

THE EFFECTS OF MANAGEMENT MICRO-POLITICS ON TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Olutola Olujuwon, Juliet Perumal

*University of Johannesburg, Dept of Education Leadership and Management
(SOUTH AFRICA)*

Abstract

This qualitative multiple case study explored how micro politics in school management affect the practice of teacher leadership in the context of Nigerian public secondary schools. It shows the extent by which the practice of micro politics in public secondary schools affects the promotion of teacher leadership. Participants included nine teachers, three principals, vice-principals and an educational administrator in an Educational District in Lagos, Nigeria. Data for the study was generated through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The study reveals that micro politics is part of human existence and it leads to forming of cliques, which affects professionalism in organisations. It also reinforces the role principals play in traditional models of leadership, which affects teaching and learning processes. The study recommends adherence to ethical standards in schools and that the era of principal as a sole leader in school leadership is over. The study contributes to better understanding of leadership development in schools.

Keywords: micro politics, teacher leadership, school culture, ethics, professionalism.

1 INTRODUCTION

Politics is recognised as a universal and pervasive feature of human behaviour. Politics occur where there are two or more human beings involved in some form of collective activity whether it is formal, informal, public or private interactions [1]. Micro politics on the other hand is described as the political interactions that take place between social actors in different organisational setting be it schools, sports teams, companies or families [2]. It could also be referred to as the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organisations [3]. Politics is about power and rooted in human relationship that facilitates the control of an individual over another person. This has made politics and personal interaction to be virtually inseparable. This inseparability is largely due to certain inalienable rights of members which could be the right to equal treatment and opportunities in the distribution of roles and responsibilities in schools [4].

This shows that in schools, teachers as well as school leaders could be involved in the practice of micro politics either for personal or professional gains. There is a repertoire of micro political strategies and tactics that school leaders manage to skilfully and effectively apply in order to influence the situation either to resist and protect or proactively change it [5]. This political strategy and tactics could include power, influence, authority and rule depending on what needs to be achieved. Thus, micro politics offers a new lens for understanding the collaboration in school reform in the way that power, influence, conflict and negotiating processes are experienced [6]. Thus, there is a correlation between the teaching environment and the subjective viewpoints of teachers. When changes occur in the teaching environment as a result of school changes, there will be perceived harm to teachers' self and their subjective viewpoint, which means that their professional development is affected [5]. If teachers' professional developments are affected, which in this case is their working environment and in the distribution of roles and responsibilities they will take actions to defend themselves and these actions are referred to as the micro politics ([5], [6]).

Micro politics on the part of teachers stems from their right to "desired working conditions". These desired working conditions which are changing, are assumed by teachers to affect their career development, so they take actions "to safeguard themselves in case they are threatened or to restore to them what they have lost" [6]. However, many beginning teachers are generally unwilling to challenge or attempt to renegotiate the norms and values of the dominant culture during the early stages of their tenure. Instead, they opt not to engage themselves in ongoing conflicts and discussions and either adapt to the situation or comply with the dominant values [6]. In the study being reported on participants, were not happy with the disparities seen in the educational setting and this has affected relationships with colleagues. In spite of being aware of micro politics, teachers in the study

talked about it but seemed helpless to tackle the issue. Micro politics as noted in the study affects effective teaching and learning and creates conflicts among colleagues which hamper effective collaborative activities. It can also prevent an organisation as well as individuals from achieving desired goals. Against this background, this study attempted to explore the question: How does the micro politics in school management affect teacher leadership?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Micro politics occurs in school daily as a result of political forces that wants to dictate how things must be done, how things have been done and how things are done. This is done in order to protect themselves and to get whatever they want through the use of power and influence [7]. Therefore micro politics encompass the daily interactions, negotiations and bargaining occurring at any school [8]. This provides a lens to understand the various complexities in school leadership such as the use of power, conflict resolution or in building alliances. Similarly, in schools, power, conflict, coalitions and policies are alive and well and make up the fabric of educational policies [9]. Some of the conflict emanating from policies could be the issue of working conditions, race, promotion, and in the distribution of leadership. These factors affect teacher leadership.

