

Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of School Staff Meetings: A Study of Two High Schools in Northern Kenya

Benard Odhiambo Bonyo

Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science & Technology, P.O. Box 210 60140

E-mail: bennel06@yahoo.com

Abstract

Professionalism requires self determination, participation and the ability to make important decisions about the nature of one's work. However, in schools, often times, teachers outside their classrooms have little say about school policies, procedures, curriculum development, and other matters that have a direct bearing on the quality and effectiveness of their work. School staff meetings where their ideas would be heard may be occasionally unprofessionally held, with members unprepared and the leaders doing most of the talking. This study investigated the factors affecting the effectiveness of school staff meetings in two high schools in Northern Kenya. Using qualitative case study design, the study sought to establish whether there were policies guiding the conduct of staff meetings, the practice of staff meetings and how policy and practice affect the effectiveness of staff meetings. Two teachers per school were randomly sampled for interviews, two heads of departments per school, the deputy principal and the principal of each school were also interviewed, 4 staff meetings were observed and meeting documents such as minutes and notification of meetings analyzed in the two schools. The findings indicate that inadequate policies or lack of them, inadequate knowledge of meeting protocol, haphazard formulation of agenda, lack of teacher involvement in meeting preparations and communication hamper the best practice of staff meetings hence ineffectiveness. An improved and structured bottom up model for school staff meetings is recommended if schools are to manage staff meetings professionally and conventionally. It is also suggested that for effective school staff meetings to be achieved, an action research study should be carried out in institutions with a view to improving the conduct of staff meetings in schools.

Key Words: Staff Meetings, Effectiveness, Policies, Practice

Introduction

Staff meetings are an essential aspect of running a school and are important forums used by the principals to not only communicate policy directives from the Ministry of Education but also enact internal school policies. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology expects schools to formulate vision and mission statements tailored towards the achievement of the national goals of education by formulating effective school based policies through such forums as staff meetings (MOEST, 2003). In addition, TSC (1998) emphasizes that guiding policies, shared objectives, the directions and destinations of the school can be patterned for implementation by teachers through effective forums such as the staff meeting in schools. However, principals and teachers can hardly express and manifest themselves before each other because interaction during formal meetings is 'a scene' in which professional as well as personal roles play out with varying norms and procedures (Salo, 2008).

In such meetings individuals or groups sometimes perceive themselves at odds with each other, antagonistically paying attention to how best their interests, aims and opinions are carried through with disregard for the interests, aims and opinions of others (Achinsten, 2002). The focus in staff meetings thus, shifts from unity to division and often times, meetings are haphazardly managed as meeting facilitators typically lecture the group without focusing the meetings without integration or participation of members (Mysiades, 2000). As a result, dissatisfaction with meetings has been registered with participants (McConnell, 1997) who want meeting procedures to be planned, and standardized in agreement with staff members (Herbert, 1999; Hoch, 2000). Ultimately, time has been wasted each time members disagree over issues that could best be solved outside the meetings (Harger & Harlet, 2006). Various analysis of meetings have thus led to inquiries on the struggles and power games as played out in decision making and negotiations in staff meetings (Csaniawska & Skoldberg, 2003; Salo, 2002).

In Kenya, focus on staff meetings has been minimal and in spite of principals' participatory leadership styles, they do not provide teachers with the opportunities to get involved in participatory leadership through decision making meetings (Bulinda, 1999; Mungai, 2001). Perhaps, this is due to bureaucratic and personality factors that generally inhibit participatory formulation of schools' operational decisions and implementation. Communication barriers are among the factors that lead to infrequent conduct of staff meetings (Amule's, 2005). Therefore, this indicates that holding meetings is one of the administrative roles of principals and they should set time to meet teachers and communicate agenda for staff meeting early enough (Hussein, 2004).

The purpose of the study was guided by the following research questions: what policies guide the conduct of staff meetings in the schools? What is the practice of staff meetings in the schools?

Research Methods

This study aimed at understanding the factors that affect the effectiveness of staff meetings through qualitative case study of meetings in two public schools in Northern Kenya. A

qualitative case study design was appropriate because it demonstrates a commitment to studying everyday events like staff meetings in terms of the way they are experienced and understood by participants (Sarantakos, 2005). The case study design was also used because of its suitability to the needs and resources of small scale researcher as it allows a focus on perhaps two or three examples (Blaxter, Hunges, and Tight, 2006). Therefore using case study enabled an examination of contemporary policies and practices of staff meetings in two public secondary schools with the advantage that data was drawn from teachers' experiences and practices (Yin, 2003) in the conduct of such meetings.

