

Participative Governance and School Effectiveness: The Mediating Roles of Professional Development, School Discipline, and Curriculum Governance

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600571>

Received: 31 May 2026; Accepted: 05 June 2026; Published: 30 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Shared decision-making has increasingly emerged as a central dimension of participative leadership within educational administration, yet the mediating institutional processes through which it influences school effectiveness remain insufficiently theorised in African educational contexts. This study investigates the mediating roles of staff professional development, school discipline, and curriculum governance in the relationship between participative governance and school effectiveness in secondary schools in Cameroon. Using a mixed-methods research design, quantitative data were collected from 480 principals and teachers across 30 secondary schools in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon, while qualitative interviews were conducted with 24 purposively selected participants. Quantitative findings reveal that shared decision-making is significantly associated with staff professional development ($r_s = 0.631$), school discipline ($r_s = 0.584$), and curriculum governance ($r_s = 0.592$), all of which are positively associated with school effectiveness ($p < 0.001$). Multiple regression analysis further demonstrates that shared decision-making makes a statistically significant independent contribution to school effectiveness ($\beta = 0.176$, $p = 0.007$) after controlling for delegation and financial transparency. Qualitative findings indicate that the effectiveness of participative governance depends less on formal participatory structures than on the authenticity, deliberative quality, and communicative openness of leadership practices. Drawing on Hargreaves' concept of contrived collegiality, the article argues that many schools reproduce symbolic forms of participation rather than cultivate genuine collaborative governance cultures. The study contributes theoretically to the scholarship on participative leadership and, practically, to leadership development policy in African schools.

Keywords: shared decision-making, participative governance, school discipline, professional development, curriculum governance, school effectiveness, Cameroon, contrived collegiality.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The growing complexity of educational leadership and school governance in contemporary Africa has intensified scholarly interest in participative leadership models and their implications for institutional effectiveness. Across many educational systems, particularly within developing contexts, shared decision-making has increasingly emerged as a critical leadership strategy for enhancing teacher commitment, strengthening school discipline, improving curriculum governance, and fostering collaborative professional cultures within schools. Existing educational leadership scholarship consistently demonstrates that when teachers are meaningfully involved in governance and institutional decision-making processes, schools are more likely to experience improved organisational cohesion, professional accountability, instructional effectiveness, and learner performance (Somech, 2002, 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). However, despite the extensive theoretical and empirical attention devoted to participative leadership globally, relatively limited scholarship within African educational contexts has systematically examined the specific pathways through which shared decision-making contributes to school effectiveness, particularly in relation to staff professional development, school discipline, and curriculum governance.

Within many African secondary schools, leadership practices continue to operate within highly centralised administrative structures where decision-making authority remains concentrated in the office of the principal,

often limiting teacher participation in institutional governance processes. Such hierarchical governance traditions may undermine collaborative professionalism, reduce teacher ownership of institutional policies, and weaken the collective responsibility necessary for sustainable school improvement. In Cameroon specifically, educational institutions continue to face multiple challenges related to leadership effectiveness, professional development, learner discipline, curriculum implementation, and institutional accountability, particularly in resource-constrained and crisis-affected educational environments. These realities raise important questions concerning the extent to which participative governance structures may contribute towards strengthening institutional effectiveness and improving the broader educational climate within secondary schools. Although previous studies have acknowledged the positive relationship between participative leadership and school performance, insufficient attention has been given to understanding the mediating institutional mechanisms through which shared decision-making influences effectiveness outcomes in African schools.

Against this background, the present study investigates the relationships among shared decision-making, school discipline, professional development, curriculum governance, and school effectiveness in secondary schools in Fako Division, South West Region, Cameroon. The study seeks to examine the extent to which participative governance contributes to improved institutional functioning and to identify the specific organisational pathways through which these effects occur. More specifically, the study explores the relationships among shared decision-making, staff professional development, school discipline, and curriculum governance, and examines how these dimensions collectively influence overall school effectiveness. The study is guided by the following research questions: How does shared decision-making influence staff professional development in secondary schools? What relationship exists between participative governance and school discipline? How does shared decision-making affect curriculum governance and pedagogical policy implementation? To what extent do these institutional dimensions contribute to school effectiveness?

