



RESEARCH ARTICLE

SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT: A PANACEA FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of education reforms is to bring about newness in terms of competencies and skills. Many reforms have been introduced in the country's education system with the aim of improving and increasing student achievement. School-based Management was introduced as one of the many strategies employed to improve student performance. This paper addresses how SBM contributes to student achievements. To do so we asked the following questions: Why the sudden obsession about SBM? What is its role in school improvement process? Why are governments eagerly pushing for this approach in their education reform processes as if it was the panacea for quality education?

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INTRODUCTION

Many nations, including South Africa, are seeking to improve their education systems to ensure that children acquire the traditional basic skills while many others are actively seeking to develop new competencies for competing in a global market. However, changing education systems so that children develop the skills they need is a complex and daunting process. In both the national and international literature of educational policy, decentralization has been the favoured means of improving school systems. During the past few years the education system in South Africa has evolved from a largely centralised system to a more democratic and decentralised form. Although the expression of this trend goes by different names, it is popularised in the literature as school-based management (SBM). This approach has been adopted by different governments and their educational systems so as to increase school autonomy and to share decision-making with teachers, parents and sometimes students.

Spurred by a growing number of interests from the private sector on the benefits of participatory decision-making, school level personnel, including other stakeholders, believe that SBM is a promising strategy for improving the quality of educational decision-making because it engages those closest to the action (Caldwell 2003). The underlying assumption for this approach is that educational improvement is possible if those closest to the point at which decisions are enacted become architects of these decisions. The SBM in South Africa typically involves the formation of a school governing body (SGB) prescribed by the South African Schools Act (1996) and empowered to make decisions for the wellbeing of the school and the education system. Hence, school-based management, sometimes called participatory decision-making, is seen as a means to formally incorporate the voices of historically ignored or disenfranchised members of the school community (parents, teachers, students, etc) in the active management of schools. The paper analyses the impetus for SBM. In particular, it addresses its contributions to school improvement and student achievements.

Why the sudden obsession as regards SBM and what is its role in school improvement process? Why are governments eagerly pushing for this approach in their education reform processes as if it was the only solution or panacea for quality education? These questions are significant for the writer for the simple reason that the literature often discusses SBM in terms of school governance with little or no relation to student performance. Many researchers have all attributed the motives for the shift in focus for SBM as being political, managerial or educational. Politically, SBM aims to redistribute power to those who have been historically denied and deprived of participation and contributing in the educative process. The argument in favour of managerialism maintains that local budgeting more often than not do provide greater financial and administrative flexibility and that efficiency in the allocation of resources creates a possibility of cost saving. The educational dimension points to the fact that SBM enhances improvement in learning as education content is decentralised. Based on this educational argument proponents emphasize that it has the potential to provide greater sensitivity to local variations (Weiler 1990).

This argument is based on the assumption that the ultimate goal of education reform is to improve teaching and learning with the ultimate goal of promoting quality in education. But the stated rationales do not seem to be appropriate strategies for school improvement. These cannot sufficiently cause increase in student performance. These are political interventions or manoeuvres by governments to gain political favours within the education ministry. More often than not these do not address issues within the classroom or the teaching and learning. The question is, what is the essence of education restructuring if it does not address the problem of student improvement? Standards are falling and governments, parents, students and other stakeholders are concerned. It is based on this concern that this essay argues that if the objective of SBM is to bear the fruits that policy makers anticipate then it is necessary to expand the boundaries of SBM beyond mere involvement of school level personnel in decision-making. Lawler (1986 cited by Wohlstetter *et al*, 1994) concurs with this view, asserting that while power is essential for improving organisational performance this is not a

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sufficient enough condition to assist in increasing student improvement. To be effective and to produce desired results, he proposes the high involvement model. This form is appropriate but also an alternative for achieving the purpose of decentralisation. This model proposes three additional resources that complement power in order to create high performance in schools. These other resources are knowledge, incentives, and information.

