

AUTHORS:

Dr Abdullah Bayat<sup>1</sup> 

Prof Aslam Fataar<sup>2</sup> 

AFFILIATIONS:

<sup>1</sup>School of Business and Finance, University of the Western Cape

<sup>2</sup>Department of Education Policy Studies, Stellenbosch University

EMAIL:

abbayat@uwc.ac.za

afataar@sun.ac.za

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# EXPLORING AGENCY IN MARGINALISED OCCUPATIONS: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE CLERKS' DEPLOYMENT OF "PARTICIPATORY CAPITAL" IN ESTABLISHING PRACTICE-BASED AGENCY

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## ABSTRACT

*Popular conceptions of school administrative clerks and school secretaries imply that they have little agency because they are deemed as subordinate support staff. However, the literature across a range of fields suggests that these subordinates exercise agency. We set out in this article to explore the workings of subordinate agency. The article suggests that it is through their involvement and interaction in the socio-cultural context of the school that school administrative clerks are able to expand the range of their agency and thereby reposition themselves at school. We employ the analytical construct "participatory capital" to analyse how these clerks establish their agency and renegotiate their roles and places in the school. Based on a qualitative research study, we interviewed and observed three purposively selected administrative clerks in three primary schools in Cape Town. This article argues that, while the occupational identity of administrative clerks remains one of subordination within the bureaucratic discourse and their places of work, the selected school administrative clerks were able to extend the scope of their agency through their participatory capital.*

Keywords: *school administrative clerks, participatory capital, agency, school secretaries*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although they occupy subordinate positions, school administrative clerks have been described as crucial to the functioning of public schools (Casanova, 1991). Sometimes called school secretaries or office managers, little has been written on their agency and professional identities. They are seldom the focus of discussion in textbooks, articles and policy documents on school operations, management and governance (Conley, Gould & Levine, 2010). Conley *et al.* (2010: 311) found that "[i]n particular, there appears to be a lack of written ... [work] regarding the

complexities (e.g. tasks encountered beyond formal job descriptions) entailed in their work". In South Africa published work on school administrative clerks is sparse (see De Witt, 1990; Van der Linde, 1998; Naicker, Combrinck & Bayat, 2011; Bayat, 2012). This written work does not explicitly address questions of their agency and identity, except for two articles by Bayat and Fataar that reference their professional agency and practices in their workspaces (2018b) and their ethical contributions to their schools (2018a).

Thomson, Ellison, Byrom and Bulman (2007:146) suggest that the lack of representation of administrative clerks in school management and governance discourses is in stark contrast to their actual "agency which is critical to ongoing events" in the school office. The explicit focus of this article is on how administrative clerks accumulate resources, contextual know-how and relationships in their everyday work contexts, which they carefully deploy to enable them to expand the scope of their agency and transcend the narrow popular constructions of their identities as support workers in subordinate roles.

The literature on administrative clerks situates them as peripheral, as a support to the work done by the school principal (Hart, 1985; Casanova, 1991; Thomson *et al.*, 2007; Conley, Gould & Levine, 2010). The assumption is that school administrative clerks have little agency because they have a subordinate occupational identity (Mann, 1980; Hart, 1985). In schools, as in other organisations, the secretarial job has a subordinate work status wherein "the secretary support(s) someone who is assumed to do the 'real' work and who has supervisory control over her [*sic*]" (Ames, 1996: 38). The work of the secretary is deemed to be relatively skill-less (Crompton & Jones, 1984; Gaskell, 1991). School secretaries are generally given little recognition outside of their schools (Wolcott, 1973), their job descriptions are vague (Mann, 1980), they are generally poorly paid (Rimer, 1984; Crawford, 1995), and they feel like second class citizens in their schools (Jackson, 1989). Nevertheless, Kidwell (2004) found that the school secretaries in his sample were satisfied with their jobs despite its subordinate status; Ediger (2001) emphasised the contribution of the school secretary to positive public relations; Casanova (1991), Nystrom (2002), and Logue (2014) highlighted some of the additional tasks undertaken by the school office managers; Casanova, (1991) as well as Bayat, Naicker and Combrinck (2015) found that they were key to the successful running of their schools, while Bayat (2012) and Bayat and Fataar (2018a and b) have highlighted administrative clerks' agency. In 2008, the Western Cape Education Department funded a training programme for school administrative clerks because they recognised the ongoing and potential contribution of school administrative clerks to their schools (Naicker, Combrinck & Bayat, 2011). Recently, Robert (2017) investigated clerical turnover in American schools and Huot and Forget (2018) reported on a study in Quebec that was conducted to improve primary school secretaries' work processes.