According to Cohen & Manion (2000) on qualitative study, a range of data collection methods such as interviews, observation and document analysis are used. The interview's role was to probe the respondent's views and perspectives and gave the interviewees, a 'voice' (Wellington, 2000). Analysing of minutes of previous meetings and notices of meetings revealed some issues that the respondents were unwilling to divulge for whatever reasons. Observation helped to improve the validity of the responses from the other methods (Robson, 2000). The researcher observed two staff meetings in each school as a non participant to gain insight into the conduct of meetings thereby accessing inaccessible information. During the meetings, the following details were taken note of; procedure, attendance, roles of members, participation, and time management.

The observation schedule helped capture relevant details of the documents and observation. This tool filled the gap of information and facts that may have been overlooked by other data collection tools. As for interviews, a notebook was used as the interviewees responded and also during meetings. This was purposely done to provide a back up reference and readable data in case of unclear messages from the voice recorded data. It also afforded the researcher an opportunity to note paralinguistic features during the interview and observation sessions. This data as collected from the chalkboards, minutes, notice boards was to corroborate information gathered through interviews since the writings were recorded experiences of teachers in past meetings and could bear upon the present trends and patterns. A summary of each observation was then made from these notes.

The study targeted four meetings in two schools that had a total population of fifty teachers including two principals, two deputy principals, 14 heads of departments and thirty two class teachers. These had the following required characteristics: diversity of experience, age differences, length of stay in the school and varied qualifications a combination of which played out in the meetings and thus sufficient information was collected from them. Such diversity of key informants at all 'levels' could be valuable in establishing different perspectives and in-house triangulation (Wellington, 2000). In this research, a sample size of 12 teachers was selected to collect data. This was 24% of the teachers' population in the two schools. Four heads of departments (2 from each school) were selected due to their experience in facilitating meetings at departmental level whereas 4 subject teachers (2 from each school) were selected. All the teachers and heads of departments had equal chance of being selected by picking marked papers from a lottery basket. Anybody who picked a 'Yes' was included in the study. The

meeting leaders, namely the principals and the deputy principals, by virtue of their leadership positions, as the chairperson and the secretary to the staff meeting, were deliberately chosen to be part of the participants. These choices of four heads of departments and 4 subject teachers was premised on the fact that it was easier to collect data from a small sample and possible to investigate it in details and several times.

The analysis of data begun as soon as data collection had began given that in a qualitative approach this can be overwhelming (Creswell, 1998) then listening and transcribing from audio tape, reading of documents and reflections on observation notes continued. These were summarized and categorized into emerging themes. Coding was done followed by interpretation of categorized themes from the data through rules of evidence and logic. The data was then recorded as descriptive narrative. Analysis of data was accomplished by studying repeated patterns, corroboration of doubted data and classifying them appropriately. This was followed by drawing of inferences which formed the basis of the research findings as presented.

Results and Discussion

The study had sought to investigate policies that guide the conduct of school staff meetings and the practice thereof.

The Policy

The researcher asked about the knowledge of any existing policy documents and records used in the conduct of staff meetings. It emerged from the participants that there were no official policy documents from the MOE in the schools. For example, Principal X confirmed the presence of a handbook on effective meetings but declined to endorse it as a policy document, dismissing the text as a publisher's material and not a ministerial handbook on staff meetings. Conclusively, he said, "No, I don't think, there are any policies on meetings, neither are staff minutes required by anybody...it is good to mention that for your research. (Principal X, interview, April 26, 2009). According to Principal Y, there was a policy gap and each school grappled with that reality. He said, "...that gap is there, there are no official policies ...and the effect trickles down to the staff meetings". (Principal school Y, interview, May 7, 2009).

The Deputy Principal of school Y (DPY) was also totally unaware of the existence of any policies particularly on the staff meetings (DPY, interview, April 26, 2009). Probed to corroborate the principal's sentiments, Deputy Principal of school X (DPX) reported that the leader's professionalism and the professional code of ethics were applicable across the board (DPX, interview, April 14, 2009). However, for principal Y, it was imperative that "school as an organization is supposed to cut a niche for itself and have its own culture whenever such gaps exist...since meetings provide rare opportunities for teachers to come together." (Principal Y, interview, May 7, 2009).