Therefore teacher leadership is a process by which teachers; individually or collectively influence their colleagues as well as other members of the school community as they try to bring about better teaching and learning processes. The Institute of Educational Leadership report of 2001 in the United States of America, emphasized teacher leadership as a means of mobilizing the untapped attributes of teachers to strengthen learners' achievement at the ground level, thus principals, teachers and students benefits from teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is about the discovery of teachers' potentials for collaboration in school leadership [10]. The potentials of teacher can only be realisable in a school culture that is favourable and conducive to learning. In public secondary schools, teachers work within a cultural context that influences every aspect of their pedagogy and these shapes their interactions, decision-making and attitude. The culture of a school can have positive influence on learning as well as having negative impact on the functioning of the school.

Therefore, the research on micro politics will provide an understanding on how leadership is distributed, to whom and by whom and in what circumstances. It also shows the interplay of power, politics and the formation of alliances. This indicates the inevitability of micro politics in school. It is seen as a survival strategy for school leaders and it is inherent in occupational requirement [11]. This is consistent with research findings that "school leaders candidly admitted using micro political strategies and tactics to select key staff to join these teams and to set the tone for their operation" [12]. The leader achieves this through influence, networking and building of alliances. This means that, "power relationships, conflict, and the policy process as concepts are central to the study of political dynamics that exist within schools" [13].

This reveals that in human interactions, there is bound to be political elements which could either be positive or negative [14]. Therefore the leader must develop a political skill to persuade, influence and control others in order to be successful as a leader. Political skill is defined as the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal or organisational objectives [15]. Research has shown that leader political skill plays an important role in facilitating team performance that extends beyond mere empowerment of team members [15]. This requires behavioural adjustment on the part of the leader to changing situations in a way that shows sincerity and trust, which can effectively influence and control the responses of others [16].

Despite the fact that politics is an intrinsic part of human nature, most people do not know how to navigate the politics of their personal and professional relationships. It is only when people learn the true nature of interpersonal politics, or 'micro politics,' that they can acquire more power and success in their lives. However research on micro politics has been conducted for some time, its "conceptual boundaries and distinctive features remain elusive and contested" [17]. More research is needed that will connect micro politics with distributing leadership in schools [18].

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a multiple case, qualitative study which is exploratory and descriptive in nature. The reason for working within a qualitative research tradition is to understand the ways in which the participants act

and the accounts that they gave for these actions [19]. This promotes seeing issues from the perspectives of the participants; [20] and to get a clearer understanding about the dynamics of the situation, how participants, relate and interact in a specific situation and how they make meaning of the phenomenon under study [21]. Participants were purposively selected from five public urban secondary of the study based on their seniority, teaching experience and qualification because they possess rich information [22]. In the study, there were 16 participants in all comprising nine teachers, three principals, three vice principals and one Educational Administrator in Education District IV in Lagos, Nigeria.

Semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis were used to elicit data. The interviews were conducted at the school sites, after school hours and during free periods over an eight month periods. The minimum duration of each interview was 1 hour. The interviews elicited information on the participants' biographical information, their perception on teacher leadership and their understanding on the current leadership practices in schools. The interviews were audio taped for easy verbatim transcriptions of participants' responses in order to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. Data from the semi-structured interview and documentary evidence were triangulated in order to establish the credibility of findings [23]. Data was analysed using content and discourse analysis so as to understand the interaction and the literal meaning of language of people in their day-to-day activities [24]. Relevant approval from the Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, and Education District V in Lagos State of Nigeria with that of the voluntary consents of the participants were obtained. The identity of the schools and participants were treated with utmost confidentiality and anonymity was assured. The five schools in this context are located in urban area in Lagos and are funded solely by the Lagos State Government.

