



EMPOWERED TEACHERS-- STRONGER INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Most educational institutions practice a 'hierarchical' approach toward decision making. Decisions are taken and made, mostly, by one person, who usually is the headmaster. Despite the fact that this approach, which sidelines 'practitioners', may lead to effective consequences on part of the institution, it however, may also lead to some kind of unease on part of the teachers wishing to voice their views on topics such as selection of instructional material, syllabus design, rules setting, exams, assessment, meetings, etc. This study argues that powerful teachers lead to powerful institutions. Based on this premise, it was conducted with 73 teachers functioning at Turkish primary educational institutions; all expressing views on matters building and enhancing an autonomous stand in the institution.

Keywords: Decision making, shared decision making, teacher empowerment, teacher autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Considerable research (e.g. Tyree, 1969; Dwivedi, 1988; Armstrong, 1984; Bascia, 1996; Bogler, & Somech 2004; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; Somech, 2010) conducted so far is in favor of participatory decision making, claiming that involving subordinates in decision making improves the quality of the decision and the effectiveness of the organization which in turn leads to the achievement of institutional goals.

The two continuums regarding decision making are described by Taylor and Tashakkori (1997). The first is actual participation, which ranges from very little participation typical of an authoritarian-managerial style to an extreme democratic form in which teachers make all decisions (Conway & Calzi, 1996). In the second, Taylor and Tashakkori (1997) attempt to deal with a teacher's varying level of actual desire to participate. Bridges's (1967) views on the first continuum suggest that an administrator's decision should be accepted unquestionably with no need of teacher's participation. Unlike Bridges's stance here, Belaso and Alutto (1972) include teachers' participation in three different categories in this continuum: deprivation (wanting more decision making), equilibrium (satisfied with current levels), and saturation (wanting less).

In the second continuum, teachers' desire to participate is considered. Kunz and Hoy (1976) discuss the teacher's zone of interest in decision-making where teachers highly desire participation contrary to Bridges's (1967) views where teachers are indifferent.

Smith (2001) offers a very comprehensive set of characteristics of teacher's decision-making process as follows: Self-directed professional action, capacity for self-directed professional action, freedom from control over professional action, self-directed professional development, capacity for self-directed professional development, freedom from control over professional development. Here in this division, Smith (2001) analyzes almost every aspect of teacher autonomy.

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Leithwood and Jantzi (1997), in their review of research on teachers' decision making curriculum (Table 1) identify four main areas where a teacher's autonomy may be rather high. The first area concerns teacher and students interaction in the classroom; and the second deals with activities used to meet course objectives. The teacher may also determine how fast topics are covered and the total time allocated for each topic. They may also have a lot of influence on how often and when tests are administered. Teachers share decision-making responsibilities in the objectives area regarding choice of curriculum materials and teaching strategies.

Table 1. Degree of Teacher Autonomy and Areas of Responsibility

| Degree of Teacher Autonomy | Area of Responsibility |
|--|---|
| High degree of autonomy | -Teacher/Student interaction in class -Type of activities used in class -Pace, timing and total time allocation -Timing of tests |
| Shared autonomy with others | -Objectives -Curriculum material -Teaching Strategies |
| Low - decisions dominated by principals and staff groups | -Global concepts and outline of curriculum -Criteria for assessing students |

The purpose of this study is to define the participation of teachers working in Turkish Primary Education institutions regarding decision making. For this, we seek responses to the following questions:

- (1) Do teachers who are affected by decisions taken in their institutions participate in decision making regarding decisions related to administrative issues, courses and course delivery, and classroom management?
- (2) Do teachers who do not take part in decision making wish to be involved in this process?
- (3) And, if so, why would teachers feel a need for involvement?

METHOD

Participants

In this study 73 primary school teachers (all female, age range: 20-50) acted as participants. Of these, 15 were mathematics teachers; 20, Turkish language teachers; 18, English language teachers; 10, Social Sciences teachers, and 10, Arts and Music teachers. All participants had a work experience of 3-16 years.