### Background school-based Management in South Africa

At the heart of the new policy initiatives in South Africa is a process of decentralising decision-making regarding the allocation and utilization of educational resources to schools, and a significant process of democratisation in the ways schools are governed and managed (Gultig *et al.*, 1999, p. 5). This approach is related to a drift towards institutional autonomy. The move towards SBM is thus based on the understanding that school decisions should be made by those who best understand the needs of students and the local community (ibid, p. 5). This move towards school self-management, in the South African context, emerged from two eras: the apartheid education epoch and the subsequent post-1994 period. At the peak of struggle against the apartheid education system, the National Education Coordination Committee (NECC) proposed a popular slogan 'peoples' education for peoples' power' (DoE 1996). This campaign that featured prominently in the 1980s necessitated the establishment of parent, teacher and student associations (PTSA) in the townships in order to ensure participative governance by all key stakeholders within schools (Fleisch 2001). Even though it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of these structures, their presence created an awareness and prompted further discourses pertaining to school control that involved all key stakeholders: teachers, parents, and students. The demand for stakeholder involvement gave rise to the education act of 1988 under the apartheid national party government that devolved financial control and policy making to school governors in white schools which fell under the House of Assembly (Fleisch 2001). Black schools under the Department of Education and Training (DET) received non-statutory PTSAs and were established in secondary schools and parent teacher associations (PTAs) in primary schools. The PTSAs/PTAs were considered to be unofficial governance structures in black schools and that they were established in oppose the apartheid education system.

Even though, as (Karlsson *et al.*, 1996, p. 118) assert, the apartheid government did not recognise these structures as legitimate, Sithole (1994:48) argued that they were regarded as important milestones in the direction towards the popular participation in the formation and implementation of education policies and the subsequent institutionalisation of participatory democracy. The widespread support of PTSAs and PTAs in Black communities and the principle upon which they were based (participatory governance) was finally adopted in the 1995 White Paper 1 on Education and Training. In the same vein, the Hunter Report of 1995 and the White Paper 2 (1996) on school culture, organisation and funding stressed the necessity of active stakeholder participation in school decision-making. Section 6.22 of the Hunter Report stipulates that governing bodies should be representative of the main stakeholders. For instance, the report stipulates that in primary schools parents and teachers should have significant representation in the SGB. The report also required that students at the level of secondary schools should be included in the decision-making process. Similarly the White Paper 2 on school structure, organisation and funding also states that 'the sphere of governing bodies is governance, by which is meant policy determination in which the democratic participation of the schools stakeholders is essential<sup>1</sup>. The trend towards devolution of powers to schools was thus consolidated in the South African Schools Act (no 84 of 1996). For instance, section 20 of SASA devolves financial control and policy making to school governing bodies and section 21 of the same Act further provides opportunities for school governing

bodies to take more responsibilities in respect of: maintaining and improving the school property, buildings and grounds occupied by the school, purchasing of textbooks, educational materials or equipment for the school and finally paying for services of the school. Section 16(1) of the SASA categorically states that the governance of every public school is vested in its governing body. At the heart of SASA is the principle that each school should be on the path towards self-management if it has not already been established. It is in the light of this that School-based management is to be perceived as an attempt to transform schools into learning communities where educators, learners and parents together participate constructively in the educative process, regarding major decisions affecting them. As a result, parents now have a greater involvement and influence in the teaching and learning process. It is in this regard that SBM can be perceived to promote quicker decision-making, innovations, flexibility, accountability which in turn enhances effectiveness and efficiency (Squelch, 2000).

### The Concept and Nature of School-Based Management

The growing popularity of school-based management as a reform strategy and a trend towards devolution of powers to schools in South Africa was consolidated and legitimised in the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996. This new approach is rapidly becoming the centrepiece of the current wave of reform globally. However, its conceptualisation is a huddle for many individual stakeholders, including those involved in its implementation. Scholars of school decentralisation concur that the concept of SBM is both ambiguous and problematic. Hence, the term has been variously defined. The literature on school-self management shows that SBM simply demotes a decentralisation of decision-making power and authority to school sites. In other words it is an approach by which budgeting, curriculum and personnel decisions are devolved or decentralised to the school sites. For Weiler's (1990), the term is a means to ensure wider representation and involvement of legitimate interests in education. In the same way the concept is perceived as a transfer of some form of authority from the centre to the school level. Hence, SBM is a transfer of authority and responsibility from the national department of education to the school (Cadwell 2003; Howkins 2000; Ornelas 2000). Gustav (2004) also describes SBM as movement of responsibilities from the centre to the periphery. This movement, he suggests, is aimed at addressing the failure of national office to foster the needs of schools as it should be. In this way SBM is considered as an attempt by the state to localise education decision-making with the goal of empowering schools and communities to control matters that affect them in the running of schools.

