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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the gap between actual and desired decision domains as a potential factor affecting teacher participation in decision-making in Egyptian schools. In order to explore this gap, the study sets out to answer three questions: (1) what would a typology of school decisions look like in Egypt's secondary schools? (2) How do Egyptian teachers perceive actual decisions made in their schools? (3) What decision domains are most desired by Egyptian teachers? The study employed a qualitative, descriptive research approach based on individual, semi-structured interviews with a sample of 85 school teachers and senior and middle management members in nine general secondary schools in Damietta County, Egypt. School documents were also collected and analyzed. These included minutes of meetings of school boards and Boards of Trustees (BOTs). A typology of school decisions was developed which revealed the absence of significant decisions related to curriculum. Teachers' responses showed that they regarded school decisions as insignificant and irrelevant to their concerns, and that significant decisions are retained by central administrators. Desired decision areas were identified which included curriculum and student discipline policy. As this study is consistent with the current interest in decentralization and increased participation in Egypt's schools, it is hoped that the findings will be useful to educational policy makers as well as practitioners as they implement decentralization initiatives in Egypt. The findings may also have relevance and applicability to comparable secondary schools in other parts of the world.

Keywords

Decision-making, Decision Domains, Teacher Participation, Secondary Schools, Egyptian Schools, Qualitative Research

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Decision Domains and Teacher Participation: A Qualitative Investigation of Decision-Making in Egyptian Schools

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the gap between actual and desired decision domains as a potential factor affecting teacher participation in decision-making in Egyptian schools. In order to explore this gap, the study sets out to answer three questions: (1) what would a typology of school decisions look like in Egypt's secondary schools? (2) How do Egyptian teachers perceive actual decisions made in their schools? (3) What decision domains are most desired by Egyptian teachers? The study employed a qualitative, descriptive research approach based on individual, semi-structured interviews with a sample of 85 school teachers and senior and middle management members in nine general secondary schools in Damietta County, Egypt. School documents were also collected and analyzed. These included minutes of meetings of school boards and Boards of Trustees (BOTs). A typology of school decisions was developed which revealed the absence of significant decisions related to curriculum. Teachers' responses showed that they regarded school decisions as insignificant and irrelevant to their concerns, and that significant decisions are retained by central administrators. Desired decision areas were identified which included curriculum and student discipline policy. As this study is consistent with the current interest in decentralization and increased participation in Egypt's schools, it is hoped that the findings will be useful to educational policy makers as well as practitioners as they implement decentralization initiatives in Egypt. The findings may also have relevance and applicability to comparable secondary schools in other parts of the world. Keywords: Decision-making, Decision Domains, Teacher Participation, Secondary Schools, Egyptian Schools, Qualitative Research

The notion of teacher participation in decision-making developed at the heart of the education reform movement which took place in the USA in the late 1980s. This reform movement embraced more democratic approaches to school management with School-Based Management (SBM) and Shared Decision-Making (SDM) being key themes on the reform agenda (Conley, 1991; Conley & Bacharach, 1990; Smylie & Denny, 1990). Recommendations by the Carnegie Commission on Teaching as a Profession (1986), the Holmes Group (1986) and the National Education Association (1988) called for giving teachers a greater say in the decisions affecting the school. These calls were based on the assumption that teaching is mainly a process of decision-making and that teachers are “professional decision-makers and problem solvers” who are involved on a daily basis in making decisions in “unpredictable and interactive” situations (Conley & Bacharach, 1990, p. 541).