This article draws on data from a purposive sample of three public school administrative clerks who were chosen because of their range of responsibilities, experience and lengthy tenure in public primary schools. We refer to the two females and one male as P, M and F. Their profiles were similar to the profiles of the administrative clerks in the Western Cape identified by Naicker *et al.* (2012). P, M and F were the non-teaching staff representatives on their schools' governing bodies (SGBs)<sup>1</sup>. In addition, P and F had been regular participants in their school management team (SMT) meetings, a position not ordinarily held by administrative clerks. It is the contention of this article that their participation in the school

1 In South Africa, administrative clerks can formally participate on the school governing body if elected as the non-teaching staff representative (Department of Education, 1996).

community, particularly in its smaller units such as the SGB and SMT, provided them with the opportunities and resources to make a substantive contribution to their schools' functioning, by enabling them to augment their agency in such a way as to significantly contribute to their schools' daily operations.

We employed a qualitative approach to ascertain the respondents' subjective meanings and experiences of how they went about building and exercising their agency within the school setting. We interviewed and observed them over a period of a school term. We employed semi-structured interviews and informal interviews and engaged in participant observation, visiting each school extensively during the period. These interviews concentrated on aspects of their administrative biographies, their backgrounds, education and work experiences. We interviewed the principal of each school, more than one teacher in each school, a parent governor at each school and local members of the education department who were familiar with the schools. These interviews were conducted while the first author was spending several hours a week observing the school administrative clerks at their schools. The semi-structured interviews with the school administrative clerks were conducted over many weeks while the interviews with other respondents were around 30 minutes per interview and varied in length depending on the participants' willingness to engage. These served as corroborative interviews to confirm and supplement the administrative clerks' stories. After we transcribed the interviews, we analysed the data using content analysis and thematic analysis, while drawing on our observation notes. The interviews and observations provided textured depictions of the clerks' activities, which we analysed inductively to arrive at key themes.

The next section explains the theoretical framework that we used to argue that school administrative clerks' participation within the sociocultural context of their schools provided them with resources that enhanced their agency to contribute to the functioning of their schools.

## 2. "PARTICIPATORY CAPITAL" AS THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

'Participatory capital' refers to what individuals learn and acquire through their involvement and interaction in sociocultural contexts. We contend that discourse communities and sociocultural contexts provide opportunities for agency formation and play a crucial role in shaping the contours of the subject's agency and identity. Participatory capital can be thought of as resources generated and deployed in a particular social setting (Edwards, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Vågan, 2011). We contend that individuals who occupy subordinate occupational identities exercise agency through the deployment of participatory capital. Our conception of agency draws on Kabeer's (1999) insight that, in order to widen the ambit for people to exercise agency, they need an increase in informational and interpersonal resources. For example, if a school administrative clerk concludes that the school's poor student performance is related to students being hungry, and then decides to organise a feeding programme with other volunteer teachers, she is exercising agency because organising a feeding programme is not a practice associated with school administrative clerks. In such a case, she would be using relationships cultivated at school (her accumulated participatory capital) to recruit volunteers from among the staff and motivate for the introduction of the feeding programme.

Participatory capital enables an individual to realise that, even though structures and discourses constrain an individual's action, there is space to manoeuvre within the social world beyond the restrictions that are imposed by these structures or discourses. It refers to the information and relational resources that accrue to, or are accumulated by, individuals

by virtue of their social interactions and relationships. Interaction within the particular sociocultural context of a school enables a participant such as an administrative clerk to learn the discourses that circulate in that school and the subject positions that are made available through these discourses, as well as to understand the broader contextual issues facing that school (such as its financial position and student throughput) and to cultivate relationships with other participants (such as teachers, the principal and the students) (Edwards, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, what this framework emphasises is that the accumulation of resources, positions and knowledge is crucial to understanding how participatory capital is cultivated and agency executed.