Based on the theoretical and conceptual framework, the study advances the proposition that shared decision-making positively influences school effectiveness through its mediating relationships with staff professional development, school discipline, and curriculum governance. The study further proposes that the effectiveness of participative governance depends primarily on the authenticity and deliberative quality of participation, rather than on the mere existence of formal participatory structures.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to educational leadership scholarship, particularly within African contexts where empirical research on participative governance remains comparatively underdeveloped. By examining the institutional pathways linking shared decision-making to school effectiveness, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how collaborative leadership practices may strengthen educational institutions within resource-constrained and socially complex environments. The findings may further assist policymakers, school principals, educational administrators, and teacher development practitioners in designing leadership models and governance frameworks that promote professional collaboration, democratic participation, institutional accountability, and sustainable school improvement. Moreover, by distinguishing between genuine participative governance and merely formal or contrived collegiality, the study advances important theoretical discussions concerning the quality, authenticity, and effectiveness of participative leadership within contemporary African schools (Hargreaves, 1994).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical and conceptual framework of this study is grounded in participative leadership theory, collegial governance models, and school effectiveness scholarship. The framework provides the analytical lens through which the relationship between shared decision-making and institutional effectiveness is examined within secondary schools. It further explains the organisational pathways through which participative governance influences staff professional development, school discipline, curriculum governance, and overall school effectiveness.

Participative Decision-Making in Schools

Participative decision-making constitutes one of the most influential dimensions of democratic educational leadership and collaborative school governance. The theory is largely rooted in the work of Vroom and Yetton

(1973), who argue that involving subordinates in organisational decision-making improves both decision quality and implementation commitment. Within school contexts, participative governance allows teachers to contribute their classroom experiences, professional expertise, and contextual knowledge to institutional decision-making processes, thereby strengthening organisational effectiveness and policy relevance. Shared decision-making also enhances teacher motivation, ownership, professional trust, and institutional commitment because teachers are more likely to support and implement policies in whose formulation they actively participated (Somech, 2002, 2005). Educational leadership scholars further maintain that participative governance creates collaborative institutional cultures that promote communication, accountability, and collective responsibility for school improvement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). In contemporary African schools, where educational institutions increasingly confront leadership, disciplinary, and curriculum implementation challenges, participative decision-making provides an important framework for strengthening institutional responsiveness and collaborative professionalism.

Shared Decision-Making and School Effectiveness

The concept of school effectiveness refers to the extent to which educational institutions successfully achieve desired academic, organisational, and developmental outcomes. Effective schools are characterised by strong instructional leadership, positive school climate, professional collaboration, discipline, and coherent curriculum implementation (Robinson et al., 2008). Existing scholarship suggests that shared decision-making contributes significantly to these institutional dimensions by fostering collective responsibility, improving communication structures, and strengthening staff engagement in school governance processes. Participative leadership enables teachers to contribute meaningfully towards professional development planning, disciplinary policy formulation, and curriculum governance, thereby improving institutional cohesion and organisational efficiency (Blase & Blase, 1994). Shared decision-making also strengthens social capital within schools by promoting trust, collegial interaction, and collaborative problem-solving, all of which are essential for sustainable school improvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Within this study, school effectiveness is therefore conceptualised not merely as learner academic performance, but as the broader institutional capacity of schools to maintain professional accountability, collaborative governance, instructional coherence, and stable disciplinary environments conducive to teaching and learning.