Teacher participation in decision-making has been a key component of the shared/participatory school leadership trend that has been flourishing over the past three decades or so. This trend has taken different names including distributed leadership (Harris, 2004; MacBeath, 2005), teacher leadership (Grant, 2006; Harris, 2003; Lambert, 2003), shared leadership (Lambert, 2002), teacher empowerment (Rice & Schneider, 1994) and collaborative leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). While they might have slightly different connotations,

the underlying assumption behind all these leadership styles is that teachers should have a key role to play in school decision-making processes. The rationale is that empowering teachers will have a positive impact on the teachers themselves as well as on their schools. Teacher participation in decision-making has been found to increase teachers' job satisfaction (Cheng, 2008; Sarafidou & Chatziioannidis, 2013; Taylor & Tashakkori, 1997) and their sense of self efficacy (Sarafidou & Chatziioannidis, 2013). It is also reported that collaborative leadership can enhance student learning as it helps build school academic capacity (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

Despite the popularity of the notion of teacher participation and its reported benefits, research conducted in different context suggests that its implementation has been a challenging task. Several institutional and cultural challenges to participation have been identified (see Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Cranston, 2001; Grant, 2006; Johnson & Pajares, 1996; Muijs & Harris, 2007; Newcombe & McCormick, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Weiss & Cambone, 1994). One challenge relates to teachers' unwillingness to engage in shared leadership processes (Grant, 2006; Muijs & Harris, 2007; Weiss & Cambone, 1994). Teachers' unwillingness may be triggered by a variety of reasons, including their doubts over the significance of the decisions in which they are invited to participate and the extent to which they might affect school policies. Hoyle (1986, p. 92) argues: "It cannot be assumed that all teachers want to participate in the decision-making process, especially if the structures serve to mask the reality of their limited capacity to influence policies."

Teachers' willingness may be particularly undermined by their realization that they are called for participation in trivial issues that are of little relevance to "the core mission of schooling" (Taylor & Tashakkori, 1997, p. 611). Thus, in order to achieve meaningful involvement in school decision-making, there is a need for a clear identification of teachers' preferred areas of involvement. The argument is that when promoting teacher participation, it cannot be expected that everyone will be involved in every decision (Rice & Schneider, 1994). A number of studies have been carried out in different international contexts to investigate decision domains.(i.e., areas of decision-making) as they relate to teacher participation. (e.g., Alutto & Belasco, 1972; Cheng, 2008; Conley, 1991; Kuku & Taylor, 2002; Mehtia, Gardia, & Rathore, 2010; Mohrman, Cooke, & Mohrman, 1978; Rice & Schneider, 1994; Taylor & Bogotch, 1994; Wadesango, 2010).

In the Egyptian context, empirical research reports little teacher participation in school decision-making (Abdurasool, 2010; Al-Mahdy, 2007; Sweilam, 2004). This is despite decentralization and increased teacher participation initiatives intensifying throughout the country (Ginsburg et al., 2010). The initiatives include: the Alexandria Pilot project launched in 2001 in collaboration with USAID (Human Development Project, 2004) and the National Standards of Education initiated in 2003 (MOE, 2003). Most significant is the creation in Egypt's schools of Training and Evaluation Units (TEUs) and Boards of Trustees, Parents and Teachers, often called Boards of Trustees (BOTs). The TEUs were initiated by ministerial decree No. 254 in 2000 with the aim of providing local schools with more discretion over self-assessment and identification of training needs (MOE, 2000). The BOTs were introduced to promote greater participation in school decision-making (MOE, 2006). Doubts have been raised over the effectiveness of these initiatives in promoting decentralization and participatory forms of school leadership (El-Baradei & Amin, 2010; Hammad, 2013). More empirical research is needed in order to explore why this is so. One possible area of inquiry that has been neglected to date is to explore the gap between actual and desired decision domains as a potential factor affecting teacher participation in school decision-making. The study described in this paper was designed to explore this gap by trying to answer three questions: (1) What would a typology of school decisions look like in Egypt's secondary schools, (2) How do

Egyptian teachers perceive actual decisions made in their schools, and (3) What decision domains are most desired by Egyptian teachers?