Nevertheless, SBM is also seen as a direct response to the overburdened bureaucracy at the state and district levels. In this approach, Fullan (2000) argues, the power and authority to reform and implement educational policies is left to individual schools, the success of which unites teachers and members of school management team (SMTs) as well as students/pupils and parents. In this regard, decision making is made from bottom-up and it is participatory in nature by which decisions made are arrived at through consensus. In the words of Caldwell and Spinks (1988) SBM is,

*One [where] there has been significant and consistent decentralisation to the school level of authority to make decisions related to the allocation of resources. This decentralisation is administrative rather than political, with decisions at the school level being made within a framework of local, state or national policies and guidelines. The school, however, remains accountable in the manner in which resources are allocated (p.5).*

Similarly, Wohlstetter *et al.* (1994) view school-based management as, *the formal alteration of governance structures as a form of decentralisation that identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement and relies on the distribution of decision-making authority as the means through which improvements might be*

<sup>1</sup> [www.gov.za/whitepapers.pdf](http://www.gov.za/whitepapers.pdf)

*stimulated and sustained. Some formal authority to make decisions in the domains of budget, personnel and instructional programs is delegated to and often distributed among site-level actors. Some formal structure (council, committee, team, board) often composed of principals, teachers, parents, and at times students and community residents is created so that site participants can be directly involved in school wide decision-making (p. 56).*

According to Caldwell (2003) SBM is the systematic and consistent decentralisation to the school level of authority and responsibility to make decisions on significant matters related to school operations within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum and accountability. The central element in these definitions points to the fact that power to make certain decisions have shifted or moved from the central authority to the schools. The justification for this shift is based on the fact that SBM promotes efficiency and effectiveness at school level since major decisions are made at school level (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988, p. 5). Squelch (2000, p. 131) concurs with this view stating that "local school personnel know their schools best and if given the chance, are in the best position to solve most of the problems experienced by the schools (i.e. local solutions to local problems)".

On their part, Gershberg and Winkler (2003) note that school-based management is a term typically used to describe schools where a high degree of authority has been delegated to the school level personnel where teachers and parents originally had limited voice in terms of school decision-making. Under SBM teachers are made to assume leadership roles in staff development, mentoring, curriculum development and through that they become key partners in staff supervision and school evaluation. Evaluation and supervision programs are designed to elevate the professionalism of teachers, increase morale, add prestige and recognition and provide opportunities for professional development. As a consequence teacher collaboration is a fundamental component in the implementation of SBM. School-based management is an attempt to dismantle a centralized education system in order to create devolved systems with some form of autonomy in school. This point of view in line with Caldwell's (2003) proposition that education decentralisation is a transfer of some form of authority from the centre to the local school in which schools take on more autonomy in decisions about their management. This is in relations to the use of human, material as well as financial resources. Here again there is some movement of responsibilities from the centre to the local school as well as the classroom levels. The reason for this transfer of tasks and authority again is to strengthen decision making at those levels and to increase participation and effectiveness among stakeholders at the school level.