Instruments and Procedure

This study was carried out in different primary schools in Adana, Turkey. Simple random sampling was done to select five out of 20 schools. Originally 140 teachers were aimed to be reached in the selected schools distributing a questionnaire of 11 items related to decision making in the participants' institutions. However, only 73 teachers turned in their response sheets. Thus, interviews, another tool utilized here, were held with only this limited number of teachers. A blank space was left at the end of the questionnaire to facilitate elicitation of open-ended comments from teachers.

To ascertain the reliability of the questionnaire, piloting was done in two primary schools where 25 teachers were administered the questionnaire. The split-half method was used to calculate the reliability coefficient using Pearson product formula. The reliability coefficient obtained was later subjected to the Spearman Brown prophecy formula to obtain the reliability of the full test (Koul, 1984). A correlation coefficient of 0.73 (considered reliable) was obtained. Content validity was ascertained in consultation

with educational management specialists from the University of Cukurova, Adana, Turkey. The researcher herself distributed the questionnaire and collected it two weeks following the distribution date.

An open-ended interview was held by the researcher with the participants. The interview, with a total duration of ≈ 295 mins, was performed in a one-to-one fashion within two weeks following the administering of the questionnaire. 73 participants who took the questionnaire were each interviewed for approximately 4 minutes. During the interview, the following issues were taken into consideration: 1) One question was asked at a time, 2) The interviewer verified unclear responses, 3) Students were asked open-ended questions, and 4) Leading questions were avoided, and unbiased questions were preferred.

During the interview sessions, unstructured questions were asked to elicit more information on a given topic. The researcher tried not to express her own ideas on the discussed topics. The interviews included the same items employed in the questionnaire, and aimed to ratify the written comments of the participants. The data gathered from the interview was recorded and transcribed, each item having been coded and similar codes having been aggregated into themes. Themes emerging from the interviews were tallied with those elicited from the written data, and both types of data were subjected to a non-parametric frequency analysis.

The analysis of data was associated with the comparative method to identify recurring themes within and across data sources. First, any incident was a starting point, and then this was compared to another incident in the other set until thematic units were reached. Finally, the themes reached were integrated with the item analysis of the questionnaire.

RESULTS

The data collected from the two different tools, the questionnaire (D1) and the interviews (D2), included almost the same themes, yet with slight, statistically insignificant differences. Common themes in both tools were analyzed using the SPSS v.11 statistical program supported by content analysis and verbatim of participants. A non-parametric analysis was carried out to observe any potential differences in the dispersion of themes regarding each potential decision in which participants would / would (not) like to take part. The outcomes presented in this section are based on the questionnaire items and the one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

Teachers expressed views on a total of 11 potential decisions concerning educational as well as administrative matters. Table 2 illustrates these decisions, willingness / unwillingness in getting involved in the taking of such decisions in terms of percentages and significance of dispersion of responses. Results concerning the two sets of data, the questionnaire and the interviews are presented in this table.

Regarding the first item (topic in D2) of the questionnaire, 98.6% (D1) and 90.4% (D2) of the participants expressed wish in taking part in decision making regarding *materials selection*. Related to this decision, the teachers came up with three themes: (1) being *aware of learner styles and levels* with 45.6% (D1) and 67.1% (D2), (2) being *able to match content and age* (20.5% D1; 19.2% D2), and, (3) being *able to find useful material for students* observing class specific needs (17.80% D1; 13.7% D2). The only 1.4% (D1) and 9.6% (D2) of teachers who did not volunteer to get involved in decision making did so since they did not want to assume any responsibility. Related verbatim statements from the interviews are presented below:

Since we know our students' level and interest best, we should be decision makers on this matter. We are not only able to take decisions regarding content of materials but also can judge whether visuals inside such sources are appropriate and adequate for our students. Finally, since the coursebook is a major motivation source in class, we should decide what coursebook to use.

