The Ethics of Parental Participation in School Management

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Introduction

Since the mid-1960s there has been a steady, although sometimes haphazard, growth of interest in greater parental participation in schooling (Watson, 1979). The arguments for parental participation in schooling and school management in particular rest on social and political considerations but are given focus with the welfare of the child. The social and political considerations of parental participation are those involved with the concept of democracy. In this context the primary function of a school management is concerned with the personal, social and political development of all those within its sphere of responsibility. This article takes the view that a school, for both ethical and practical reasons, must also address the developmental needs of parents, besides those of children and teachers (the latter two are not the concern of this article). It argues that their participation is both their right and duty. First, the article looks at the concept of participation. Next, it discusses the ethical arguments for parental participation in schooling. Lastly, it examines the degree of parental participation in school management in Fiji. Although the discussion is based on my educational experience in Fiji, it is intended to have wider relevance.

'Ethics' in this article is concerned with an attempt to build an ethical school environment (Bottery, 1992; Starratt, 1991) where the school management is concerned with the social and political rights of all the citizens involved (parents in the case of this paper). Such an ethical principle will not only enable them to participate actively in school management, but it will also allow them to evaluate and improve their performance in the interests of the common good and justice of all involved. Arguing for 'full participation' Bottery (1992: 51) notes:

In an ethical school environment, members would be aided not only in their personal development, but in their social and political
development as well.

It is emphasised that caring, justice and criticism (Starratt, 1991) are ethically important in promoting active parental participation in school management. Furthermore, I will argue that ethically-oriented participation in school management will help empower parents, teachers and students to play an active, caring, critical and constructive part in a democratic society.

The Concept of ‘Participation’

The ethical concern for participatory school management rests primarily on democratic and egalitarian principles, and social aims as generally affirmed in most democratic countries. This perspective of participation is related to freedom, accountability and civil training as stressed by Rousseau (1762) in his notion of the ‘General Will’. The premise, therefore, is that every individual has the right to, and it is his/her duty to, participate in the governing of a democratic society and its institutions. This conceptualisation of participation is central to the ethics of parental participation in school management.

More specifically, participation for the purpose of this article is explained as the process in which parents share in the decision-making mechanism of a school. Literature on this topic also uses the term ‘involvement’ within this context, and therefore it is necessary to clarify this term as well. According to Robinson (1989) ‘involvement’ refers to those activities which are useful but essentially peripheral to the educational management processes. Such activities, for example, include attending meetings and assisting children in their school work. ‘Participation’ on the other hand implies active participation in decision-making in management processes, such as curriculum development, resource management, personnel appointment, school policy formulation and pedagogy. Similarly, Pateman (1970) identifies three forms of participation: ‘pseudo participation’ where no real decision-making is allowed; ‘partial participation’ where individuals can influence decisions but do not really have decision-making powers; and ‘full participation’ where each individual has equal decision-making powers. Other writers have categorised participation in three levels. These are ‘consultation’, ‘involvement’ and ‘participation’. The degree of participation,
Based on the above discussion, is shown on the continuum below.

Figure 1: A Participation Continuum

Pseudo Participation or Consultation Partial Participation or Involvement Full Participation

Parental participation in school management in most countries, including Fiji, generally lies between consultation/pseudo-participation and involvement/partial participation levels. This is because the statutory power in most schools lies largely with the school heads and they determine the types of parental participation in their schools. Writers such as Bottery (1992), Bolman and Deal (1991), Dickson (1981) and Hoyle (1988) argue that in most schools, participation is employed as a means to organisational control. When participation becomes the 'gift' of the school head, it functions mainly as a means to furthering his/her self-interest. In this regard Bolman and Deal (1991) aptly note the following:

Although the participation fad has reduced the number of autocratic managers, participatory management often exists more at the level of myth than reality (Argyris and Sehon, 1974; Bolman, 1975), and managers often believe in participation more for themselves than for their subordinates.

In the Fiji context parental participation in school management is largely the 'gift' of the school head (as Bottery would say) and is employed mainly for organisational control and as a strategy of micropolitics to furthering his/her self-interests. Generally parents participate in school management through their representatives on various committees such as the Government's Education Forum and the school Board of Governors. This is democratic, provided that the representatives are genuine and subject to easy recall. However, how representative this participation in Fiji schools is, is a matter of concern. Most of these committees are frequently used by educational administrators and politicians to legitimise government policies at the school
management level. Even in countries such as Australia, Britain and the United States of America where parental participation has received considerable attention, the question of representation (as in LEAs in Britain) remains to be addressed. Watson (1979: 183) describes parental participation in this context as "little more than rhetoric". However, Pennock (1979) [cited in Graham, 1986: 162] argues in favour of representative democracy rather than 'direct' or 'full' participatory-democracy, pointing out that the latter represents so many different interests that there is likelihood of biases towards compromise from the start. According to him this may not occur with members of a small self-governing unit where emphasis is on the interests of the unit rather than those of the individuals.