#### **Assumptions underpinning School-Based Management**

Another concern regarding school-based management is why the sudden popularity of SBM in many education systems? From the literature there varied answers to the question. In general, however, the efficacy of SBM is based on certain basic assumptions as enumerated by Squelch (2000, p. 129). Firstly, SBM presupposes a devolvement of power from the central to the school level. Secondly, it is a democratic form of governance based on the principles of representation, equity and participation. In other words, given that governance structures are representative of the community and that such representations are elected according to fair democratic procedures, parents have a right to participate in all that goes on in the school as far as the upbringing of their wards is concerned. Thirdly, it anchors on the principle of shared decision making, which presupposes open communication, consultation and the willingness to negotiate. Fourthly, SBM requires active participation of stakeholders who have an interest in the school. This implies that governments must create and provide an appropriate climate, structures and support mechanisms to engender genuine participation and involvement. Last of all, SBM is considered to be the most effective means of improving

standards of teaching and creating effective schools because it is more inclusive and seeks to meet the collective needs and aspirations of the community. From the above stated assumptions, certain fundamental concerns once more come to the fore regarding SBM: which or what decisions are transferred? Who receives this authority at the school? What is the essence of such a transfer anyway? Does the devolution of power to schools, by any means, impact on student outcomes? By way of response to the concerns, Caldwell (2003) makes a distinction between school management and governance. In school-based management more often than not there is a transfer of responsibilities to professionals within the school (principal and the teachers). School-based governance, in contrast, involves the giving of authority to an elected school board, which is normally representative of parents, teachers and other stakeholders within the community. Hence, a constructive response to the first question is that it will entail delegating 'real powers' to the principal in managing financial (including budget) and human resources in the context of the school. For instance, the South African schools Act 84 of 1996 mandates each school principal to form a governing body (SGB) as well as senior management team (SMT). The SGB takes charge of the governance and policy formulation of the school while the SMT is liable for the professional life and day-to-day organisation and administration of the school. However, whether this is the practice is a different story.

#### **School-based management and student achievement**

Critics of SBM have argued that there is a poor correlation between SBM and student achievement. They further contend that greater management efficiency, rather leads to more effective student learning. As a result self-managing schools should be more productive since it implies increased use of resources. However, SBM is not an end itself as most people think. It is simply a means to an end. SBM in and of itself will not generate improvement in school performance. It is simply a means through which school level decision makers can implement various reforms that can improve teaching and learning. Wohlstetter *et al.* (1994) concurs with this view and states that SBM will not automatically result in improved learner performance. Rather, they assert that SBM only acts as a facilitator of effective teaching and learning. The authors further argue that if SBM were implemented narrowly as a political reform that merely shifts power from the central office to schools, it would be an inadequate effort to improve student performance. In a similar vein Fullan (2000) has argued that decentralised management usually does little to improve student achievement. Therefore, the mere devolution of authority to schools is not a guarantee that student outcomes will improve. Moreover, without an expressed focus on improving student learning school reforms, shifts in central-local relationships and devolution of resources will certainly be fruitless. Self-management of schools, by itself, is no guarantee of improved learning opportunities for learners. School-based Management can be effective if it is combined well with instructional focus and appropriate professional support (Goodman, 1994). This is affirmed by Fullan (2000), when he asserts that school improvement initiatives that focus on structural and organisational changes only constitute a very limited strategy for successful change in student performance. For him any school improvement efforts should and must focus on facilitating change in teachers' perceptions, beliefs and practices regarding teaching and learning.

Even though there has been no empirical evidence linking SBM and student academic achievement, Wohlstetter *et al.* (1994) contend that improving school performance may be an unrealistic expectation for a governance reform that alters the balance of power within an entire educational system towards the school. Nevertheless, Oswald (1994) asserts that SBM can and does contribute to four intermediate outcomes which in turn have a positive effect on student achievement: increased efficiency in the use of resources, increased professionalism of teachers, the implementation of curriculum reforms and increased community engagement. This perspective is in

line with Mohrman's (1994) assertion that high-performing schools often combine governance reforms with an overall push for curriculum and instructional reform. In this way or with such a combination school councils or SGBs would focus on ways to improve student academic performance and make schools more interesting places to work. Without such combinations SBM becomes a political reform where school councils end up spending their time and energy deciding who is empowered and who is not.

