change on the work life experience of teachers, who are the key figures in the facilitation of such change.

To gain more insight into how teachers experience educational change, the authors have taken part, since 1994, in an international research project as members of the Michigan-based Consortium for Cross-Cultural Research in Education. The aim of this Consortium is to obtain rich, descriptive data about the contexts, activities, beliefs and feelings of teachers in and about their particular settings with the possibility of making context-bound generalizations. The

results of the first phase of the ongoing research in which nine countries took part were published in "New realities of secondary teachers' work lives" (Poppleton & Williamson, 2004). In this investigation it was found that the active involvement of teachers in school change was more powerful than any of the study's other variables for promoting positive work life outcomes for teachers, as well as generating teachers' receptiveness and positive feelings towards change itself. "The more teachers participated in responsible and initiating roles in school change, the more positive they felt about the change, and the more willing they were to seriously engage in future change" (Poppleton & Williamson, 2004:289). Furthermore, the investigation revealed that the most positive consequences of work life change for teachers and for their school's improvement occurred if they were involved at the highest level of change activity (initiating, planning, and shared decision-making).

The findings mentioned above link up with previous research and reiterate the importance of the active involvement of teachers as the key agents who mediate between the change agenda and the implementation of the change in the school and classroom. Bradshaw and Buckner (in Botha, 2004:239) claim, for instance, that the significant changes and reforms demanded of schools can only be attained through devolution of power and through shared decision-making that encourages people to change and address educational problems. However, although research studies show how central teacher involvement is to successful implementation, governments see education as an instrument for national economic growth and social engineering and, therefore, intervene directly in school curricula, administrative structures, and assessment practices without the involvement of teachers.

The tendency of education providers to ignore the importance of teacher involvement in the process of educational reform, however, is only one side of the coin. The current international trend in educational reform and restructuring is the decentralization of decision-making powers to the local and school level that implies an increase of the responsibilities of school management teams and school governing bodies (Kruger, 2003:206). This has resulted in significant changes in the role of the principal over the last decade or two. Botha (2004:239) mentions in this regard that the workload of school principals is becoming more and more unmanageable and many principals lack the time for and an understanding of their leadership task. In addition, the South African Minister of Education recently announced that she intends introducing legislation that will increase the powers and authority of school principals and thereby curb the role of school governing bodies (Naidoo, 2005). She signalled that there was a need to re-assert the professional responsibility of principals. Such legislation will probably enhance the leadership role of the principal and will ensure that (s)he will become more influential regarding matters such as school budgeting, recommendation of teachers for vacancies and admission policies.

### **Research problem and research aim**

The above scenario implies that the school principal's disposition towards teacher involvement in responsibility-taking and decision-making is a crucial factor determining the nature and level of teacher participation in educational change. It appears, however, that some school principals are hesitant to involve teachers in decision-making processes. In a recent collection of writings the dilemmas that principals face in engaging teachers in the sharing of leadership in schools were examined (Chrispeels, 2004). The question arises why this is the case if theory and practice have shown that significant responsibility-taking of members within organizational

settings increases the likelihood of a healthy institution and increases the willingness to participate in future organizational improvements or change.

With reference to this question, the research was aimed at determining the views of South African secondary-school principals regarding the involvement of their teachers in processes of school change and comparing these to the views of school principals in nine other countries.

## **Methodological matters**

### **Research design**

A quantitative empirical investigation, which can be described as exploratory in nature, was undertaken. In this investigation a structured questionnaire was developed and applied to gain practical knowledge of secondary-school principals'

- Perceptions of teachers' desires to be involved in different kinds of school change;
- Views on the extent to which teachers should be involved; and
- Hesitancy to involve teachers.

### **The questionnaire**

A survey instrument (questionnaire) consisting of 20 tightly focused items was developed by the University of Michigan research team and was used by the teams from the other countries, with native language alterations where necessary. The 20 items were based on roles and expectations derived from existing literature. Back-translation procedures were employed in the precise construction of the items and country-specific field-testing was conducted. The 20 items represented different possible responsibilities relating to school change in which teachers could be involved. Deviation from the questionnaire for a particular country was not possible as this would have jeopardized cross-country comparisons.

For each of the 20 items principals were requested to answer the following four questions:

- How much do you think teachers want to take part in this responsibility?
- How much do you feel teachers should take part in this responsibility?
- How hesitant do you feel about teachers taking part in this responsibility?
- Give a brief explanation of your hesitancy response.