Two informants in Tikam (pseudonym) confirmed the DPX statement that the leader's professionalism fills the void because "nobody had been punished for not attending meetings but there is a time they received some warning letters and it was the issue of the staff meeting."

(Informant, interview, March 28, 2009). Sigara (pseudonym) teachers too were uncertain about existing policies but advocated that a policy should be in place to guide teachers' professional meeting management thus, "we need to have a policy regarding conduct of meetings" (Informant school Y, interview, April 15, 2009). Collating the informant's position and the principals' revealed that such policies do not exist. Therefore, it emerged from the interviews that in the absence of clear guidelines on staff meetings, the general staff management or professional guidelines and a 'cultural practice' of in house policies fill the void.

The Practice of Staff Meetings

The study also sought to find out the conduct of staff meetings in the two schools. Of interest were the following aspects: the quorum, the agenda and procedure, length, and member participation. To this end, the separate interviews held with Sigara and Tikam teachers and their principals testified to these practices. According to the Principals, most of the staff meetings were a routine. For example, "when the school opens, there is always a staff meeting and once one or two issues are raised, the meeting ends without even being recorded, teachers do not keep record of what was discussed." (The Principal, May 7, 2009). The meeting observation confirmed the presence of two meetings that term.

The quorum. In three of the four meetings observed in both schools, both principals paid attention to lack of quorum and could only start a meeting after confirming the majority were present. However, in an interview with Sigara teachers, the attendance was erratic and the latest meeting lacked quorum as "very many of our colleagues were not available to attend because there was no memo, warning, no instructions, and no notice that we should have a meeting at that particular time." (Informants, interview, April 15, 2009). The researcher noted that the quorum availability was not supported by any written rule that required a specified number of teachers before the commencement of a staff meeting. This perhaps explains the progress of one meeting with a large staff in absentia. However, an interview with Tikam teachers noted "there is always an appropriate number, three quarters required for the staff meeting to take place. Usually everybody is supposed to attend but if the turn up not 100% is, usually it is the quorum that dictates." In two minute documents in Tikam, the analysis revealed that each time the chairperson's communication involved confirmation of a quorum before the proceedings (Minutes, April 1 & January 6, 2009). (Informants, interview, March 28, 2009). Therefore, the practice of a quorum was a silent rule but the principal needed it to validate that the majority of teachers approved the agenda. After a confirmation of the quorum, the meetings could pick up with the agenda of the meetings.

The Agenda and proceedings. An agenda is a list of items that are programmed for debate in a meeting. Four types of agenda emerged from the study as follows: the "Agenda one", the Convener's agenda, the Teachers' agenda, and the Emergent agenda. The "agenda one" was the very first activity that meeting attendees engaged in, either preceding the onset of the staff meeting or coming in when the meeting was in progress. Asked if there was any aspect of the staff meetings Tikam teachers liked about their meetings, one member responded sarcastically,

“Yes, Agenda one (Laughter). The first thing is the 300ml or 500ml of soft drinks. That is Agenda one.” (Informant, interview, March 28, 2009). The triangulated data confirmed the practice of lunch in all the four observed meetings accompanied by a bottle of soda. This agenda was however, never ‘minuted’ in any of the staff meeting minutes that were analyzed. The “Agenda one” therefore, is the practice of taking refreshments or meals before or during meeting commencement. The researcher concluded that it serves the maintenance and marshalling function hence the first order in the staff meetings.

The second type of agenda as practiced in the staff meetings was the Convener’s agenda. According to Principal Y, the agendas flowed from two directions; from the desk of administrators and the heads of department who also supervised the teachers and the teachers themselves. A Sigara informant defined the Convener’s agenda as a concealed agenda, only raised by the convener. As it turned out, the Convener’s agenda is the meeting’s agenda and in most cases was raised in the meeting by the Principal without prior notification. According to Tikam teachers, the agenda was communicated at the meetings as one informant reflectively exclaimed, “the agenda is usually read for us during the meeting. What we always get is a notice to attend the meeting.” (Informant, March 28, 2009)