The second element of participatory capital concerns the ways in which the subject uses the accumulated resources and positions – what may be described as the deployment of participatory capital. This occurs when those occupying marginalised positions (such as an administrative clerk, school nurse, midwife), drawing on their accumulated participative resources, exercise their agency to take up alternative and refashioned identity positions and engage in situated action. The assertion is that a given occupational identity position can be expanded, negotiated and changed (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Weedon, 1987) by drawing on accumulated participatory capital.

This section has elaborated on the theoretical lens of participatory capital, i.e. the resources that enable agency through which school administrative clerks can reposition their identities and engage in novel and productive practices. In the next section we start the data-based sections of the article with a discussion on how the selected school administrative clerks go about building and enhancing their participatory capital.

### 3. BUILDING PARTICIPATORY CAPITAL

This section discusses how the three administrative clerks go about accumulating their participatory capital through their practices in their school office space (Holland, Lachiocotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998). We illustrate the practical actions that the clerks engage in to accumulate these participatory resources by accumulating knowledge, strengthening relationships and building trust.

We start by illustrating how relationship building acts as a way of augmenting their interpersonal agency; for example, concerning the principal and other actors in their office space. F explained that she had formed a close working relationship with the principal at the school where she had worked previously and a past principal of her current school. Both principals had mentored her. M said that she “learnt as she went along” by seeking information and knowledge from those around her, especially from the school principal with whom she had worked from the time she joined the school over a decade ago. P said that in his many years of experience at the school, he had cultivated friendships with the principals. One of these principals had moved on to a position at the education district office and P still enjoyed a close relationship with him. This relationship gave him access to informational resources about events happening in the local district.

Furthermore, all three administrative clerks indicated that they had built up a network of relationships and contacts that they could draw on when needed. For example, M recounted that she established multiple relationships, inside and outside the school, for the purpose of obtaining contextual information. Having cultivated these relationships, M was able to position herself as an aid and assistant to teachers needing information on matters regarding their employment.

The acquisition of participatory capital is also facilitated by their contextualised understanding of the school. Because they dealt with correspondence between the local education district office and their school, each administrative clerk was well aware of the issues affecting the school and the broader educational context, including which teachers were retiring, which teachers would be going on maternity leave, teacher disciplinary processes, annual national literacy and numeracy test scores of the school, and other information required by the local education district office. They were aware of the budgetary allocations for the schools, knew about the financial challenges faced by their schools and had an opinion about what needed to be done to deal with these challenges.

M had grown up in the area where her school is located, attended it as a student, worked in the community and later became the school's secretary. Her understanding of the school and the broader community was extensive. M explained that she continued to make a concerted effort to remain informed about what was going on in and around the school. She kept abreast of happenings at school and personalised her relationships with students, parents and teachers. Describing her knowledge of students' backgrounds, M said:

I know what [students'] circumstances are so I tend to be soft with them, and they will come to me, they'll actually come into my office ... but I'd say to [the teachers], but do you know what, what's going on at home?

M explained that she used this contextual information to influence the teachers' interactions with troubled or troublesome students. This knowledge allowed her to direct teachers' attention in ways that she could not have done otherwise.

F said that she dealt with all correspondence at the school and engaged in fundraising because the school's finances were poor. P was very aware of the socio-economic context of the parents and students, since he lived in the area and his son attended the school. The three school administrative clerks built up participatory capital through their knowledge of the school context, the economic and social status of parents and students as well as the personal circumstances of teachers and the principal. They knew the challenges that teachers faced, how their students were performing, whether the teachers and principal were studying further, complaints that students or other staff might have and teachers' personal problems. This depth of insight was a key asset.