All the participants are full time staff and are members of the Nigeria Union of Teachers. They are also certified by the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN). One of the schools in the study is situated in a military facility, two in an estate; one is close to the seaports in Lagos and one is situated very close to a major highway. Data was presented using direct quotes and comments of participants. The data was categorised into major themes related to the different effects of management micro politics on teacher leadership in schools. Such as breeding of fear in the principal, ethnicity, favouritism, appointment by principals and forming of cliques. Others themes include micro politics as a management strategy and micro politics being part of human existence and its effects on teaching and learning.

4 IT BREEDS FEAR IN THE PRINCIPAL

This refers to a scenario when the principal is fearful of taking a decision so as not to offend a group of people. This show the characteristics of laissez faire type of leadership what the leader dances to the left or right. Bayo one of the teachers explains that:

It brings uncertainty especially for the principal who often finds himself in a dilemma when it comes to recommending certain people for assignments. There was a time when the principal was asked by the ministry to recommend one of the best teachers for vice principalship positions, there was confusion because even though he knew who to recommend, yet he was afraid not to step on toes and this also led to bickering among the teachers.

The excerpt from Bayo highlights the dilemma faced by the principal in recommending one of the best staff for vice-principalship position. The principal's indecision in not doing what is right creates confusion among colleagues because the principal does not want to offend anybody. The shows that micro politics brings uncertainty in decision-making especially when the right things are not done and this could damage relationships among staff in the organisation. Therefore a culture of indecision is not in the best interest of the organisation [25].

5 ETHNICITY

Ethnicity refers to a social group of people who identify with each other based on common ancestral, cultural, social or national experience [26]. These groups of people because of the aforementioned bonds may decide to throw merit to the wind and do things that will favour the group members. Ade one of the participants stated: *we know somebody is better suited for this particular role and was not being given because he is from a particular State*. The excerpt from Ade shows that in spite of the

knowledge of the suitability of an individual for a position, this person was denied being appointed to a position due to ethnicity. Ade's view is buttressed by Njoku, another participant. Njoku commented: *There are many factors, one factor is tribalism and another factor is the issue of sacred cows. In a situation, whereby two people committing the same offence and only one party is favoured while the other punished.*

In the excerpt, Njoku indicates some causes of ethnicity such as an individual's tribe and being above criticism or mistreatment festers micro-politics. It also shows preferential and differentiated treatment despite the same offence being committed. These acts could cause conflict in the organisation and militate against achieving organisational goals because it could lower the morale of members. Similarly, given position to individuals based on ethnicity is against professional practice as enshrined the Teachers' Handbook as well as Section 42 of the Nigerian 1999 Constitution which frowns at discrimination on the basis of sex, religion or race.

6 FAVOURITISM

Favouritism is defined as the state of being treated as a favourite or the practice of giving special treatment to a person or group [27]. It is also described as the use of personal ties to receive preferential treatment of relatives, friends, neighbours or other acquaintances. Favouritism has been described as a natural human phenomenon which exists everywhere and fluctuates from culture to culture [28]. There are many reasons in literature why favouritism still persists in organisation. This is due to the fact that, favouritism is not seen as a criminal activity or the need for fines to be imposed yet it is a kind of corruption [28]. Orji, one of the participants explained that: *leadership that is dashed out as a result of your political connections... When that is given to people, as a result of who you know, and is not a kind of leadership that is achieved through merit.*

This excerpt reveals that distributing of leadership as a result of favouritism is based on affinity of the follower to the leader or through political connections or socio-cultural context. Also this type of leadership is not based on merit or on following standard appointment procedures. Similarly, Loveth, another participant buttress the view of Orji that leadership is given out based on favouritism and not on merit. Loveth state that: *It is a leadership that all do not agree to follow. It is disputed leadership that not everyone accepts its followership.* This shows that leadership given as a result of favouritism does not enjoy the consent of followers because subordinates may not want to follow directives from this leader because it lacks legitimacy. Legitimacy is regarded as the cornerstone of leadership with the consent of followers. If this is lacking, it could cause conflict in organisations and could lead to show of political power, influence and forming of alliance which could negatively affect the goals of the organisation being realised. However, favouritism is often cited as the basis for distrusting a supervisor and questioning his or her decisions in other areas [29].