Contrived Versus Genuine Collegiality

A major theoretical concern in participative governance scholarship is the distinction between genuine collegiality and what Hargreaves (1994) terms 'contrived collegiality'. Genuine collegiality emerges organically through relationships of professional trust, authentic collaboration, and meaningful participation in institutional governance. In such contexts, teachers experience participation as intellectually valued, professionally respected, and institutionally consequential. Contrived collegiality, by contrast, refers to administratively imposed structures of participation that create the appearance of collaboration without genuine deliberative engagement. Teachers may attend meetings, participate in committees, and fulfil consultation procedures while remaining excluded from substantive decision-making processes. Under such conditions, participation becomes procedural rather than transformative, generating compliance without professional ownership or institutional commitment. This distinction is particularly important in many African educational contexts, where bureaucratic administrative cultures may maintain formal participatory structures without fostering genuine collaborative leadership practices. The present study therefore adopts Hargreaves' concept of contrived collegiality as an important analytical tool for distinguishing between nominal participation and authentic participative governance within Cameroonian secondary schools.

Conceptual Pathway Model

The conceptual framework underpinning this study is based on a multi-pathway model linking shared decision-making to school effectiveness through three key intermediate institutional dimensions: staff professional development, school discipline, and curriculum governance. The model assumes that participative governance positively influences these institutional variables, which, in turn, contribute to overall school effectiveness. First, shared decision-making strengthens staff professional development by promoting collaborative learning

cultures, collective identification of professional needs, and increased teacher ownership of institutional improvement processes. Second, participative governance improves school discipline by enabling teachers to participate in the formulation, implementation, and enforcement of disciplinary policies, thereby increasing consistency and institutional legitimacy. Third, shared decision-making enhances curriculum governance by promoting collaborative pedagogical planning, policy coherence, and instructional innovation responsive to learner needs. These three dimensions collectively strengthen institutional functionality, instructional effectiveness, and organisational accountability, thereby contributing towards broader school effectiveness outcomes. The framework, therefore, conceptualises participative governance as both a relational and organisational process through which collaborative leadership influences institutional performance within secondary schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational leadership scholarship has increasingly emphasised participative governance as a critical determinant of institutional effectiveness, teacher professionalism, and collaborative school improvement. Contemporary studies consistently demonstrate that schools characterised by shared decision-making tend to exhibit stronger professional cultures, improved staff commitment, enhanced disciplinary environments, and more effective curriculum implementation processes. However, despite the growing body of international scholarship on participative leadership, relatively limited empirical attention has been devoted to examining the specific institutional pathways through which shared decision-making influences school effectiveness in African, particularly Cameroonian, secondary school contexts.

Shared Decision-Making and Staff Professional Development

Existing literature strongly associates shared decision-making with improved staff professional development and collaborative teacher learning cultures. Participative governance enables teachers to contribute actively towards identifying institutional training priorities, pedagogical challenges, and professional learning needs, thereby making professional development programmes more responsive, contextually relevant, and professionally meaningful (Somech, 2005).

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that sustainable school improvement depends not only on individual teacher competence but also on the development of “professional capital,” which combines human capital, social capital, and decisional capital within collaborative institutional environments. Shared decision-making strengthens this professional capital by fostering trust, collegial interaction, peer mentoring, and collective professional inquiry.

International scholarship further demonstrates that schools characterised by collaborative leadership tend to experience higher levels of teacher motivation, professional ownership, instructional innovation, and organisational citizenship behaviour (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

Teachers who participate meaningfully in institutional governance are more likely to engage in collaborative lesson planning, peer observation, curriculum reflection, and school-based professional development activities because they perceive themselves as valued contributors to institutional improvement processes. Conversely, highly centralised administrative cultures often weaken professional collaboration by limiting teacher agency and reducing opportunities for collective instructional reflection. In many developing educational contexts, professional development remains administrative and top-down rather than collaborative and participatory, thereby limiting its transformative impact on instructional quality.

Recent educational leadership scholarship also emphasises the importance of distributed and collaborative leadership models in strengthening teacher learning communities. Harris (2020) observes that schools increasingly require participative governance structures capable of supporting collective professionalism and adaptive instructional innovation within rapidly changing educational environments. Within African schools confronting resource constraints, curriculum reforms, and social instability, collaborative professional cultures become even more important for sustaining institutional resilience and instructional continuity.