Theoretical Framework

One of the difficulties associated with teacher participation is the lack of agreement on its exact meaning and nature (Conley, 1991; Hoy & Sousa, 1984). Drawing on early studies by Bridges (1967), Alutto and Belasco (1972) and Mohrman, Cook and Mohrman (1978), Conley (1991, 226) concluded that the concept of participation could be explained within “a political organizational framework.” She suggested two dimensions which must be addressed when trying to define participation, namely who participates in decision-making and in what types of decisions teachers may want to participate. Much of the research addressing decision domains has been influenced by Barnard’s (1938) conceptualization of “the zone of indifference,” later named “the zone of acceptance” by Simon (1947). Based on this conceptualization, certain decisions that are made by superiors will be accepted unquestionably by subordinates because they are not interested in them. Guided by Barnard’s proposition, Bridges (1967) argued that teachers should be involved only when they have a “personal stake” in the decision outcomes (i.e., when they have interest in the decision) and “expertise” (i.e., when they have the knowledge and competence to make the decision). He highlighted the administrators’ need to clearly determine which decisions fall within and outside the zone of acceptance in order to decide whether or not to involve a particular teacher in the decision-making process. The assumption is that involving teachers in decisions located inside their zone of acceptance would be less effective, and that ignoring them in making decisions located outside that zone would generate resistance and alienation.

Researchers investigating decision participation differ depending on whether they address it as a single-domain or a multidimensional construct (Conley, 1991). Studies by Alutto and Belasco (1972) and Hoy and Sousa (1984) are examples of the single-domain approach. Alutto and Belasco (1972) developed an aggregate typology of teacher participation across different types of decisions, resulting in a global conceptualization of decision-participation. Similarly, Hoy and Sousa (1984) investigated head teachers’ tendency to delegate 10 different decisions to their subordinates. By dividing the number of decisions made by the subordinates by the total number of school decisions, the researchers obtained a total measure of participation.

The single-domain approach was criticized by Conley (1991) because, on one hand, it would not help researchers in capturing “the actual domain-specific nature of decision participation” (Conley, 1991, p. 234) and, on the other hand, it may encourage school administrators to increase teacher involvement in decisions which they see as irrelevant rather than trying to determine areas in which participation is more needed. The multidimensional approach has been advocated as an antidote to these weaknesses. It was first used by Mohrman and his colleagues (1978). Expanding the work begun by Alutto and Belasco (1972), Mohrman et al. (1978) distinguished between two decision domains: the “technical domain” which comprises decisions relating to the teaching process, and the “managerial domain” involving decisions related to managerial support functions. Using the same twelve decision areas developed by Alutto and Belasco (1972), the researchers measured actual and ideal levels of participation in each of the decisions. The results showed that teachers both desired and actually exercised greater participation in the technical domain than in the managerial domain, which indicates that teachers differentiate between the two domains, thus supporting the proposed multidimensional nature of participation.

Hanson (1979) applied the multidimensional approach, yet used the term “decision zones” instead of “decision domains” to typify school decisions. He distinguished between two

decision zones: administrators' zone (mainly comprising school-wide decisions), and teachers' zone (mainly comprising classroom decisions). He then suggested the existence of a "contested zone" located where the two zones overlap. It involves decisions which can be contested by both parties such as teacher scheduling, teacher promotion, parent-teacher relations and special instructional programmes. By applying his model to five schools, Hanson (1979) found that conflict developed due to teachers and administrators' disagreement over the extent of influence each party should wield on the decisions located within the "contested zone."

Bacharach and his colleagues (1990) developed the model proposed by Mohrman and colleagues (1978). They suggested that the technical domain could be viewed as "operational," whereas the managerial domain could be regarded as "strategic" in nature. They then distinguished between whether these operational or strategic decisions affect only individuals or the whole organization. By combining the two dimensions, they obtained four decision areas: strategic-organizational, strategic-individual, operational-organizational and operational-individual. When they applied their model to investigate the impact of participation on work outcomes, they found that participation in operational decisions was more strongly associated with positive outcomes than participation in strategic decisions. These findings indicate that teachers are more interested in decisions related to their immediate work in the classroom. Similar findings were later reported by Taylor and Tashakkori (1997) and Riley (1999).