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis of Two Types of Data: Questionnaire (D1) and Interview (D2)

| Potential Decisions | Willing (D1) | Unwilling (D1) | Sig. | Willing (D2) | Unwilling (D2) | Sig. |
|---|--------------|----------------|------|--------------|----------------|------|
| | % | % | P= | % | % | P= |
| <i>Material selection</i> | 98.6 | 1.4 | .000 | 90.4 | 9.6 | .000 |
| <i>Time schedule</i> | 71.6 | 28.4 | .000 | 76.1 | 23.9 | .000 |
| <i>School rules</i> | 67.8 | 32.2 | .006 | 79.7 | 20.3 | .006 |
| <i>Syllabus design</i> | 89.1 | 10.9 | .000 | 84.8 | 15.2 | .000 |
| <i>Discipline maintenance</i> | 93.9 | 6.1 | .000 | 89.7 | 10.3 | .000 |
| <i>Holding teacher meetings</i> | 95.7 | 4.3 | .000 | 94.8 | 5.2 | .000 |
| <i>Preparations of exams and evaluation</i> | 100 | 0.0 | .000 | 93.1 | 6.9 | .000 |
| <i>Holding parental meetings</i> | 91.2 | 8.8 | .000 | 88.1 | 11.9 | .000 |
| <i>Improvement of physical conditions</i> | 71.2 | 28.8 | .000 | 68.4 | 31.6 | .000 |
| <i>Student rewarding</i> | 81.6 | 18.4 | .000 | 78.5 | 21.5 | .000 |
| <i>Teacher rewarding</i> | 64.2 | 35.8 | .011 | 61.9 | 38.1 | .011 |

The high percentage of teachers willing to take part in decisions may be linked to findings reached by Hutchinson and Torres (1994), who believed that teachers, should be able to evaluate coursebooks properly and support coursebooks with supplementary materials appropriate for their students' age, level and interest. To Cosh (1999), only autonomous teachers are able to make appropriate decisions on coursebook selection, which may lead to enthusiasm, confidence building and professional growth. In addition, Thanasoulas (2000) emphasizing the active role of teachers in utilizing textbooks, suggests that there has to be a teacher who will adapt resources, materials, and methods to suit learners' needs. Teachers need to be able to choose some controlled role plays and simple tasks involving information exchange from the textbook if possible, or they need to design their own; and if necessary, suggest alternative activities not found in the book. Having said this though, however, autonomous teachers are not advised to heavily rely on textbooks since no textbook is perfect in telling teachers to tackle specific problems emerging in classroom practices.

The participants, by 71.6% (D1) and 76.1% (D2), agreed to take responsibility while 28.4% (D1) and 23.9% (D2) did not volunteer to get involved in any way regarding preparing *time schedules*. Wishing to be decision makers, teachers came up with four themes in this respect believing that they are (1) *aware of students' attention span* (37.5% D1; 50.0% D2); (2) that they are able to predict when *students feel energetic* (20.8% D1; 18.8% D2); (3) that they know when *students can spare time for courses during the day* (20.8% D1; 14.6% D2); (4) and that they are *more aware of most efficient hours* (20.8% D1; 16.7% D2). As for those who did not volunteer to get involved in decision making on *time schedules* (28.4% D1; 23.8% D2), they did so because they believed (1) that *class hours also involve other subjects* (61.1 % D1; 75.0% D2); (2) that there is, a *question of objectivity* (16.7 % D1; 12.5% D2), and that (3) they are *unwilling to take responsibility* (22.2% D1; 12.5% D2). The results here are in line with those obtained by

Leithwood et al. (1998), who stated that teachers preferred higher degree of autonomy in preparing time schedule.