Shared Decision-Making and School Discipline

School discipline constitutes one of the most important organisational conditions for effective teaching and learning. Existing scholarship consistently demonstrates that schools characterised by collaborative governance and participative leadership tend to experience more stable disciplinary climates, stronger institutional cohesion, and improved learner behaviour (Blase & Blase, 1994). Shared decision-making contributes to disciplinary effectiveness because teachers who participate in the formulation and implementation of disciplinary policies are more likely to support, internalise, and consistently enforce institutional regulations. Participative governance, therefore, strengthens institutional legitimacy by generating collective ownership of school rules, behavioural expectations, and disciplinary procedures.

Research further suggests that disciplinary systems imposed unilaterally by principals often encounter resistance, inconsistency, and limited institutional commitment because teachers may perceive them as externally imposed administrative directives rather than as collectively developed institutional frameworks (Bridges, 1967). In contrast, participative disciplinary governance encourages collaborative problem-solving, shared accountability, and coherent responses to learner misconduct. Schools characterised by positive relational trust and collaborative governance structures are also more likely to adopt restorative and developmental disciplinary approaches rather than purely punitive systems.

In many African secondary schools, disciplinary challenges have intensified due to broader social, economic, and political pressures on educational environments. In Cameroon, particularly, crisis-related disruptions, learner indiscipline, and institutional instability have placed significant pressure on school leadership structures. Under such conditions, participative governance may strengthen institutional stability by fostering collective responsibility and collaborative disciplinary management among teachers and school leaders.

Shared Decision-Making and Curriculum Governance

Curriculum governance refers to the institutional processes through which schools manage curriculum implementation, pedagogical coordination, instructional policy, and academic innovation. Contemporary educational leadership literature increasingly recognises curriculum governance as a collaborative rather than purely administrative process requiring meaningful teacher participation in instructional planning and pedagogical decision-making (Robinson et al., 2008). Shared decision-making strengthens curriculum governance by enabling teachers to contribute their classroom experiences, learner-centred insights, and contextual expertise towards instructional policy formulation and curriculum adaptation.

Research indicates that schools characterised by participative governance are more likely to promote instructional innovation, collaborative curriculum planning, and pedagogical responsiveness because teachers experience greater professional autonomy and ownership over instructional processes (Somech, 2002). Participative curriculum governance further strengthens communication between school leadership and teaching staff, thereby improving policy coherence and consistency in curriculum implementation. Conversely, highly bureaucratic school systems may discourage pedagogical creativity and adaptive instructional responses by centralising curriculum decisions within administrative structures removed from classroom realities.

Recent scholarship also highlights the growing importance of collaborative curriculum leadership in contexts affected by educational disruption, technological transformation, and learner diversity. Effective curriculum governance increasingly requires schools to develop flexible, contextually responsive pedagogical strategies that address evolving learner needs and educational challenges. In African schools confronting resource limitations and social instability, participative curriculum governance may therefore serve as an important mechanism for institutional adaptability and instructional resilience.

Shared Decision-Making in African and Cameroonian School Contexts

Although participative leadership has received extensive scholarly attention internationally, research within African educational contexts remains comparatively limited. Existing African educational leadership studies suggest that many schools continue to operate within highly hierarchical administrative cultures influenced by

colonial bureaucratic traditions, centralised governance systems, and authoritarian leadership models (Mbua, 2003). Such institutional cultures often limit teacher participation in governance processes and weaken collaborative professionalism within schools.

Nevertheless, emerging African scholarship increasingly acknowledges the importance of participative governance for strengthening educational effectiveness and institutional accountability. Studies conducted in Cameroon indicate that shared decision-making positively influences teacher commitment, organisational climate, and school performance, particularly when participation is perceived as genuine rather than symbolic (Ebot, 2020). However, many schools continue to experience what Hargreaves (1994) describes as “contrived collegiality,” in which participative structures are formal but fail to foster authentic collaborative engagement.