### Arguments for and against SBM

There are varied arguments in favour of SBM. The proponents of SBM have a positive view of the concept arguing that it provides better programs for students because resources are often available to directly and appropriately match student needs. Advocates again assert that SBM ensures better and quality decisions because they are made by groups instead of individuals. Proponents further argue that school self-management increases communication among those involved in the educative process (i.e., SGB, SMT, teachers, parents, students). In the South African context, in recent times, it had been a source of conflict and division among stakeholders rather than something that should unite them. One advantage of the SBM is that it more democratic, allowing teachers and parents to contribute their views in decision making on issues relating to the education of their children. This approach is certainly more democratic than to keep this decision making authority in the hands of a select few officials. In SBM, there is a devolvement of power and decision making at the school level involving all stakeholders in education. Secondly, it is further argued that SBM is more relevant as decision making power is located closer to where problems are experienced. For that reason, it is expected that this will lead to more relevant policies as local staff generally know their own situation better. Squelch (2000) agrees with this position asserting that local school personnel know their schools best and are in the position to design appropriate solutions according to their local contexts. Thirdly, the system is less bureaucratic given that decisions are more likely to be taken more quickly as there is no need to go through a lengthy intermediary processes. Usually the decisions are made at a level close to the school level. It boosts commitment and ownership of teachers, parents and students as they are participants or involved in matters that matter to them. The approach is based on the principle that shared decision making enhances an open communication, sharing and dialogue, consultation and a willingness to negotiate.

Furthermore, SBM usually promotes stronger accountability since it allows schools and teachers a greater say in decision making. The implication is that teachers, parents and even students can be held accountable for the results of the school. For this reason schools should be encouraged to create the necessary climate, structures and support required to engender genuine participation and involvement. This consequently serves as an instrument for greater effectiveness in the management of schools. Lastly, SBM encourages greater and efficient resource mobilisation. Teachers and also parents will be eager to contribute to the funding of their school since they have a greater say in the organisation and management of it. Once again it promotes ownership and commitment as the clients feel involved in the work of the school. Despite the advantages SBM its implementation been criticised. Although the policy is expected to lead to higher quality and improved students performance, its limitations cannot be underestimated. The next section highlights some disadvantages or drawbacks of SBM. Firstly, critics observe that SBM has overburdened school personnel with an enormous workload and increased stress giving them little space for effective teaching and learning, which is fundamentally an essential component of the policy. The second point is related to the first. There appears to be insufficient training and/or inadequate professional development for principals, teachers and SGB members to enable them to cope with their new roles. It will not be an exaggeration to state that SBM has brought with it power conflicts with school personnel. Some principals are ostensibly autocratic and appear to dominate decision

making, disregarding and paying no attention to the contributions of teachers and SGB members. It is not uncommon to find principals who characteristically identify their vision for the school and then simply present it to teachers. This kind of attitude and behaviour leads to power struggle between teachers and principals over who controls the school and their contributions to the wellbeing of the school. Thirdly, the interests of school actors seldom coincide. Hence, it is not uncommon to find strained relationships among teachers, principals and members of SGBs. Such problems may likewise arise because of the insufficient formation received by both principals and SGBs regarding their respective roles in the schools. Conflicts have also arisen between teachers, SGB members and also principals about the use of funds and evaluation of performance with an adverse impact on the collegial relationships necessary for a quality school. Leithwood and Menzies (1998) have argued that the single biggest hurdle to developing an effective school council is interpersonal conflict of one sort or another. Fourthly, there is also a gender issue as recounted by Anderson and Limerick (1999). They observed that even though the teaching profession is increasingly becoming feminine, the position for principalship remains male-dominated. Dempster, on her part, was more keen on the impact SBM on the prevalence of women among headteachers and their positions in schools. She claims that a successful leader in a school with SBM needs to be supportive and collegial, with a willingness to negotiate, in order to bring all teachers on the road of reform. In views that Dempster articulates that this comes closer to the type of leadership women will be more comfortable with. Nonetheless, the argument is that the increased pressure, especially in relation to time, may render it more difficult for women to occupy such positions.