However, there is evidence that suggests that some teachers may want to extend their involvement beyond their immediate classroom work and take part in school-wide issues. For instance, in a study of school management styles in Czech basic schools, Pol and Rabusicova (1997) examined teachers' involvement in school decision-making in four areas: process of education and schooling, school-wide strategies, personnel, and external school relations. The results showed that although teachers reported more interest in education and schooling decisions, they expressed varied degrees of interest in other areas. Kuku and Taylor (2002) explored school leaders and teachers' perceptions of teacher participation in decision-making in North Philippines Academies. The study examined teachers' actual and desired levels of involvement in nine areas: goals, vision, mission; standards; curriculum and instruction; budgeting; staffing; operations; facilitating procedures and structures; staff development and spiritual matters. The results showed that teachers expressed more desire to participate than they currently have in all areas, particularly in those related to staffing, budgeting and staff development.

More recently Wadesango (2010) conducted a study to investigate teacher participation in decision-making in secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The study explored participation in five decision areas, namely teaching load allocation, student discipline policy, school-based promotion, choice of curriculum, and recruitment and selection of teachers. The study found that although teachers expressed varied degrees of participation in the five areas, they wanted more involvement in strategic issues such as formulation of school budget and school discipline policies. Mehta and colleagues (2010) investigated teacher participation in decision-making in an Indian higher education institution. The study examined actual and desired participation in three decision domains: managerial, institutional and technical. The results indicated that teachers' actual and desired participation was highest in institutional decisions and lowest in technical decisions. Sarafidou and Chatziioannidis's (2013) study measured decision participation in Greek primary schools and explored its relationship with school and teacher variables. The study examined involvement in three decision domains: managerial issues, student issues, and teacher issues. The findings revealed high levels of actual participation in decisions relating to students' and teachers' issues, but low participation in the managerial domain. It was also found that participation in decisions concerning teacher issues was the strongest predictor of teachers' job satisfaction and sense of efficacy.

The above discussion suggests that research on decision domains remains inconclusive as there is no consensus on the nature of these dimensions and how they relate to teachers' expectations of participation. Imber and Duke (1984) rightly argue that "There are almost as many ways to categorize the decisions made in schools as researchers studying these phenomena" (p. 29). This implies that reaching an agreed-upon typology of school decisions is not necessary, nor is it achievable. One conclusion that seems to emerge from reviewing existing research, however, is that a multidimensional approach to studying decision participation is crucial as it is more suitable to the multi-faceted nature of the participation construct.

Context and Role of the Researcher

The author of this paper is an assistant professor of educational management in the College of Education at both Damietta University (Egypt) and Sultan Qaboos University (Oman). Before becoming a university staff, he was a teacher at a secondary school in Damietta. This made him familiar with the context and culture of secondary education in Egypt. His interest in studying decision-making in that particular context was fuelled by the current decentralization efforts deployed by the MOE as well as the great emphasis placed on the involvement of local stakeholders in school decision-making. As Egypt shifts to more decentralized modes of educational management, it is vital to examine grassroots receptivity to such a move. The author was concerned that implementing SDM structures in Egypt's schools may be unsuccessful. On one hand, Egypt's education has long been characterised by centralized control, and such notions as power sharing and participation have not traditionally been part of school leadership practices (Abdurasool, 2010; Al-Mahdy, 2007; Sweilam, 2004). On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, studies carried out in other contexts revealed that SDM projects faced challenges which inhibited the establishment of effective SDM practices in schools. The author's intension in carrying out this study was to explore how barriers to SDM might manifest themselves in the Egyptian context.

Research Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study that explored challenges to shared decision-making in Egyptian schools (see Hammad & Norris, 2009; Hammad, 2010). The study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach. The choice of this qualitative design was based on the assumption that it enables researchers to grasp the participants' perceptions of the situation under investigation and interpret the meanings they develop about the world (Creswell, 2003). It also provides hands-on experience and a good opportunity for qualitative researchers to understand "the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22).