The Cameroonian educational context is particularly significant because schools operate within complex institutional conditions characterised by resource constraints, socio-political instability, curriculum reform pressures, and uneven professional development opportunities. These realities create an urgent need for collaborative leadership models that can strengthen institutional cohesion, teacher ownership, and school effectiveness. Yet empirical research examining the pathways through which participative governance influences institutional outcomes within Cameroonian schools remains underdeveloped.

Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite the growing body of scholarship on participative leadership and school effectiveness, several important gaps remain evident within the literature. First, much of the existing research focuses broadly on the relationship between participative leadership and institutional performance without systematically examining the intermediate organisational pathways through which shared decision-making influences school effectiveness. Limited attention has therefore been devoted to understanding how participative governance specifically affects staff professional development, school discipline, and curriculum governance as interconnected institutional processes.

Second, much of the available scholarship remains heavily Western-oriented, with comparatively limited empirical evidence from African educational contexts where institutional cultures, governance traditions, and resource conditions differ significantly from those in Europe and North America. Third, existing studies often treat participation structurally rather than qualitatively, focusing on the presence of participatory mechanisms without adequately distinguishing between genuine collaborative governance and symbolic or contrived participation.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by providing empirical evidence from Cameroonian secondary schools on the pathways linking shared decision-making to school effectiveness through staff professional development, disciplinary climate, and curriculum governance. The study further contributes theoretically by examining the distinction between genuine and contrived collegiality within participative school governance systems.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the relationship between shared decision-making and school effectiveness in secondary schools in Fako Division, South West Region, Cameroon. The mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because the study sought not only to establish statistical relationships between participative governance and institutional effectiveness variables, but also to explore the deeper organisational and relational dynamics through which these relationships operate within school contexts.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches was particularly important because participative governance involves both measurable organisational relationships and subjective institutional experiences that cannot be adequately captured through statistical analysis alone. The qualitative component, therefore, enabled a deeper exploration of the communicative, relational, and deliberative dimensions of participation that underlie the quantitative patterns.

The design, thus, enabled the integration of numerical evidence with qualitative insights on teacher participation, collegial interaction, leadership practices, and institutional governance processes. The study was conducted within the specific socio-educational context of Cameroonian secondary schools characterised by centralised administrative traditions, resource constraints, evolving educational reforms, and increasing demands for collaborative school leadership and institutional accountability.

The target population comprised principals and teachers from secondary schools in Fako Division. Using a multi-stage sampling strategy, thirty secondary schools were selected to ensure representation across different school categories and institutional contexts. The quantitative component involved 480 participants, comprising principals and teachers from the selected schools, while the qualitative component involved purposively selected participants with direct experience and knowledge of school governance and participative leadership practices. Purposive sampling in the qualitative phase enabled the researcher to obtain rich, contextually grounded insights into the lived experiences of participatory governance in schools. The relatively large quantitative sample further strengthened the statistical reliability and generalisability of the findings within the study context.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire instrument consisted of multiple scales measuring shared decision-making, staff professional development, school discipline, curriculum governance, and school effectiveness. The scales were adapted from established educational leadership and school effectiveness frameworks and demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.733 to 0.801, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. The qualitative interviews complemented the quantitative data by providing deeper explanations of how participative governance operates within institutional settings and how teachers perceive the authenticity or limitations of shared decision-making structures. Data collection procedures involved obtaining institutional authorisation from relevant educational authorities and school administrators before administering questionnaires and conducting interviews within the participating schools.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Spearman rank-order correlations, and multiple regression analysis to determine relationships between participative governance variables and school effectiveness outcomes. The qualitative data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, enabling the identification of recurring patterns relating to participative governance, collegiality, professional collaboration, and institutional effectiveness. Reliability and validity were strengthened through triangulation of quantitative and qualitative evidence, pilot testing of instruments, and the use of established measurement scales derived from previous scholarship. Trustworthiness within the qualitative component was enhanced through careful transcription, thematic consistency, and interpretive coherence. Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the protection of participant identities. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and assured that the information provided would be used strictly for academic and research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that shared decision-making operates as a significant pathway through which participative governance influences school effectiveness. The first pathway links shared decision-making to staff professional development. The study found a strong positive relationship between shared decision-making and staff professional development, indicating that schools in which teachers are meaningfully involved in governance decisions are more likely to create professional development cultures that are responsive, collaborative, and practically relevant. This finding is important because professional development is not merely about sending teachers to workshops; it depends on whether teachers participate in identifying their own learning needs, shaping training priorities, and translating new knowledge into classroom practice. In schools where principals genuinely consult teachers, professional development becomes a shared institutional project rather than an administrative requirement. The attached study shows that shared decision-making correlated strongly with staff professional development and that professional development was also significantly associated with school effectiveness.