Lastly, Mhone and Edigheji (2003) contend that shifting responsibility to schools and communities for financing and support of education, in the context of scarce resources, is an attempt to privatise the education system which in no doubt has negative consequences for a proportion of the population. As Sayed (1994) argued, this would lead to increased inequity or unequal education provision among the populace. Hence, the negative effect of marketisation of education, he maintains, is an impoverishment and further marginalisation of poor areas or communities. Education provision from this angle then creates what he refers to as creating a two-tier society based on class rather than race. This approach, ultimately defeats the original rationale for decentralisation as it does not improve responsiveness and democracy; rather it is seen as a strategy to abrogate financial and political responsibility for education provision (Mhone and Edigheji, 2003). Decentralisation and, therefore, SBM, they contend, may work well within an economically viable environment. Poorer areas may be struggling to cope and come to grips with the impact of SBM as a result of their inability to pay fees and to provide for certain essential amenities and resources adequately. Consequently, such economically disadvantaged areas will only wish that the state were more involved in education provision. Hawkins (2000) and Gustav (1999) have observed that schools and communities have openly urged central authorities to take up and bear the cost and management of education – a return to centralised education provision or what is called “decentralised centralism”.

### How school-based management can be made effective

Even though critics have painted a gloomy picture of SBM, suggestions abound on how the approach could contribute to student achievement. To this Wohlstetter and Mohrman (1994) argued that the devolution of powers to schools concerning such things as budgets, personnel and curriculum does not guarantee the success of SBM since other resources such as information, knowledge, skills and rewards are indispensable. Accordingly they affirm that empowering school sites with control over information, professional development (knowledge) and compensation systems (rewards) are essential for efficient SBM. Caldwell (2003:12) also argued in similar lines stating that rewards and incentives are essential elements for efficient self-management of schools. Therefore, incentives, recognition and

reward schemes should be designed to explicitly show the correlation between effort and outcome pertaining to the commitment of self-management and the improvement in learning outcomes. Short and Greer (1997) also assert that cultural norms, values, assumptions and belief systems should change if SBM is to realise its potential. For the SBM to work well, they stressed that more attention should be focused on instructional improvement. School systems may also need to transform their culture from one of centralisation or hierarchical bureaucracy to that of democracy which values autonomy and empowerment. Devolution should be made real and visible at the school level and not only at the national or district levels. Such a restructuring will entail more attention to professional development in the areas of shared decision-making, team building, conflict resolution, effective communication, planning and evaluation. For success in SBM, Sakney *et al.* (1994) reaffirm that the approach must be restructured around the notions of improvement, equity and equality of opportunity. For SBM to work successfully, the principal must use a team approach to decision-making. If this is done, supporters of SBM say, teachers will feel more positive towards school leaders and more committed to school objectives. Parents and community members will also be more supportive of the school since they have more say in decision making. In the same vein principals will benefit by receiving input from other stakeholders, thereby being aware of teacher and parent concerns before they get out of control, as well as being freer to research new ideas and teaching methods and deal with problem areas.

### Conclusion

Educational reforms in the name of decentralisation have tended to transmit power and responsibility from the centre to the periphery. The decentralisation of such tasks does not necessarily mean a shift of total power and control from higher to lower level. Even though power and decision-making authority have been decentralised, central authorities still hold substantive powers for accountability and standardisation. Government can and usually does give more authority for budgeting, for example, yet through a legislative framework, curtails or controls the utilisation and management of such a budget. The intentions of SBM are laudable and clear as it tries to devolve power from the central to the local school level, enhances democratic forms of governance in response to the principles of shared decision making. Furthermore, SBM encourages active participation of all stakeholders, as it is considered the most effective form of improving standards of teaching and creating effective schools because it is inclusive, and seeks to meet the collective needs and aspirations of everybody. However, as Caldwell (1998), Anderson and Limerick (1998), Wohlstetter *et al.* (1994) and Fullan (1993) observe that the approach cannot be operational. To improve student performance through SBM, Wohlstetter *et al.* (1994) observed that student performance can improve not only when powers shift down from the centre to the periphery but when those empowered are trained for their new roles and responsibilities, have information to make informed decisions and are rewarded for high performance. The authors suggest that if the goal of SBM is to create high performance schools, then school authorities must expand the boundaries of SBM beyond the mere involvement of school level personnel in decision making to include knowledge and skills that enable them to understand and be able to contribute to student performance. Furthermore, such a system should not only create avenues for information sharing in relation to student performance but also provide monetary rewards and incentives for high performance and increased morale and professionalism.

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