The word "favouritism connotes a negative image of corruption as common thinking suggests in a favouritist exchange two sides might gain something but everyone else loses [30]. Therefore, favouritism is seen as a form of corruption but it can be distinguished from other forms, such as bribery, because it does not usually involve a direct exchange of material favours. Compared to bribery, favouritism creates a more implicit, indirect, and unspecified return obligation [31]. There is consciousness on the part of the participants on issues they faced daily in schools that affects their work but they felt less empowered to do anything rather than talk about it.

7 PRINCIPAL APPOINTEES

In Nigeria, the principal is recognised as the administrative, academic and social head of a school. S/he must utilise his/her, professional expertise for the corporate advancement of the school [30]. There are responsibilities, academic, administrative, social and special regulations which the principal must undertake or perform with multiple management challenges [32].

The process of distributing leadership is initiated by the head teacher who identifies and delegates leadership responsibilities to individual teachers based on the expertise or skills of the teacher. In this way, there is an expectation from the head teacher to the teacher in accomplishing delegated role and the head teacher is expected to provide support [33]. In the traditional model of leadership which is prevalent in Nigerian Secondary Schools, the principal appoints people into position in schools. Massarawa a teacher interviewed in the study explain:

Micro politics affects teacher leadership. If the principal is a clique person and you are the right person, the principal may not appoint you. Because principal is the one that appoints all these people, HODs and year tutors. It's only the VPs that principal did not have right to appoint.

The excerpt highlights the effect of micro politics in the practice of teacher leadership and in the appointment of the right person into position as the principal may appoint his/her own people. It also shows that the right of the principal in the appointment of individuals into designated positions in schools like that of the HODs and year tutors. The vice-principals on their own are not appointed by the principal but by the district. On the other hand, Butter, a another participant contends that the success of a leader depends on the leader appointing people that are close to him/her into leadership so that they can be his/her representative in the organisation. Butter continues: *So, if a leader wants to be successful, definitely he or she must have those people that are close to him, that will serve as his own eyes and ears.*

8 MICRO POLITICS IS PART OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

Human beings by nature are regarded as political animals that constantly engage in power seeking behaviour and politics exists in varying degrees in organisations [34]. Participants' responses in the study highlight the issue of micro politics as part of human existence. Clark, a vice-principal explained:

Somebody said we are all political animals. So there is micro politics in school management, well though there is politics even in the home - husband, wife and children. So anywhere you have human beings and you have a leader where somebody is leading, and you have those that are following, there is politics.

Similarly, Saida, a vice-principal shares the views of Clark that micro politics is part of human nature. Saida comments: wherever you have two or three people gathered, there must be... even in families there is politics, there is politics in families. The excerpts reveal that micro-politics abound where there are gathering of human beings. This is to corroborate the axiom that 'human beings are homo politicos'. This could happen at home between husband, wife and their children, in offices or where there are leaders and followers.

9 FORMING OF CLIQUES

Forming of cliques refers to groups that are characterised by friendship, similarity, interaction, exclusion and the flow of valuable resources: information, support, and opinions, among others [35]. Okoli a principal recognises the existence of cliques in schools. Okoli stated that: *There are, in some schools, they will form cliques.* Thus, formation of cliques could occur in schools as a result of lack of collaboration or spirit-de-corps in schools. This act discourages other teachers and limits their contributions to school development, but teachers lack the energy to stop the act. All the characteristics mentioned above concerning cliques occur in the school system and it brings about mistrust and affects relationships among colleagues. This is consistent with the findings that the presence of alliances, factions and cliques discourage the promotion of teacher leadership in schools ([11], [36]).