M took care to provide the social worker with information on students who needed assistance or were at risk. Not only did she identify students for social work intervention, but she also acted as an information provider: "...our social worker, she phones me, first, before she comes in for anybody else".

Being in the school office meant that the administrative clerks were at the boundaries of many figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 1998) of the principal, teachers, students and the local education department. They were thus acquainted with most issues affecting the school. P's school was being poorly managed by the principal, who made little effort to bring about change. Our observations and conversations with teachers at P's school confirmed this. Because of this, P took it upon himself to relay information between the school and the education district officials. He said that because he knew the principal did not answer emailed requests for information from the education district, he would answer emails on behalf of the school without even consulting with the principal.

All three administrative clerks were participants in their schools' SGBs. This meant not only that they forged and cultivated relationships with other school governors, but also that their experiences of the situated dynamics of their SGB enabled them to relate across domains/figured worlds, which expanded their relational agency.

They spoke of their hesitancy when they joined the SGB and how they became more confident as their participation increased. F explained:

I was a bit nervous because I did not know what to expect and ... I did not know the governing body members ... so it was a learning curve ... then you could observe and by observing you could automatically see ... and then afterwards I was then quite confident because everybody was there to learn ... and if I didn't understand I would normally phone ... (an)other school principal or school secretary and then I will ask for advice.

Here F explained how she gradually observed the inner workings of the SGB while continuing to engage and ask questions until she was confident in her ability to participate effectively in SGB deliberations.

Similarly, having spent many years on the SGB, P explained: "I was involved with the school governing body, then, we have to learn, so that you make informed decisions". This indicates that P gradually absorbed the "know-how" of school governance. He was therefore gradually able to adopt the school governance perspectives and discourses. M was initially a hesitant participant in the SGB, explaining that she "didn't say much then". But as she became acquainted with the practices of the SGB, learning and mimicking the relevant practices and perspectives, she became an active participant.

As the years went by, F cultivated a relationship with the parent members on the SGB, including the chairperson. Commenting on F, the chairperson explained that, at the start of her tenure as a chairperson, F had assisted her a great deal by familiarising her with the expectations of her role, adding that she continued to be receptive to suggestions by F. P also cultivated firm relationships with SGB members during his extended tenure on the SGB: "the people I was on the governing body with, we had a relationship because we were on the governing body for the second term working together".

M said that she had "an extremely good relationship with them [parent governors], I give them a lift home after the meetings ... we've got a good relationship, working relationship, an informal relationship". She commented that this relationship led to governing body members working together productively because she was able to assist parents to contribute meaningfully to the SGB's deliberations (Mncube, 2009).

In addition to her current SGB involvement, F had also served on the SGB of the school that she had worked at previously. She conveyed a thorough understanding of the responsibilities of being a school governor within the school's existing circumstances. For example, she stated that she had been actively involved in the drafting of school policies and had suggested many novel and productive practices to deal with challenges that the school faced.

We have thus far been able to suggest that administrative clerks engage in practices whereby they grow their personal, interpersonal and relational agency. In the next section, we discuss the school administrative clerks' participation in their schools' routines, the school governing body (SGB) and the school management team (SMT) in order to highlight their deployment of the participatory capital they have developed.

#### 4. SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE CLERKS' DEPLOYMENT OF PARTICIPATORY CAPITAL IN THE SCHOOL GOVERNING BODY

The previous section highlighted the administrative clerks' accumulation of participatory capital. We now discuss the administrative clerks' practices as participants in their schools' SGBs to exemplify the ways in which they deploy their participatory capital.

During a participant observation event at F's school, the first author witnessed an emergency SGB meeting that was called to discuss the purchasing of office equipment. After the meeting, F explained that the principal had wanted to purchase a liquid crystal display (LCD) projector but wanted the consent of the SGB members. She said that she had drawn the SGB's attention to the school improvement plan and the school budget that made allowances for office equipment. Through her intervention, they agreed to the purchase of the LCD projector. In this situation, through her knowledge of the school improvement plan and the budgetary allocations, F deployed this participatory capital that enabled the SGB to make a procedurally justifiable decision. Her action should be viewed in light of the management style of the principal, who was prone to make important procurement decisions without following proper procedures.