Perception of participation also differs in accordance with a society's ideological position (Fitzerald, Musgrave and Pettit, 1974). The socialists, for example, favour a greater degree of intervention in public affairs after wide consultation with the public, while the advocates of free enterprise support the principle of competition in the majority of social affairs with wider scope for individual initiative and response. Both groups, however, contain radicals and conservatives and manage some degree of participation. Bottery (1992:4) argues that the free enterprise or market-oriented approach, which is competitive in nature, is required so that schools re-orient themselves towards their 'clients'. By doing this the schools will not only address the needs of pupils, teachers and parents but will also promote individual responsibility and freedom of choice. Competition and participation are therefore features of different areas of a school. In participatory school management, however, partnership and collaboration become increasingly necessary and require the building of structures and the facilitation of the development of relationships conducive to democratic perspective.

Most writers on this topic (for example, Bhindi, 1988; Devlin, 1989; Naybour, 1989; Pettit, 1980; Stewart, 1989) also argue that parental participation in schooling and school management has a direct, favourable bearing on children's education. Thus the concern for education and welfare of the children constitutes another ethical argument for parental participation in school management. It is a concern for partnership between the school and the parents in the education of the child.
Several writers have emphasised that parental participation in school management is not only good for children, but also for the parents, teachers, schools and for the community at large. Children profit considerably from almost every opportunity parents may have to demonstrate an interest in them. Parents' increased understanding of the school programmes and their participation in school management contribute to better performance of children in their school work. There are vast learning opportunities for parents through formal education programmes and through informal interaction with staff and school resources. The participation of parents in school management is good for schools, because parents are capable of devoting considerable energy to schools in such areas as tutoring programmes, playground construction and fund raising.

**Ethical Arguments for Parental Participation**

It is reiterated that the ethical arguments for parental participation in school management generally rest on: a) the social and political considerations; b) the concern for parent-autonomy; and c) the concern for the education and welfare of the child. Participation can be located within these broad ethical considerations: participation because parents are citizens of a democratic society, parents are knowledgeable about their children, parents and all those concerned learn from this exercise, education is a process, teaching is a caring profession, education is partnership and so forth.

(a) **Social and Political Considerations:** According to Blakers (1980) the arguments for parental participation in schooling are rooted in social and political considerations. The social and political considerations stem from the desire to preserve democracy and democratic institutions and practices. In supporting this, Vanbergen [cited in Blakers (1980)] notes:

The key word here has been ‘participation’. Fundamental to this is a new conception of how society is managed - a conception that broadens and deepens the practice of democracy.

Several writers, such as Blakers (1980); Matheson (1984) and Pettit (1980), suggest that in recent years democracy is not only conceptualised as a
system where those managing the political or social systems are elected, but also as an attitude that must infuse all relations between citizens. The emphasis now is more on the organisation and management of a democratic society and its institutions, and the cultivation of democratic attitudes. Similarly, commenting on the participation theory, Graham (1986: 166) adds:

...[the theory] focuses on the individual in the context of co-operative effort with others, and engages in an attempt to find concrete means of fulfilling the ideal of self-rule which is at the heart of the concept of democracy.

This argument for parental participation in school management encourages parent-school relationships through dialogue, mutual consideration of opinions, shared-leadership and partnership in decision-making. It is through such participation that a parent's responsibilities are respected and as a consequence s/he takes responsibility in shaping the school and other community institutions together.

Moreover, as Matheson (1984) notes, participation in itself is a form of education. By taking part in discussions and by sharing in the processes of decision-making on social and educational policies, parents learn important social skills and participate meaningfully in significant political activities. Parents in this context are not only prepared for running democratic organisations, but are also empowered to protect their own rights while respecting those of others. This is necessary because the contemporary political systems in most democratic countries do not offer the basic experience in participation at the grass roots level. The only form of democracy known to us in Fiji is a large elective one, devoid of sustained personal involvement for most of us. Parental participation in school management, therefore, provides the opportunity to put democratic practices into schools, thus enriching the quality of life by making it genuinely democratic.

Parental participation in school management is an essential element of devolution (Blakers, 1980). To achieve this it is necessary to establish participatory communication. This allows parents and teachers to help each other as partners in the development of the child. Participatory
communication promotes mutual understanding in which an individual has a right to know and ask for explanations. However, our schools in Fiji, for example, are not marked by participatory communication and hence fail to promote mutual understanding.