The first three questions were answered on a five-point scale, namely, none/little/some/much/very much. The fourth question required an open-ended response.

### **The sample**

The ten research teams involved were from Australia, Canada, China, Hungary, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, Singapore, South Africa, and the United States of America. Each team collected responses from 50 secondary-school principals within a similar type urban-suburban area in each national setting. The South African team drew their sample from urban-suburban areas in Gauteng province.

### **Data analysis**

Role expectation theory (Hoy & Miskel, 1987) was used to arrange the 20 items of the questionnaire into four clusters according to their conceptual similarity. The conceptual clusters became four new variables for analysis and reduced the complexity of cross-country analysis. The first cluster, which related to the primary role of principals, was named 'Administration and coordination'. Items that were assigned to this cluster dealt with staffing, budgeting,

assigning learners to classes, and staff meetings. Items in the second cluster, labelled 'Human relations', dealt with relations with external groups or teacher-staff-administration relations. The 'Teacher support' cluster comprised items that dealt with assistance or support of teachers. The fourth cluster was labelled 'Classroom activities'. Items in this cluster dealt with curriculum matters, student behaviour, and class schedules. The issue of implementing and evaluating change was also included in this cluster since most changes were assumed to affect the classroom.

The analyses of the single-country data consisted of obtaining response percentages, distributional percentages, and means for each item, as well as for the four item clusters. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach alpha) were also calculated for the cluster averages and grand questionnaire means. Subsequently, the data for all countries were combined so that both univariate and multivariate analyses could be used to identify systematic similarities and differences in result-patterns among countries. *t* Tests of pairs of ordered means and one-way ANOVAS, followed by the application of a Newman-Keuls test of differences among ordered means, were utilized in this regard (Pagano, 1990:361). Results were also contextualised and explained by principals' open-ended responses.

## Results and discussion

The data analyses revealed a number of general tendencies. Firstly, the responses on the 20-item questionnaire showed that, although rather small, the difference between principals' views on how much teachers should be involved in responsibility-taking regarding school change and how much they thought teachers wanted to be involved, was significant. For the South African sample the grand means of the 20-item means were 3.87 for the 'teacher should' question and 3.77 for the 'teacher want' question, respectively. For the ten-country total the corresponding means were 3.71 and 3.30 (note that the principals used a 1 to 5 numeric scale, running from none to very much). In both cases the application of a *t* test for pairs of means indicated that the differences between these means were significant. As a matter of fact this significance applied to each individual country. (The data for the various countries are not provided because they are too extensive and space-consuming.) This implies that not only for the South African sample, but also for those of the other countries, principals held the view that teachers should be more involved in responsibility-taking during school change than the degree they anticipated teachers wanted to be involved.

Another general trend was discernible in the principals' responses to the request to indicate their hesitancy level about teachers being involved in responsibility-taking. The means of the distributional percentages showed that, for the South African sample, 88% of the principals indicated 'none' or only a 'little hesitant' about this matter whilst only 3% indicated 'much' or 'very much hesitant'. The corresponding percentages for the ten-country sample were 74% and 9%.

In the remainder of this article the focus is on an in-depth discussion of the views of school principals on how much teachers should be involved in responsibility-taking during school change. It is argued that these views represent the most direct measure of principals' support for and willingness to involve teachers in various school-change activities.

A synopsis is given in Table 1 of the responses of school principals on the extent to which teachers should be involved in responsibility-taking during school change, for the South African sample and the ten-country sample. For each of the 20 items the percentage of principals

who indicated that teacher involvement was of much or very much importance is included in the table as well as the mean of the item. Similar percentages and means are also given for the predetermined item clusters.