Regarding preparation of school rules, 67.8% (D1) and 79.7% (D2) of the participants wished to take part in decision making, since they believed (1) that *they are aware of students and their needs* (50.0% D1; 60.0% D2); (2) that they are *able to cope with potential problems* (27.5% D1; 17.5% D2); (3) that *rules concern teachers themselves* (12.5% D1; 15.0% D2); (4) and that they are *willing to take responsibility* (10.0% D1; 7.5% D2). Those who did not want to take responsibility in this process (32.2% D1; 20.3% D2) did so for they believed (1) that it is *not their job* (73.7% D1; 91.7% D2); (2) and that *most rules are useless* (26.3% D1; 8.3% D2). Statements reflecting participants' views during the interviews are presented below:

I do believe that rules in an institution are very important. My personal beliefs are significant and they should be taken into consideration in setting up school rules. I do not impose my beliefs on my colleagues but at least we should discuss openly and try to negotiate with colleagues and the administration since we work for the same institution.

Concerning syllabus design, 89.1% (D1) and 84.8% (D2) of teachers expressed that they should take part in this matter; and those who did not wish to do so remained as 10.9% (D1) and 15.2% (D2). Reasons favoring involvement were stated as that teachers felt (1) that they are *able to match content, age and cognitive skills* (63.4% D1; 56.1% D2); (2) that they could easily *set up topic priorities* (19.5% D1; 14.6% D2); (3) that they are *willing to take responsibility* (9.8% D1; 17.1% D2); (4) that they are able to *include extra-curricular activities* (4.9% D1; 7.3% D2); (5) and that they could *increase quality in education* (2.4% D1; 4.9% D2). The two reasons for not being willing to participate in decision making are (1) that they are already *pleased with the current syllabus design system* (60.0% D1; 80.0% D2); (2) and that they *do not wish to take responsibility* (40% D1; 20.0 D2).

Maintaining discipline was one of those topics which attracted a rather high percentage of involvement (93.9 % D1; 89.7% D2). By doing so, participants justified this willingness by stating (1) that they themselves should be the ones *responsible for their classes* (67.7% D1; 59.7% D2); (2) that they believe in *rewarding or punishing students* (16.1% D1; 25.8% D2); (3) and that they also *believed in discipline* (16.1% D1; 14.5% D2). As for those who did not volunteer to get involved in decision making (6.1% D1; 10.3% D2), they expressed that they believe *maintaining discipline* is the administration's and not their task (100.0% D1; 100.0% D2). Views of participants related to *maintaining discipline* are reflected in the statement below:

Discipline is a prime factor regarding a smooth flow in course delivery. Otherwise, a lesson cannot be handled effectively. Since we, teachers, are in a way actors and actresses in class, we should have the right to take decisions and be active concerning this issue.

Arrangement and holding of teachers' meetings was also one of those topics with great attraction of involvement in both the questionnaire and the interviews (95.7% D1; 94.8% D2). Only a mere 4.3% (D1) and 5.2% (D2) of the participants did not want to take part in decision making regarding this topic. The teachers favoring willingness believe (1) that *exchanging ideas is highly significant* (55.6% D1; 60.0% D2); (2) that *developing a sense of understanding* between teachers is very important (31.1% D1; 20.0% D2); (3) and that *meetings are essential* (13.3% D1; 20.0% D2). The unwilling participants stated (1) that it is the *administration's duty to deal with this matter* (80.0% D1; 85.7% D2); (2) and that they *already have enough work to deal with* (20.0% D1; 14.3% D2). Verbatim statement concerning *arrangement and holding teachers' meetings* is presented below:

If we become decision makers, then our enthusiasm to participate in meetings will get higher. Moreover, teachers, knowing their students well, can easily make appropriate decisions regarding their students' needs.

An overwhelming percentage of participants (100% D1; 93.1% D2) expressed willingness regarding participation in decisions concerning *exam preparation and evaluation*. These participants stated (1) that they, themselves, only could be *fully aware of the topics covered* (34.7% D1; 43.1% D2); (2) that they could also truly *assess students' level* (31.9% D1; 30.6% D2); (3) that they, themselves, could only *know what students lack* (22.2% D1; 15.3% D2), and (4) that they could make sure tests are *valid and reliable* (11.1% D1; 11.1% D2).