(b) Concern for Parental Autonomy: Another argument central to parental participation in school management concerns the development of parents' sense of autonomy. Autonomy in this paper is used to mean individual freedom within the context of democracy. However, Graham (1986) and Wolff (1976) point out that autonomy, being rooted in the freedom of the individual, can also be interpreted as a threat to the principles of democracy. In the school context genuine parental participation in school management allows parents to become both democratic and autonomous. It can be argued that a school as a democratic and political institution should by its very nature seek to maximise the autonomy of all citizens involved. In other words, while exercising their autonomy, parents are expected to respect and acknowledge the autonomy of all the players involved in the school management. The ethical consideration in this respect therefore is to promote the autonomy of all concerned. It is obvious that every parent's autonomy cannot be realised fully and therefore through genuine participation in management, parents can develop shared autonomy.

To affirm shared or collective autonomy as a principle, it is necessary that parents accept the right and responsibility of every individual parent to participate in the management of the school. Furthermore, to accept this as a principle is to accommodate a greater variety of social, political and educational purposes, differing aspirations and aims, and consequently disagreement and dissent. However, it needs to be stressed that encouraging autonomy within the democratic perspective will require strategies to protect essential values of the school and the autonomy of others. Given the basic social and democratic principle that every parent should have a realistic opportunity to seek personal fulfilment, the operation of participatory processes in school management should be such that they will allow the parents (as well as pupils and teachers) the independence necessary to produce diversity appropriate to meeting the differing needs of individuals, provided that the needs of all pupils are being adequately catered for.
Therefore, genuine parental participation in school management is claimed as a means of strengthening parents’ autonomy within a managerial system of participatory democracy.

(c) Concern for Education and Welfare of the Child: Parental and teacher participation in school management opens up avenues for both parents and teachers to become engaged in thinking about what is best for the child. Moreover, when the school’s goals are formulated in partnership, they are more likely to be implemented. However, our schools in Fiji are not noted for participatory decision-making. On the contrary, they are marked by administrative bureaucracy where the senior officials of the Ministry of Education, school heads and the senior members of the school Board of Governors get to participate in the process of decision-making. In other words decision-making is vested in the few rather than the majority. This is consistent with the elitist theory:

where the elites compete periodically for endorsement by the wider population, with that wider population playing little or no part in substantive decision-making (Graham, 1986: 126).

Hunt (1980:29) argues that parents should participate in making important policy decisions in curriculum development. He emphasises that:

the parents, as agents of the child, have a significant role to play in translating the local environment to the teachers.

It is therefore argued that the parents have the responsibility to negotiate the aims, content and the context of learning of their children. The Fiji school curriculum is based on the centre-periphery model, and it is designed largely to secure the passing of external examinations. It is inevitable that in such a system of education, preparation for examinations becomes the preoccupation of pupils, teachers and parents. As a result, there is little concern for parental participation in school management and curriculum development because of the fear of not completing the examination syllabuses. Therefore, parents’ knowledge and experience of the school environment are not gainfully utilised in school management and curriculum development.
Furthermore, it is argued that in a multi-ethnic context parental participation in school management is increasingly important. This can involve parents' input in determining what the educative process should be about and how it should be structured and implemented (especially in multi-ethnic situations) to enrich a school’s teaching-learning process. Politically, parental participation in school management in a multi-ethnic context can also assist in strengthening multi-racial harmony. It is essential to bring together not only children of different ethnic origins to learn under a common roof, but also their parents to work cooperatively in school management.

One of the fears expressed by existing school management personnel is that parental participation in school management may only reflect the bias of the vested interests of a few rather than the majority. In other words, they suspect that the representatives will not be genuine. Nevertheless, this can hardly be regarded as an argument for not encouraging such parental participation. Even if only a few parents are on school committees, it is useful, as the American experience indicates, and clear that schools have more to lose by continuing to avoid parental participation. Sikula (1981) noted that in recent years, American schools have been burdened with a multitude of societal pressures, such as economic stress, drug abuse, student violence, teacher strikes and declining educational achievement test results. Initially, schools opted to internalise these problems in the hope that they would be resolved or would disappear before they sparked public controversy. Unfortunately, the problems have not only remained but have grown beyond the resolution capabilities of schools and their trained personnel. Many school heads have found that it is more productive to keep the parents informed, accept parental input and avoid the misconceptions and accusations that arise from concerned but ill-informed parents.