**Table 1** Principals' views on responsibilities teachers should be involved in

Cluster/ Item No.	Cluster/Item description	South Africa		Ten countries	
		% scored 4 or 5*	Cluster/ Item mean	% scored 4 or 5*	Cluster/ Item mean
<b>Cluster A</b>	<b>Administration &amp; coordination: Mean of 4 items</b>	<b>46.0</b>	<b>3.43</b>	<b>35.8</b>	<b>3.13</b>
1	Decide on number of students for different classes	44.0	3.48	34.5	3.15
12	Setting policies and criteria for hiring teachers	34.0	2.96	30.0	2.92
15	Deciding on the distribution of the school's budget	38.0	3.36	30.3	3.06
10	Conducting meetings of the teachers & staff	68.0	3.92	48.4	3.40
<b>Cluster B</b>	<b>Human relations: Mean of 5 items</b>	<b>64.8</b>	<b>3.84</b>	<b>58.8</b>	<b>3.66</b>
7	Formulating changes in teacher-administration relationships	48.0	3.50	52.5	3.51
9	Giving organized feedback to the administration & staff	78.0	4.08	71.8	3.89
16	Setting policies for changes in parent involvement	62.0	3.80	55.1	3.65
18	New ways to improve school's relationship with community	82.0	4.20	64.4	3.76
20	Organizing new programs for use of volunteers in the school	54.0	3.62	50.3	3.48
<b>Cluster C</b>	<b>Teacher support: Mean of 5 items</b>	<b>71.2</b>	<b>3.93</b>	<b>66.7</b>	<b>3.81</b>
3	Organizing supportive assistance for teachers	66.0	3.74	67.2	3.82
4	Developing policies on professional benefits for teachers	76.0	4.02	68.0	3.84
6	Developing professional in-service programs for teachers	68.0	3.84	67.5	3.82
14	Developing and conducting information programs for teachers	58.0	3.82	64.8	3.78
17	Developing approaches to the induction of new teachers	88.0	4.24	66.1	3.78

**Table 1** Continued

Cluster/ Item No.	Cluster/Item description	South Africa		Ten countries	
		% scored 4 or 5*	Cluster/ Item mean	% scored 4 or 5*	Cluster/ Item mean
<b>Cluster D</b>	<b>Classroom Activities: Mean of 6 items</b>	<b>82.7</b>	<b>4.13</b>	<b>77.0</b>	<b>4.05</b>
2	Developing new departmental courses for students	86.0	4.20	79.9	4.12
5	Planning changes in curriculum content, method & materials	84.0	4.12	81.3	4.19
11	Setting policies for student behaviour	94.0	4.32	84.1	4.17
19	Planning innovative class scheduling for teachers & students	64.0	3.88	61.7	3.72
8	Implementing the new changes in the school	90.0	4.26	80.1	4.12
13	Evaluating the effects of school changes	78.0	3.98	75.0	3.98
	<b>Grand mean for 20 items</b>	<b>68.0</b>	<b>3.87</b>	<b>61.7</b>	<b>3.71</b>

\* Five-point scale used: 1 = none; 2 = little; 3 = some; 4 = much; 5 = very much

Cluster reliabilities (Cronbach alpha) differ from 0.706 to 0.771; Grand mean reliability = 0.9105

As mentioned earlier the 20 items were arranged into four clusters according to their conceptual similarity during the analysis of the data (see Data analysis). Each cluster consists therefore of items with a similar theme. These clusters are listed in Table 1 in ascending order according to the theoretical expectation of their size or involvement level. From the cluster percentages and cluster means, it is evident that the statistical ordering of clusters concurs with the theoretical expectation and listing regarding the South African sample, as well as the ten-country sample. This tendency was confirmed in every country without a single exception. (The data are not provided for all the other countries because they are too space-consuming.) These results are an indication of the construct validity of the questionnaire.

Table 1 also shows that, for each cluster, the cluster means as well as the percentages of principals, who indicated that teachers' involvement in school change was of much or very much importance, were higher for the South African sample than the ten-country sample. (In discussing Table 3 the significance of differences between country means is investigated.) In fact, except for items 3, 5, 7, and 13 the South African sample means were higher than the ten-country means for all the items. This implies that the principals in the South African sample placed an even higher premium on the involvement of teachers in school change activities than the ten-country average. Compared to countries individually the rank order of the South African sample (out of ten countries) was as follows: Grand mean — sixth highest; 'Administration and coordination', 'Human relations' and 'Teacher support' — all seventh; and 'Classroom activities' — fifth. This implies that the South African sample of principals occupied a middle position in all four clusters as well as the questionnaire mean when compared to the nine other countries.

To determine whether the differences between the cluster means of the South African sample were significant a *t* test of pairs of cluster means was applied to the data. The results of

this application appear in Table 2. It is evident from the *t* values and significant values that the cluster means differed significantly from each other except those of clusters B and C (Human relations and Teacher support). This finding implies that in addition to the previous finding regarding the concurrence of the theoretical and statistical orderings, the following conclusion can be made: Principals held the view that, as far as school change is concerned, it is more important that teachers be involved in issues dealing with 'Classroom activities' than issues dealing with 'Human relations', 'Teacher support' and 'Administration and coordination'. In addition, they regarded involvement in 'Human relations' and 'Teacher support' to be more important than involvement in issues dealing with 'Administration and coordination'. A similar pattern can be discerned in the ten-country sample except that there is also a significant difference between the means of clusters B and C in this instance.