F's school had experienced disputes in the past because of procedural irregularities in the appointment of a principal. Thus, when a deputy principal and a head of department (HOD) had to be appointed, F suggested that a recently retired education district official be approached to advise the SGB on the correct practices for the selection of new management staff. F thus changed the dynamic related to the appointment process through her agency. She said:

... now with this interview of these positions, I said that we must get someone who is professional ... Mr ... so I suggested, listen I am going to phone him to give us some training on that...

F could suggest this uncommon practice because she was able to use her accumulated participatory capital and so secure the integrity of the process. F approached the retired official, who agreed to participate in the selection process, which was properly and successfully finalised.

At P's school, there was also a dispute regarding the appointment of a deputy principal. P was asked to chair the selection process. P had cultivated strong enough relationships with the governors for them to feel confident that he was sufficiently well informed about the appointment processes. However, P said that he withdrew as an act of protest when the principal told him that he would not support a particular teacher's appointment, who was deserving of the post, because of a grudge he (the principal) had against that teacher. P said:

I feel that the only weapon I will use against them is for me to resign from the governing body because they rely on me to a larger extent, so if I am not there, they will suffer.

P's withdrawal from the SGB was an exercise of agency in that it was intended to indicate his displeasure with the way matters were being dealt with on the SGB.

SGBs in South African working-class schools are stymied by parents' lack of experience in matters of governance and management (Mncube, 2009), which was confirmed in our discussions with the administrative clerks. According to P, "parent governors misunderstand their role on the SGB". F concurred, asserting that "most parents are only there to sit [on the

SGB]”. The parent governors tended to participate marginally and to defer to the principal, whom they deemed the educational leader. This was where P seized the opportunity to contribute substantially to governance dynamics at the school. P used his knowledge of school governance and assisted the parent treasurer on the SGB to implement legitimate practices for managing the school’s finances. P also facilitated other parent governors’ understanding of their SGB roles and what it meant to be a school governor. The deputy principal commented on P’s facilitation of issues on the SGB:

He contributed a lot on the SGB ... and P was the one who is always in the school premises, he knows what is happening, and he would be the one who tells the governing body what is really happening. If the governing body sometimes is resisting, you know, he will then intervene. Because he is always at [school], he knows what is going on inside the school.

In this statement, the deputy principal acknowledged P’s productive practices and the respect he enjoys from the parent governors. The deputy principal also highlighted P’s role inducting parent governing board members onto the SGB by explaining how P provided them with contextual information so that they could make appropriate decisions. Thus, P deployed his participatory capital to act as a mentor to the parent governors, which is not normally performed by administrative clerks. The deputy principal confirmed that P exercised agency on the SGB when she said of P that “if the governing body sometimes is resisting ... he [P] will then intervene”. He thus influenced the decisions of the governors. P said of himself: “I accepted that I want to be in the school governing body because I thought that I could make a difference in the governance [and] in the running of the school”.

M was the secretary of her school’s SGB and had many responsibilities. For example, in addition to her secretarial role, M was responsible for the finances, which made it possible for her to contest procurement and purchasing decisions. She explains that “they try their luck, but they don’t get away with it, .... I’m the financial officer; I’m the chair of the financial committee”.

In another example, M said that she would type up the school improvement plan (SIP) for the SGB and needed to clarify some issues with the principal. M said that “it takes me about half a day to do it on the computer, and then they discuss it, it’s a final meeting with the governing body”. These two examples show the range of M’s agency. They demonstrate her know-how of SGB roles, practices and perspectives.

M said that the school governors would approach her because she was well versed in the local education district’s interpretations of the rules and regulations pertaining to governance. Her governance perspective allowed her insight into governance matters that the other less experienced governors did not have. M suggested that “being in on all the [SGB] meetings, that is my goal because I can make a contribution, I see little loopholes that the others don’t”.

These examples show how the clerks’ deployment of their participatory capital allowed them to contribute to the SGB. The next section explores the school administrative clerks’ engagement with their schools’ SMTs.