The second pathway concerns school discipline. The findings show that shared decision-making is positively associated with school discipline, suggesting that disciplinary systems become more effective when teachers

participate in developing, interpreting, and implementing school rules. This is analytically significant because discipline is not sustained merely by punishment or authority; it depends on shared ownership of behavioural norms. When teachers are excluded from disciplinary decision-making, they may apply rules inconsistently or refer problems upward to the principal. However, when they help formulate discipline policies, they are more likely to understand their purpose, enforce them consistently, and intervene constructively. The study confirms that shared decision-making was significantly associated with school discipline and that school discipline, in turn, was strongly associated with school effectiveness.

The third pathway links shared decision-making to curriculum governance. The evidence indicates that participative governance improves the quality of curriculum and pedagogical policy by bringing classroom-level knowledge into institutional planning. Curriculum governance is strongest when teachers are not treated as passive implementers of centrally designed policies, but as professional agents capable of interpreting learner needs, adapting pedagogy, and contributing to instructional innovation. This is particularly relevant in crisis-affected or resource-constrained contexts, where rigid top-down curriculum implementation may fail to respond to disrupted learning, trauma, absenteeism, and uneven learner preparation. The study found that shared decision-making was significantly associated with curriculum governance and that curriculum governance was strongly associated with school effectiveness.

The regression results further strengthen the argument that shared decision-making makes a unique contribution to school effectiveness, even when other participative leadership variables are taken into account. The study reports that shared decision-making remained a significant predictor in the multiple regression model, with a unique contribution after controlling for delegation and financial transparency. This suggests that shared decision-making is not merely a symbolic leadership practice but an independent organisational mechanism that contributes to institutional effectiveness. Its importance lies in the way it connects leadership, teacher agency, professional commitment, discipline, and curriculum implementation into a coherent governance culture.

The deeper implication of these findings is that the effectiveness of shared decision-making depends less on the existence of meetings, committees, and consultation structures than on the quality of participation itself. The distinction between genuine and formal participation is therefore central. Genuine participation occurs when teachers believe that their voices matter, their professional judgement is respected, and their contributions influence decisions. Formal participation, by contrast, occurs when teachers attend meetings or submit views without any real influence on outcomes. In such cases, participation becomes administrative theatre rather than democratic governance. The study rightly draws on Hargreaves' concept of contrived collegiality to explain this gap between participative form and participative substance.

Shared decision-making should therefore be understood as a pathway to institutional effectiveness because it builds professional ownership, strengthens collective responsibility, and improves the implementation of school policies. Its value is both practical and symbolic. For example, a principal who invites teachers to co-design a disciplinary policy is likely to secure stronger staff commitment than one who simply announces rules. Similarly, a principal who allows teachers to shape professional development priorities is more likely to promote relevant training than one who imposes generic workshops. In curriculum governance, teachers who participate in pedagogical planning are better positioned to develop locally responsive teaching strategies.