Survival in today’s educational environment requires that school heads encourage and nurture school-parent interaction. The increased emphasis on participatory management and shared decision-making necessitates that head teachers approach their jobs with a different perspective. One of the critical requirements is that school heads change from a position of unilateral decision-making and feeling comfortable with a great deal of unquestioned power, to actively working with subordinates and parents to reach decisions.
Degree of Parental Participation in School Management in Fiji

It is apparent from the discussion thus far that for an ethically-conscious school, working with a full democratic management, genuine parental participation in school management is essential. However, the present Fiji education system and the attitudes of the stakeholders (especially those of teachers and parents) are not conducive to the successful implementation of this initiative. The present mode of parental participation in most Fiji schools is largely pseudo. While this type of parental participation can be argued as a good place to begin the process of participation, as shown in the continuum (see Figure 1), it does not allow the parents to take a decisive role in the management of a school. It does not empower them sufficiently to participate actively in a democratic society. Moreover, pseudo participation is largely seen as a ‘gift’ of the school heads and is normally governed by their self-interest (Ball, 1987; Bottery, 1992; Graham, 1986; Hoyle, 1988; Hargreaves, 1991; Starratt, 1991). Therefore this mode of participation is not appropriate for the participatory perspective adopted in this article.

‘Involvement’ or ‘partial-participation’, where parents can influence a decision rather than take a decisive position on it, is also seen in some Fiji schools. The areas of parental involvement include discussions on pedagogy, student discipline, curriculum development and resource management. In the educative sense, this mode of participation is of considerable value to pupils in particular, and teachers and parents in general. In so far as preparing the citizens for a democratic society is concerned, however, this type of participation is envisaged as inadequate. This pattern of participation also rests with the school heads and as Bottery (1992) explains "it is invited or withheld when it suits the heads". Therefore this mode of participation also does not sufficiently cater for the ethical perspective taken in this article.

Genuine parental participation in school management is necessary for meeting the requirements of an ethical school environment as adopted in this article. It may be strongly argued that this is an ‘ideal’ form of participation, and may not be applicable in most situations. However, an endeavour in this direction, as shown on the participation continuum (see Figure 1), will be of considerable educational value to the stakeholders as citizens of a democratic society. In the Fiji context, full participation is not practicable in the present
education system. One of the most commonly voiced complaints in any discussion of parental participation in school management, as Blakers (1980:64) points out, is directed at parents' apathy. According to him it takes a number of forms:

...parents are unwilling to become involved in schooling. They haven't the time; they prefer to leave it to experts; it's never the parents you want to see who come near the school, participation only involves the selected few and is not representative.

The parents' role in relationship with the school tends to be rather passive. Their major concern is that their children pass the external examinations and on graduation obtain paid employment. Another reason that arises frequently is the time-consuming nature of the exercise. Most parents simply do not have the time to participate in school activities.

Most schools in Fiji at present are managed by school committees, elected by the parents or members of the religious organisations which have established them. The main weakness of the school committees is that they generally do not represent the parents or the school community. Moreover, their membership does not include student and teacher representatives. However, it can be argued that the students themselves, as they progress up the school and encounter increasing responsibility and participation in school decision-making, policies and activities, are prepared for future parental participation in school management. What needs to be emphasised is that parents, teachers and students are partners in school management, and the relationship between teacher-child-parent is a triangle and that responsibility in school management is joint (Blakers, 1980). While space does not allow me to elaborate on this issue, it is important to note that genuine parental participation in school management in Fiji does not exist.

Conclusion

Given the present context of academic culture of the Fiji education system, it is unlikely that full participation in school management will eventuate in the
near future. However, this paper has taken the view that the concept of parental participation is central to democracy, strengthens parent-autonomy and is concerned with the education and welfare of the child. Such a position is based on the argument that parental participation in school management is both the right and duty of the parents. Moreover, it was claimed that for ethical and practical reasons, a school must address the developmental needs of the school community, of which parents form a significant part. It is emphasised that parental participation in school management helps improve the pupils' learning environment and prepares them for a democratic society. Just as importantly, it promotes personal, social and political development of parents.

Parental participation in management, it was argued, is in itself a form of education. The higher the degree of parental participation, the more substantially educational it is for parents, teachers and pupils. By participating in the processes of decision-making on social, educational and political policy, parents are learning important social and political skills and becoming part of a significant democratic government and governing activity. Parental participation in school management provides a scenario to put democratic practice into schools and, in the process, gives an opportunity to enrich the quality of community life. It is apparent that the education of parents, teachers, school heads, pupils and the officials of the Ministry of Education is a pre-requisite for this increasingly important initiative. Therefore, it is recommended that parental participation in school management be made an important item on the agendas of the school and the education system of a country.

References