In Sigara, the notice for this agenda was verbal. This practice was corroborated by the absence of agenda statements in the meeting notices of the two schools. Therefore, the agenda was never shared in writing prior to the meetings. In retrospect, other informants agreed and lamented, “if we are not informed of the agenda of the meeting well in time, we cannot prepare to debate on issues and we are just taken for a ride to rubber stamp someone’s ‘agenda’.” (Informant, interview, April 26, 2009). Principal Y concurs with the teachers that the practice of introducing the agenda in the meetings is rampant in schools and “should be discouraged such that staff meeting be different from staff briefs where matters are urgent and can be done over tea breaks” (Principal Y, interview, May 7, 2009). Therefore, the convener’s agenda can be referred to as the list of issues brought forward by the chairperson of a notified meeting and is also known as the meeting’s agenda where “at the end of the day, it is a question where the chairman or the convener will be able to make sure that what he wants is attained”. (Informant, interview, May 8, 2009).

The third type of agenda is the Teachers’ agenda. In Principal Y’s practice, the teachers’ add agenda in the meetings because the agenda is not provided but a paper goes round and the teachers get to write what will be discussed.” (Principal Y, interview, May 7, 2009). Similarly, according to an informant in Tikam, teachers do not know how the agenda is arrived at but “if the principals saw it fit to ask for teachers’ views, the agenda will be read for us then we contribute in the meeting and surprisingly, we can add the agenda at the meeting.” (Informant, interview, March 28, 2009). In triangulation with (Sigara staff meeting, observation notes, 8 May, 2009), it emerged that teachers were instructed by the chairperson to register their agenda as an addendum to the main agenda for the meeting. According to Principal X, “almost all the policies come from the staff members for example; we have the number of CATs, co-curricula activities, policies on appointment of prefects, policies on discipline in the dining hall, even now

the policy on textbooks”. (Principal X, interview, March 28, 2009). Therefore, the Teachers’ agenda is any issue that teachers want to be discussed in a meeting and the principal may know it formally or informally.

The fourth type of agenda was referred to as the emergent agenda. This agenda cropped up during the discussions of any agenda on the floor. It was an offshoot of agenda in the meetings. According to one informant in Sigara School, “the emergent agenda is an issue or item that arises to fill the vacuum of meetings organized without specific agenda. The practice, as another informant clarified, “is that the meetings we have had including the latest, was without specific agenda and what came out was the emergent agenda which was concealed and only being raised by the convener.” (Informants, interview, April 15, 2009). However, in the observed meetings, such agenda cropped up even when the agenda were specified and anybody would come up with it. For instance, there was a lengthy discussion on staff meeting policies in Sigara School which was not intended for that particular meeting yet it emerged and the members discussed it. (Staff meeting, observation notes, April 25, 2009). Similarly, there was a teacher in Tikam who successfully demanded to be discussed as part of agenda. From the foregoing, it was concluded that there were various interest groups in school meetings each of which came into the meeting with presupposed types of agenda.

From these, a coinage of words derived from the combination of initial letters of each agenda type, present puns whose meanings reflect the kind of staff meetings in schools. For instance, (M- meetings agenda; E- emergent agenda; T-teacher agenda and A-agenda one). These initials form three classes of English acronyms. First, the META, second, the TEAM and third, the MEAT. Table 1 shows the practice of the agenda in school staff meetings from the two schools.

Table 1. Emerging practices of agenda in school meetings

Category	Category One	Category Two	Category Three
Type	M EAT	TEAM	META
Meeting	Convener provides agenda	A group agenda	Resists group agenda
Agenda			
Emergent agenda	Agenda crops up in the meeting	Unity of interests	Diversity of interests
Agenda 1	Precedes all activities and is about meals.	Precedes or brought up during meeting	Among the many interests
Teacher Agenda	Serves teachers priority and are issues overlooked by chair.	Addresses team’s needs	Attracts the members

From the above table, it emerges that the agenda seem to be the focal point of all staff meetings and using various means the staff manipulates the communication process to achieve

whatever 'agenda' they have for a staff meeting. Therefore, the practices in formulating, communicating, and discussing agenda may impact on the effectiveness of meetings.

Length of Meetings. As far as the length of meetings was concerned, the data indicated that the observed meetings ended up taking a whole afternoon or five class sessions of usually one to three hours. As one informant said, "It goes wide until the members run out of facts and ideas" (Informant, interview, May 8, 2009). Interestingly, no staff in both the schools complained about this except Sigara teachers who voiced a concern of being put on the spot over missed lessons during meeting sessions for too long. (Staff meeting, observation notes, May 8, 2009).