The study was carried out in nine general secondary schools in the Damietta Governorate. Following approval from the General Directorate of Education in Damietta, the researcher visited the schools to collect data through individual, semi-structured interviews with 85 research participants. To obtain perspectives from participants at different school management levels the researcher selected interviewees from senior, middle and lower school management including head teachers, deputy heads, heads of department, BOT members, TEU supervisors and newly appointed teachers. Six participants participated from the pilot school, whereas 10 participated from each main school except one school where only nine participants agreed to take part. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the perceptions of stakeholders at school level about issues underpinning shared decision-making. The investigation entailed the nature of decision-making as perceived by the participants (the types

of decisions made and how they are made); and the participants' expectations of the decision-making process (the decision areas in which they wanted to participate and the meanings they ascribed to participation).

The interviews generated rich descriptive data which were organized and coded using the MAXQDA software program. Organizing involved the creation of seven text groups based on the seven categories of participants interviewed. It was also appropriate to create nine sets of interview texts based on the nine schools visited. This allowed the researcher to explore possible variations among participants and schools. Coding involved reading carefully through the transcripts, inductively generating categories, and indexing chunks of data accordingly. Mason (2002b, p.150) refers to this process as "categorical indexing," which involves "devising a consistent system for indexing the whole of a data set according to a set of common principles and measures." The process was guided by research questions as well as by the concepts and understandings gained from reviewing relevant literature. Using MaxQDA, the two processes of generating categories and coding went hand in hand and, as the process went on, more categories continued to emerge. Upon completion of the coding process, the next step was to retrieve coded data segments in order to conduct the analysis. This was an easy process with the use of the flexible features of the software programme. For instance, in order to conduct an analysis on school board across the whole data set, all interview transcripts would need to be activated (highlighted) together with the category "school board." Then all data segments coded under "school board" would appear in the "retrieved segments" browser. These segments would then be transported to the Word programme in order to be printed off and analyzed.

Besides data from interviews, the researcher analyzed document data obtained from school documents. The documents mainly included minutes of meetings of school boards and BOTs. Minutes of meetings of school boards were obtained from seven of the participating schools, whereas those related to BOTs were obtained from six schools. The analysis of these documents was particularly focussed on identifying the types of decisions made in the schools visited. The information gained from the qualitative analysis of both document and interview data provided valuable insights into understanding decision-making processes in Egyptian schools.

Findings

The analysis of interview and document data revealed a number of interesting issues associated with decision-making in the sample schools. For the purpose of this paper, and guided by the three questions asked, three main findings will be presented in this section under the following subheadings:

1. Actual decision domains: developing a typology of school decisions
2. Teachers' perceptions of actual school decisions.
3. Desired decision domains.

Actual decision domains: developing a typology of school decisions

In order to identify actual decision domains, a typology of the decisions made in Egyptian secondary schools was sought using information from the analysis of school documents and interview data. Minutes of meetings of the school boards and BOTs were first examined, followed by an analysis of interview data. Although most information on the types of decisions was obtained from document analysis, interview data provided complementary information that filled the gaps found in some of the documents.

The preliminary stage entailed producing lists of the decisions made at each individual school. This groundwork resulted in lists which varied in length depending on the richness of information obtained from each school. At some schools, the minutes of meetings provided detailed information on the kinds of decisions made, whereas others gave only a short account of the meetings. This explains why some types of decisions appeared on some lists and not on others. Nonetheless, there is evidence from the data that the participating schools had more commonalities than differences in terms of the types of decisions made. Many decisions seemed to be common across all schools. These included teachers' and students' sanctions, task allocation, the allocation of the BOT budget, the determination of school-based training needs, school maintenance, monthly exams, and school activities.

The next step was to find a way to categorize the decisions. Having considered the models discussed in previous studies, it was found that they might not be useful in understanding decision-making in Egyptian schools. This is because they were developed in contexts that have more differences than similarities with the Egyptian context. The two major models suggested by the literature were found particularly inappropriate. Hanson's (1979) administrator-teacher model was considered inapplicable because such a distinction may not clearly exist in reality. In the Egyptian context, there is no clear distinction between teachers and school administrators because Egyptian teachers are normally promoted to administrative posts subsequent to a certain period of time served as teachers.