10 MICRO POLITICS AS MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Micro politics as management strategy refers to how leaders in an organisation exercise various forms of leadership in their everyday activities in schools. Adebayo, a principal stated: *There is no way you cannot practice politics in school leaderships to succeed. Remember that you as a leader, are governing varying people with different opinions and you must not rob Peter to pay Paul.*

The excerpt indicates that it is a normal thing for school leaders to practice micro politics if they want to succeed. This is a result of different individual perspectives as the school is not immune to the practice of teacher leadership. Also, the use of micro-politics should not be to the detriment of another person. Equally, Aladelola, another principal corroborates Adebayo's views that micro politics is part of human relationships. Aladelola explained: *As a leader, there is no way you won't have some teachers that are close to you. If you want to play politics, you know how to bring the teachers together such that the aims will be achieved eventually.* The excerpts indicate that human beings are social being.

In the school, there would be some teachers that are friends of the leader. Thus bringing these people together will help to achieve the stated aims.

11 THE EFFECTS OF MICRO POLITICS IN SCHOOLS

Effects of micro politics in schools refer to how the practice of micro politics hinders effective teaching and learning and co-operation in schools. Johnson, one of the vice-principals interviewed in the study explained:

I must say this that micro-politics have a role to play even in the appointment of teachers, in the appointment of vice-principals, principals even in the appointment of prefects especially the head boy, the head girl in the schools around this areas, it has really gone a long way.

The excerpt highlight the role politics played in teachers, Vice Principals and Principals' appointments and even in the appointment of students as prefects. This has been entrenched in the school culture as part of teachers' practices. Boladale, another teacher supports the views of Johnson on the effects of micro-politics. Boladale commented: *It affects it in a great deal; we believe that in a system where certain people appear to be more favoured than others, it creates bitterness and lack of trust by some people in the school.*

The excerpt that micro politics affects teacher and learning a lot and it is an entrenched act of favouritism, which causes dissatisfaction and mistrust among colleagues in school systems where there is preferential treatment. The above reveals that appointments at schools that are not based on merit could lead to frustration and unhealthy rivalry among members.

12 DISCUSSIONS

This study investigated the effect of management micro politics on teacher leadership in public secondary schools in Nigeria. The methods of data collection strategy used include semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The study contributes to the body of literature on micro political activities in schools. The study revealed that micro politics is part of human existence and could be found in any human endeavour. It lowers standards, creates disharmony among colleagues and violates their constitutional guarantees as citizens. The findings are important as it reveals the strategies used in perpetrating micro politics in schools by management. The practice of micro politics is visible in promotion and distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities and thus promotes mediocrity, selfishness at the expense of merit, innovation, ingenuity, merit and professionalism.

Thus, subscription to professional standards as enshrined in the Teachers' Code of Conduct as well as the Nigerian Constitution is needed to counter the negative repercussions of micro politics. In this dispensation, achieving students and educational goals requires collaboration, networking, and innovation from all members. School leaders must avoid actions or inactions that would polarise members against each other or that would jeopardise achievement of learning outcomes. School leaders must promote distributed form of leadership based on capabilities and experience and not on political or socio-religious affiliations.

13 CONCLUSION

The study showed the practice of micro politics in human endeavour as well as in schools. The strategies to solve these problems include distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities based on merit, adherence to professional standards, dialogue, trust and collaboration which can engender academic excellence. The findings reveal that favouritism, ethnicity, socio-cultural and religious considerations in promotions and distribution of roles affects teachers' morale and productivity which in turns affects teaching and learning processes in schools. Emphasis on the practice and promotion of teacher leadership must be pursued as this fosters unity, collaboration and networking among teachers in schools. Teachers' code of conduct in line with other laws of the country that forbids discrimination in whatever guise must be respected thereby upholding professional ethics. The school leaders must be open to dialogue and improve their communication strategies so as to avoid a break in communication. In addition, an alternative dispute resolution mechanism must be put in place to address issues emanating from micro politics in schools.

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