Regarding *parental meetings*, 91.2% (D1) and 88.1% (D2) of the participants believed that they should take part in decision making. This population believed (1) that they could easily *get quicker results* through parental meetings (42.3% D1; 42.3% D2); (2) that they feel that they are the *best source of information for students* (40.4% D1; 32.7% D2); (3) that they, themselves, could only follow up *students' performance* (11.5% D1; 19.2% D2); (4) and that it is *teachers' responsibility to hold such meetings* (5.8% D1; 5.8% D2). As for those who expressed unwillingness, 8.8% (D1) and 11.9% (D2) stated so believing (1) that this is *an administrative issue* (80.0% D1; 85.7% D2); (2) and that *it would lay much work on teachers' shoulders* (20.0% D1; 14.3% D2). The verbatim below best illustrates participants' views on sharing decision making concerning *parental meetings*.

In order to get successful outcomes, we should keep in touch with parents and hold meetings with parents. However, the administration should lay the ground for gatherings.

Regarding *improvement of physical conditions*, 71.2% (D1) and 68.4% (D2) of the participants aspired to have an active role in decision making. A considerable number, however, (28.8% D1; 31.6% D2) did not wish to do so. Of those who were willing, 40.4% (D1) and 50.0% (D2) stated (1) that they believe that they know *what fits students best*; (2) 21.2% (D1) and 15.4% (D2) hold the belief that physical conditions, as long as they are efficient and practical, do really *improve education*; (3) 19.2% (D1) and 15.4% (D2) are interested in *students' needs*; (4) 9.6% (D1) and 11.5% (D2) think that *technological arrangements* are important; (5) and 9.6% (D1) and 7.7% (D2) believe that they could best decide how to *utilize space most efficiently*. Those expressing unwillingness for involvement stated (1) that this is not their duty (66.7% D1; 58.3% D2); (2) and that it would *necessitate too much extra work* (33.3% D1; 41.7% D2). Views of participants on *improvement of physical conditions* are reflected below:

In order to make the best of each class, we should be able to make decisions since we spend most of our time here. Another thing we are concerned with is the suitability of materials or technological equipment for our classes. We, teachers, should have a say in this matter.

As for the topic concerning *rewarding students*, 81.6% (D1) and 78.5% (D2) of the teachers expressed a wish to play some kind of a role in taking decisions, since they believed (1) that they should be *setting up their own rules* (50.0% D1; 56.5% D2); (2) that they are aware that *rewards and punishment affect students' participation and success* (38.7% D1; 37.1% D2); (3) and that they know *what pleases their students best* (11.3% D1; 6.5% D2). Those who believe that teachers should not take part in decision making concerning *rewards* (18.4% D1; 21.5% D2), did so, thinking (1) that this would require *counseling expertise* (76.9% D1; 58.8% D2); (2) and that this *entails administrative involvement* (23.1% D1; 41.2% D2). Participants' wish of involvement in decisions concerning students' rewards is expressed in the statement below:

Since I am mostly exposed to face-to-face interaction with my students, I should be entitled to decide about their rewards and punishment. Receiving rewards when necessary, students can easily be more

motivated throughout the course or the semester. Motivation and enthusiasm have very crucial impact on students' success.

As for *rewarding teachers*, we probably face the lowest percentages here: 64.2% (D1) and 61.9% (D2). A relatively high number expressed unwillingness to do so: 35.8% (D1) and 38.1 (D2). The willing participants expressed this wish believing (1) that having a say in decision making would lead to *better and quality work* (65.4% D1; 78.8% D2); (2) that *assuming an active part in this matter would make them feel an integral part of the institution* (26.9% D1; 17.3% D2); (3) and that *they can assess each other's individual styles and preferences with greater objectivity compared to administrators* (7.7% D1; 3.8% D2). Those who did not wish to be involved stated that this was solely an *administrative issue* (100.0% D1; 100.0% D2). The statement below reflects participants' views on *rewarding teachers*:

I am an Arts teacher and I guess teachers should be assessed and rewarded according to their fields of study. Arts and its assessment is not the same as courses such as mathematics and science. My group teachers and I are eager to express our expectations and suggestions about this topic.