The model proposed by Mohrman et al. (1978) and modified by Bacharach et al. (1990) was also considered inappropriate. By fitting the developed list of decisions into the four-celled matrix of decision-making types, it was found that this typology would not be helpful in understanding decision-making in Egyptian schools. Given existing disparities between the Egyptian context and the contexts where such models were developed, a clear distinction between technical and managerial decisions was not achievable. On many occasions it was hard to decide where particular decisions would fall. Examples of these decisions included organising school trips, parties and competitions; setting period schedules; preparing monthly exams, and recording pupils' absence.

Given the inapplicability of these models to the Egyptian context, the researcher considered it more appropriate to build his own typology based on the specific decision areas under which the decisions shown on the lists might fall. This approach proved more successful as it helped classify the whole set of decisions into their respective areas. This categorization method has resulted in a whole set of categories and subcategories as charted in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of decisions made in secondary schools

Categories	Subcategories
Allocation	Budget: maintenance, fund-raising, buying school equipment. Workload: allocating teachers to classrooms and tasks to staff members, forming school committees and school supervision teams, setting departmental plans. Time: setting the schedules of periods and the TEU. Space: student placement.
Discipline	Teachers: attendance, leaves, work hours, sanctions. Students: attendance, absence, sanctions.
School Activities	Organising school trips, parties, exhibitions and competitions.
Security	Using fire extinguishers, school evening supervision, school access.

Process of Education & Schooling	Teaching: identifying teaching methods and curricular, organising extra tutoring Testing: setting first year, monthly and practical exams.
Professional Development	Determining school-based training needs, specifying trainees and trainers at the TEU.
Day-to-Day Procedures	Swapping periods, covering substitute periods, releasing idle teachers & classrooms.

Teachers' perceptions of actual school decisions

Although categorization proved useful in typifying school decisions, it was not sufficient in itself to allow a clear understanding of the nature of decision-making in the sample schools. It was important to explore how these decisions were perceived by the teachers themselves. This was achieved through analysis of interview data. The analysis revealed a shared belief amongst school teachers that Egyptian schools do not have the power to make what they described as “significant decisions.” Words such as “unimportant,” “trivial,” “meaningless” and “routine” were repeatedly used by teachers to describe decisions made at their schools.

The problem is to do with the kinds of decisions made by the school. From my point of view, they are trivial decisions which are insignificant to the educational process. The decisions we make in the school are not influential. Influential decisions come from outside. School decisions are insignificant as they don't benefit the educational process. Most of the decisions in which teachers are interested come from the district office and the school has nothing to do with them.

Most negative perceptions concerned the school board. Although research participants cited a variety of decisions made by the board, most of them pointed out that these most frequently relate to the exclusion of students from school. A head of department noted that 80% of the decisions made by the board are related to student exclusion. This claim was substantiated by the fact that exclusion decisions dominated the minutes of meetings across all schools as suggested by document analysis. More interestingly, when asked about the types of decisions made by the school board, some respondents talked exclusively about school exclusion. Others even considered it one of the most important reasons for holding school board meetings.

The school board makes decisions within certain limits. For example, if a student exceeds his/her absence limit, a school board meeting is held to decide whether or not this student should be excluded. So we don't have much freedom to make decisions inside the school. School board meetings are called when we need to exclude a student or to discuss other trivial things.

Similar views were held about BOT decisions. Some participants indicated that the BOT's authority is restricted to monitoring school finances and has nothing to do with core decisions that relate to the educational process. In the words of a head teacher: “The BOT has

nothing to do with the educational process and is only concerned with financial matters. Its members have no educational experience and, therefore, it has no educational outcomes and is of no benefit to the school.” According to some BOT members, attempts to make “important” decisions at BOT meetings were frustrated by central administrators. They believed that the BOTs were given limited decision-making discretion:

The BOT cannot make decisions about things that have been decided by the MOE, nor is it able to make a decision which clashes with the regulations that control the educational process. ... We BOT members are bound by these regulations.