## 5. DEPLOYING PARTICIPATORY CAPITAL IN THEIR SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAM MEETINGS

Attending school management team meetings is not an official requirement for school administrative clerks. However, after many years of involvement on the SGB, two of the three

administrative clerks (P and F) broadened their involvement in their respective schools by becoming regular attendees at SMT meetings. They asked their principals if they could attend these meetings. The request was made at a time when the local education department was providing administrative and management-related training to the three school administrative clerks (as part of a larger group who attended a school business management course). The local education department at the time also suggested that principals allow school administrative clerks who were doing this course to participate in SMT meetings. Unlike the SGB, this forum deals with more specific operational matters, including the managing of teaching and learning, student discipline and curriculum implementation issues (Bush, Joubert, Kiggundu & Van Rooyen, 2010). The precise operation of the SMTs regarding their interaction with the SGBs and the principals varies from school to school (Christie, 2010). For two of the three administrative clerks, the SMT meetings were fertile grounds for deploying their participatory capital.

P said:

I asked, myself, to be part of the SMT [meetings] and then the intention was that ... being on the management will put me in the position to have a say on the things that I think, maybe, I can have an influence onto.

P said that his experiences of how poorly the school was being run motivated him to find ways that it could be better managed. On the SGB he gained insight into the failings of the school management, including the divide between the SGB and the SMT at his school. According to P, the breakdown between these two forums stemmed from the perception that teachers on the SGB used their position to garner staff promotions only for themselves and their friends, leading to feelings of mutual distrust. He used this knowledge and his involvement in the SGB and SMT to make suggestions to bridge this divide. He suggested that a closer relationship be forged between the SGB and SMT. He even suggested that a meeting be set up between the two forums and tried to relay information between the SGB to the SMT in order to foster a positive relationship between these two important forums. The way he handled this issue indicates his professional leadership.

One of the challenges that P's school faces is the fighting among young gangs. These gangs come onto the school premises during school time and attack learners who are members of rival gangs; traumatising learners and teachers. Because of his broad contextual understanding of the school, P suggested that the SMT approach the local education district and request funding to reinforce the school fence. This suggestion was taken up by the SMT members, the local district was approached, funding was eventually procured, and the fence was fortified. This reduced the incidence of gangs coming onto the school premises. This example not only vividly demonstrates P's relational agency where he was able to align his concern with other stakeholders' concerns but also reveals the depth of his contextual insights.

Describing F, the principal said, "she was quite clued up". Because of this, F said she was asked by the principal to shoulder greater responsibilities. Commenting on the various dimensions related to running a successful SMT, F said, "nobody else knows what's going on there besides that person [i.e. the school administrative clerk]". Commenting on her contributions, F said that she reminded the principal that "this isn't my job, this is your deputy's job or HOD's [head of department's] or senior teacher's [responsibility]". This statement indicates that F's contribution to the management was comparable to that of a deputy principal or a senior teacher. About her contribution to other important matters in the school, F said, "I'm already doing the manager's job". This comment speaks volumes!

Teachers on the SMT were appreciative of P's insights deriving from his involvement with the SGB. Because of his daily presence, his interaction with local education district officials, parents, teachers, learners and his professional leadership, the institutional management and governance (IMG) official from the district assigned to the school remarked that P was "running the school".

F's participation on the SMT lasted for the entire tenure of one of the principals at her school. Reflecting on F's participation in the SMT, this particular principal said that F had developed the mindset of a school manager: "I could see the growth in her ... if roles ... were reversed she would run a school successfully". This statement indicates that F had enacted the agency practices associated with effective school management. However, she experienced resistance from some of the senior teaching staff. Eventually, because of this resistance, she withdrew from the SMT meetings when the principal resigned.

M, who did not attend SMT meetings, engaged informally with the principal on management issues. M said that the principal would consult her and ask about issues that he needed to raise with the teachers in the SMT meetings. M said that she would make suggestions. For example, M said: "he [the principal] would ask me, what do I think".