**Table 2** Differences between pairs of cluster means of South African sample (*t* test)

Clusters * compared	Mean	<i>t</i>	df	Sig
A & B	-0.4100	-5.194	49	0.000
A & C	-0.5020	-7.950	49	0.000
A & D	-0.6967	-8.119	49	0.000
B & C	-0.0920	-1.411	49	0.165
B & D	-0.2867	-4.345	49	0.000
C & D	-0.1947	-2.976	49	0.005

\* A = Administration & coordination; B = Human relations; C = Teacher support; D = Classroom activities

Sig values < 0.015 taken to be significant

To determine whether the views of principals in the South African sample differ significantly from those from the other countries, a Newman-Keuls test was applied to the grand means of the 20 items of the 'teacher should' responses. The results of this procedure are included in Table 3. It is evident from Table 3 that the grand mean obtained for principals of the South African sample differed significantly from the grand means of all the other countries except Netherlands and Singapore. This implies that, on the whole, the South African sample of principals was significantly more in favour of teacher involvement during school change initiatives than those from Israel, Hungary, Japan, and China. On the other hand they were less in favour than those from Australia, the USA, and Canada. It is also noteworthy that, as in the case of the grand means, Israel and Hungary have the lowest means for all four clusters whilst Canada and the USA have the highest means.

### Concluding remarks

The purpose of this study was to obtain an indication of how South African secondary school principals feel regarding teachers' involvement in processes of school change and to compare these views to those of principals in a number of other countries. A data-gathering instrument, developed for use in various countries, may often appear to be not perfectly suited for each setting. However, the results from this research indicated that the questionnaire that was developed is a valid and reliable instrument for the purpose of this study. The pattern of results

**Table 3** Principals' views on responsibilities teachers should be involved in (Newman-Keuls test on 20 item questionnaire totals)

Country	Subset for alpha = 0.050					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Israel	3.0730					
Hungary		3.3055				
Japan			3.5052			
China			3.5588	3.5588		
Netherlands				3.7153	3.7153	
South Africa					3.8670	
Singapore					3.9076	
Australia						4.0884
USA						4.1208
Canada						4.1340

Group sizes differ from 50 to 64 and a harmonic mean sample size of 53.729 was used

also supported the theoretical framework used to classify school change activities and the particular clustering that was applied worked well for the ten countries involved in the study.

The research showed for the South African sample, as well as for each of the nine other countries, that generally there was fairly strong support for the involvement of teachers in most school change activities. From the clustering of items it was evident that there was a significant ascending order in principals' enthusiasm about the kind of activities teachers should be involved in. They expressed very little hesitancy to involve teachers in matters that relate to classroom activities. Although they considered involvement in other school change activities significantly less important than the latter, a fairly high percentage of principals indicated that teachers should also be involved in these. According to the reviewed literature it could be anticipated that principals would be in favour of teacher involvement concerning activities that relate to classroom activities and to a lesser extent to activities that deal with teacher support and human relations, owing to the principal's role as mediator between teachers, teachers and staff, and teachers and external stakeholders such as parents. It is, however, illuminating that even for activities, which directly relate to the principal's primary role and which could be considered as his/her domain, a relatively high proportion of the principals in the sample felt that it was fairly important for teachers to be involved.

Principals who indicated that they were hesitant about involving teachers provided a variety of reasons to substantiate their point of view. The most prominent reasons given were that teachers do not have a holistic picture of affairs, they lack experience in the wider context, and some aspects are of a specialist nature. It was also evident that a feeling of 'intrusion on their turf' was a hampering factor. On the other hand, many principals indicated that they are not hesitant because teachers are professionals, they need to own the change process, and without teacher involvement there will be no effective change.

In comparison to other countries, principals in the South African sample occupied a middle position in all four clusters regarding the desirability of teacher involvement. They viewed the inclusion of teachers in the decision-making processes concerning school change as significantly less important than principals in decentralized education systems such as



Canada, the USA, and Australia. On the other hand they were significantly less hesitant than principals in some other countries, such as Japan and China, which have highly centralized systems. This is an aspect that requires further investigation.

This research attempted to make a small contribution to social science knowledge by gathering information that could promote manager-teacher collaboration in the context of educational change implementation. It appears that opportunities for teacher involvement in school change responsibilities may be more readily available than teachers actively seek. Follow-up research is, however, needed to correlate the results of this investigation with the relevant views of teachers.

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