According to Tikam teachers, the lengthy meetings were 'due to lack of time consciousness' in the meetings. One informant from Tikam implied that in practice, there was no fixed time and ending depended on the people and the agenda. Occasionally, punctuality was not observed as indicated on the notice since the meetings began one to two hours later due to quorum hitches. (Informant, interview, March 28, 2009). No one attempted to regulate and manage time. This position was confirmed in virtually all the four meetings observed. There was no time keeper and members could speak hours on end. "So any meeting could take until night sitting there and discussing until the meetings were completed". (Informant, interview, March 28, 2009). Furthermore, the documented evidence of two meetings indicated that the morning meeting sessions began at 9.30 a.m and ended at noon while afternoon meetings either began at 1.30 and 2 P.M or ended at 5.30 or 6 P.M in the evening with starting time having delayed by between 15 to 30 minutes. The teachers did not show any sign of fatigue or boredom in the 2 hour plus meetings.

From the fore going, time management featured as a pertinent issue in the effectiveness of staff meeting in so far as participants were satisfied with the meeting outcome. However, the two principals and the deputies were in agreement that for an effective meeting, time must be saved.

The teacher involvement and participation. The teachers felt that their involvement and participation in the meeting was hampered by leader's informal way of organization and staff meeting facilitation. The meetings were convened 'behind one's back'. Teachers did not actively participate because, "Most of the time it was the chairman's monologue. And so he would just lead the meeting to where he wants and any contributions coming was a favour. (Tikam Informant, interview, May, 8 2009). The teachers were not involved in meeting preparation and organization. The present attendees did not rise to points of order to have the meeting facilitated conventionally for fear of pointing figures at the chair. Secondly, a teacher who came out vocally against the chair was misconstrued to have an 'agenda' hence backed down from presenting (Sigara Informant, interview April 15, 2009). One could not also afford to be vocal against an issue lest they were suspected of sabotage. The participant's position seemed to forward a claim that their meetings were full of intimidation and perhaps could explain the reason behind members declining opportunities to speak in some of the observed meetings.

In my view, this study implies that there is insufficient knowledge, skills, roles and rights of teachers and principals in the staff meetings. This means that teachers might not conduct and

evaluate their meetings effectively. Without meeting knowledge and skills, structures may not be adequately instituted to encourage supervision of implementation and evaluation of staff meetings proceedings indicating that school staff meetings might be managed haphazardly for a long time to come. Therefore educational policy makers need to critically examine and be aware of these factors and others that affect the effectiveness of staff meetings. Such awareness will allow them to question the current structures of school administration thereby creating room for alternative staff meetings practices. This would address the current inattention given this area and take it to the level of other school meetings such as board of management and parent association through developing appropriate policies governing its constitution, conduct and management.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study had set out to investigate the policy, practice and how the existing policy and practice affect the effectiveness of staff meetings. It is apparent that there is a problem in the policy formulation and in practice of staff meetings. Lack of Ministry of Education policy on staff meetings might affect the way meetings are conducted hence their effectiveness since schools organize and conduct meetings without standard guidelines. That there is an uncertainty of the existing guidelines for school staff meetings needs no emphasis. In that regard, streamlining the existing 'internal policies to be in line with the current trend of educational management require clear cut structures.

As concerns the practice, the participants apparently connected the unclear policies with the informality with which their meetings were communicated, timed and managed. In the absence of policy regarding meeting conventions-the meetings come as a reactionary measure and then it does not become a staff meeting but a briefing. Consequently, the practice of staff meetings and their effectiveness is hampered since the participants have inadequate knowledge of staff preparation, meetings procedures, prerequisite management procedures, facilitation skills, member roles, and intra communication mechanisms. Therefore the following are recommendations to the Ministry of Education and schools; an evaluation of staff meetings, a structure of staff meetings that is bottom-up and an action research for effectiveness as follows:

1. Create an environment where evaluation becomes a normal part of the meeting process through self evaluation by the principal, teachers or a trained observer using a designed evaluation form to measure the staff meetings for effectiveness using designed forms.
2. Restructure Staff Meetings using a bottom-up model where the head teacher (chairperson), the deputy head teacher (secretary) the head of departments, heads of subjects, class teachers and other section heads must have sat in its own level meetings and come up with issues for the main agenda.
3. Execute an Action Research to enhance the structure and the conduct of staff meetings.

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