These findings have important implications for principal preparation and leadership development in Cameroon. If shared decision-making is to improve school effectiveness, principals must be trained not only in administrative procedures but also in facilitative leadership. They need competencies in meeting design, inclusive consultation, conflict-sensitive communication, feedback management, and collaborative problem-solving. Leadership training should therefore move beyond command-and-control models towards participative and dialogic governance. At the policy level, educational authorities should encourage schools to institutionalise meaningful teacher participation in professional development planning, disciplinary policy formulation, and curriculum governance. The central lesson is clear: shared decision-making improves schools only when it is authentic, professionally respectful, and visibly connected to institutional action.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that shared decision-making constitutes a critical pathway through which participative leadership influences school effectiveness within secondary schools in Cameroon. The findings reveal that participative governance contributes significantly to institutional effectiveness by positively influencing staff professional development, school discipline, and curriculum governance. Schools characterised by genuine teacher participation were found to exhibit stronger collaborative cultures, improved professional accountability, more coherent disciplinary systems, and more responsive curriculum implementation processes. The study therefore confirms that shared decision-making is not merely an administrative procedure or symbolic leadership practice, but a substantive organisational mechanism capable of strengthening institutional functionality and educational outcomes.

A major theoretical insight emerging from the study concerns the distinction between genuine participation and contrived collegiality. The evidence suggests that the effectiveness of participative governance depends less on the existence of formal participatory structures than on the authenticity, openness, and deliberative quality of leadership interactions. Schools in which teachers experienced participation as meaningful, respected, and influential demonstrated stronger institutional cohesion and more effective governance outcomes than schools where participation remained procedural and symbolic. The study, therefore, advances the argument that institutional effectiveness is deeply connected to the quality of communicative leadership cultures within schools. Participative governance succeeds not through administrative compliance but through the cultivation of professional trust, shared ownership, and collaborative responsibility.

The study further demonstrates that shared decision-making has important implications for educational leadership and policy development in Cameroon and similar African educational contexts. In highly centralised educational systems, school governance often remains dominated by hierarchical administrative traditions that marginalise teacher agency and weaken collaborative professionalism. Yet the findings of this study suggest that sustainable school improvement requires leadership approaches that move beyond bureaucratic control towards participative, dialogic, and professionally inclusive governance cultures. Teachers are more likely to support institutional policies, maintain disciplinary consistency, engage in professional learning, and implement curriculum innovations when they participate meaningfully in institutional decision-making processes.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that educational authorities and leadership training institutions in Cameroon strengthen participative governance practices within secondary schools. First, leadership development programmes for principals should incorporate intensive training in facilitative leadership competencies such as collaborative decision-making, inclusive consultation, conflict-sensitive communication, participatory meeting management, and feedback-loop closure. Second, schools should institutionalise genuine teacher participation in professional development planning, disciplinary policy formulation, and curriculum governance processes rather than limiting participation to symbolic committee structures. Third, educational policymakers should develop governance frameworks that encourage democratic school leadership, collegial professionalism, and collaborative institutional cultures that improve school effectiveness. Fourth, schools should promote professional learning communities and collaborative pedagogical forums that strengthen teacher ownership, peer learning, and instructional innovation.

While the study makes important empirical and theoretical contributions, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The research was conducted within secondary schools in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon, and the findings may therefore not be fully generalisable to all educational contexts within Cameroon or beyond. In addition, the study focused primarily on teacher and principal perceptions of participative governance and school effectiveness, which may be influenced by subjective institutional experiences. Future research may therefore expand the geographical scope of the investigation and incorporate longitudinal, comparative, and observational approaches to deepen understanding of participative governance processes across different educational contexts.

Further studies may also explore additional pathways through which participative leadership influences school effectiveness, including teacher wellbeing, learner academic achievement, organisational trust, and institutional resilience during periods of educational crisis. Comparative studies between urban and rural schools, public and

private institutions, and different African educational systems may further enrich understanding of how contextual factors shape participative governance outcomes. Ultimately, the study affirms that genuine shared decision-making remains one of the most important foundations for building democratic, effective, and professionally sustainable schools within contemporary African educational environments.

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