The overall picture tells us that through their deployment of participatory capital the administrative clerks' input into the SMT meetings was substantive

## 6. DISCUSSION

We have highlighted how the administrative clerks went about augmenting and then marshalling their agency. Reflecting on the findings, we can highlight a few themes around how school administrative clerks developed expertise in skilfully accumulating common knowledge and relational agency (Edwards, 2011) in their schools. In brief, the themes are building agency through contextual know-how and cultivating interpersonal relationships that allow for understanding the perspectives of others.

Agency amplification through occupying space and time that allows for deep contextual understanding. Regarding this spatio-temporal dimension, the three administrative clerks' accumulation of participatory capital occurred over more than a decade. It included their daily presence in the school office as well as their participation in SGB and SMT meetings. They built up what Edwards (2011: 38) referred to as "common knowledge", which "includes being alert to the standpoints of others and being willing to work with them towards shared ethical goals". Having cultivated this common knowledge, they deployed it as a resource to establish an active agency in shaping their professional identity. The administrative clerks' understanding and knowledge of the school context formed a key dimension of their participatory capital. This common knowledge (Edwards, 2011) formed the basis of their relational agency. Edwards (2009: 39) suggests that such agency translates into "a capacity for working with others to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems". It involves gaining a shared understanding of school problems and working with others to find solutions. This is something that school administrative clerks definitely excelled at, as demonstrated above.

Agency was augmented through cultivating interpersonal relationships. It can be said that the administrative clerks pursued productive relationships with their principals, teachers, parents, students, other school administrative clerks and local education district officials. Critically, the three school administrative clerks' cultivation of their relationships with their

principals was a source of participatory capital. This dimension has been commented on by several scholars (Wolcott, 1973; Casanova, 1991), who have indicated that the principal is quite dependent on the secretary. This makes it easy for the school administrative clerk to ally with the principal. This mutually beneficial relationship is a key node for accumulating and deploying their participatory capital.

In sum, we have made the argument that the administrative clerks had accumulated participatory capital. They then used their participatory capital as resources to expand the ambit of their agency and deploy a broad range of professional and managerial practices. In doing so, they went beyond the discursive constraints imposed upon them by the education management and bureaucratic discourses that positioned them as subordinate administrative clerks and secretaries and constructed for themselves unique professional school identities.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The article aimed to show how holders of subordinate occupational identities enhance their relational agency. We showed that school administrative clerks' purposeful interaction in the sociocultural contexts of the school facilitated their accumulation of participatory capital, which they deployed in augmenting their agency and sculpting a unique professional identity for themselves. Furthermore, their participatory capital enabled them to enact professional practices that went beyond the subordinate and support status of their occupational identity, to the extent that their principals, teachers and local district officials acknowledged them as valued professionals. Their deployed participatory capital had tangible benefits for the school in that they were able to enhance decision-making within the schools' governance and management forums. They were uniquely positioned to fill the informational gaps between the SMT and the SGB, as highlighted by Basson and Mestry (2019).

We suggest that schools would benefit from formalising administrative clerks' participation in their school contexts. This participation would provide administrative clerks with opportunities to accumulate participatory capital, which would, importantly, in turn lead to potential benefits for them and their schools if they were to deploy their resources productively. We believe future research directions should combine the application of refined analytical lenses with rigorous qualitative methodologies. Coming to understand the participative agency and contributions of school administrative clerks requires the use of theories and concepts that would enable recognition of the participative contributions of those deemed of lower professional status in workplaces. Likewise, we propose the adoption of qualitative methodologies that are able to excavate other important constitutive dimensions of their agency such as the emotional and affective dimensions of the clerks' work, their struggles in improving their professional qualifications and the abuse and subordination they encounter as members of a "feminised" profession.

This article raises important questions about the workings of subordinate agency. Clearly, discursively constructed subordinate occupational positions do not necessarily restrict or constrain the agency of their holders. Through participation in the sociocultural contexts of their workplaces and organisations, participants can and do accumulate and deploy participatory capital, which forms the basis for their enhanced agency whereby they engage in productive practices and reposition their occupational identities, which endows them with greater status and influence.

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