DISCUSSION

A great majority of participants in this study believed that they should somehow take an active role regarding decisions in administrative, course delivery and classroom management issues. Based on the questionnaire (D1) and interviews (D2) data, most of the participants here believed that self-directed professional action needed to be taken in order to make teachers feel an integral part of their institutions, as was also observed by Smith (2001). In order to acquire better abilities and greater enthusiasm in their profession, teachers believed that a considerable amount of participation is required. This finding related to Turkish teachers is line with the observation made by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2009) where the researchers suggest that autonomy is "the strongest predictor of job satisfaction". Thus, lack of decision making empowerment, i.e. restricting autonomy, not only leads to unsatisfied teachers, but also significantly affects teachers' relations with administrators, parents and students. This has also been highlighted by Bogler and Somech (2004), who state principals' practice of joint-decision-making should be recognized as highly important to the organization and its members. In line with this statement, our findings suggest that teachers are willing to take part in decisions regarding institutional matters, as well as conforming with those of other studies conducted by Bezzina (1997), Griffin (1995), Halliday (1993), and Bascia (1996) where teachers' participation in decision making is desired and encouraged. The findings here depict teachers' aspiration to participate in decision making at their institutions. Teachers' views about having an active role in taking decisions support Taylor and Tashakkori's (1997) disenfranchised category, where teachers wish to have a say in educational and administrative issues. Similarly, the results here render an interpretation suggesting that teachers should not be deprived of the right to contribute to the institution with their views. This attitude is in line with Belaso and Alutto's (1972) first category of deprivation (wanting more decision making).

Depending on circumstances and issues, the outcomes of this study are also in line with Conley's (1989) position taken towards decision making, necessitating negotiation between teachers and administrators. Such negotiation as in Wahlstrom and Louis's study (2008) supports learning and brings us closer to the elusive goal of clarifying the link between leadership and learning.

Just like any other piece of research, this present study does also have some limitations. One is that the study cannot be representative of views of all teachers across Turkey since it is limited with the views of 73 members only. Therefore, the results here cannot be extrapolated to all teachers. Another limitation is that, due to convenience sampling, the study was conducted with female school teachers only. It would be interesting to see if female teachers' views and beliefs regarding participation in decisions concerning institutional matters are similar to or different from those of males'. For this, further research is needed.

CONCLUSION

Decisions taken and made in institutions affect all members as well as the prospect of the institution. Precise decisions are sought in order to attain and/or increase quality in every aspect concerning the institution.

The results in this study indicate that nearly all participants were rather positive towards teachers' decision making. The findings suggest that primary school teachers in Turkey expressed willingness to be decision makers regarding educational and administrative issues. The most important issues that they wanted to be involved in are (1) preparation and evaluation of exam, (2) material selection, (3) holding teachers' meetings, and (4) discipline maintenance. The main argument of this piece of research is that teachers, when involved in decision making, feel more empowered in their field, benefiting the whole institution with its teachers, administration, students and parents. It is a known fact that job satisfaction, as was also highlighted by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2009), can only be attained through a decision-making power vested in the doer, who, thus, would be in a position to exert some influence over it.

Decision making is a process which should entail the participation of all concerning parties. Autonomy given to individuals does not only strengthen freedom of expression of individuals but also positively contributes to more solid decisions to be taken encouraging unanimous participation, which in turn leads to democratization in the institution. Different kinds of decisions can be made in institutions and all such decisions somehow affect all members in the institutions. Thus, it is vital for an institution to take the right decision with the participation of all members with free and autonomous thinking and self-expression.

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