Desired decision domains

Teachers’ perception that schools are only allowed to make decisions that are irrelevant to their concerns raises an interesting question: what decision areas do Egyptian teachers think are more important to them? Based on the notion of the “zone of indifference” (Barnard, 1938), identifying decision areas desired by teachers is important as it is relevant to how further involvement in decision-making in Egyptian schools could be taken forward.

In order to identify these decision areas, it was important to determine what types of decisions were more significant to the teachers in the sample schools. Analysing teachers’ responses unveiled that significant decisions were those relating to what they described as “the educational process.” Interest in this type of decision arose implicitly from the teachers’ comments on decisions made by the school board and the BOT.

School board meetings are called when we need to exclude a student or to discuss other trivial things. We do not discuss significant issues related to the educational process or those that may benefit the students and the teachers.

The problem has to do with the kinds of decisions made by the school board. From my point of view, these decisions are trivial and insignificant to the educational process.

The BOT has nothing to do with the educational process and is only concerned with financial matters. Its members have no educational experience and therefore it has no educational outcomes and is of no benefit to the school.

Teachers’ interest in decisions related to the educational process was also expressed explicitly in response to a direct question about the types of decisions in which they wanted to be involved. “If teachers were asked to participate in decision-making, their main interest would be the educational process. I want to be consulted on everything that relates to the educational process.”

Having established that Egyptian teachers were more interested in decisions related to the educational process, the next step was to understand what they actually meant by the term “educational process.” Analyzing teachers’ responses revealed a significant interest in decisions related to two specific areas: curriculum and student discipline.

Curriculum

The majority of teachers (almost 65%) expressed interest in decisions related to the area of curriculum:

I want to participate in designing the curriculum related to my subject matter. What matters to me the most is the relationship between me and my subject matter ... I want to make decisions about my own work without being so strictly monitored.

Decisions related to the curriculum should be bottom-up because this is an area that belongs to us as teachers in the first place. We have never been consulted on any curriculum at all.

Teachers expressed frustration at their perceived lack of involvement in curricular decisions, an area which they believed to be under full control of the MOE. Many of them pointed out that even the few decisions they could make about curricular activities and teaching methods are modest in scope as they are considerably constrained by central guidelines.

Teachers' comments demonstrated their interest in specific issues related to the area of curriculum. One issue centred on the distribution of syllabus.

I hope we distribute the syllabus ourselves. When I was in Saudi Arabia, we used to do the distribution ourselves on a weekly basis. We were accountable because we were given full responsibility for it.

I want to participate in the distribution of the syllabus. Due to his experience, the teacher knows better how much time each topic needs. ... All these things are prescribed for us and we have nothing to do but implement them.

Decisions related to what they teach emerged as another area of interest to classroom teachers. This was evidenced by their comments on centralized control over the content and organization of textbooks.

Unfortunately, many attempts at reform have failed because teachers' opinions have been ignored. For example, they have decided to replace some textbooks with others; teachers' opinions should have been sought prior to such a decision, but this didn't happen... It's the teachers' right to be consulted on what they are going to teach.

Another point was made by a head of department who believed that teachers are best equipped to make this kind of decision because they are closest to the students and therefore most aware of their learning needs.

The teacher is closest to the educational process and most aware of his students' needs. He knows the topics they like and dislike better than people sitting in their offices at the Ministry... This is absolutely inappropriate; teachers, students and parents should be involved in curriculum decisions.

Teachers also seemed interested in decisions relating to the way they teach. This interest emerged from their comments on their perceived lack of autonomy in the classroom. The following statement by a BOT member illustrates this point:

If teachers have the opportunity to make decisions, they will decide to work freely in their classrooms ... What I want to do wouldn't necessarily please the inspectors. This is why I cannot make independent decisions... I'm monitored

by several entities including the inspector, the senior inspector, the general inspector and committees from the Ministry.

Student discipline

Many classroom teachers showed interest in decisions related to student discipline. Their interest in this area arose from their complaints about lack of control over students' behaviour and the implications this has for their performance in classrooms. They considered this area of decision-making important because they believed it might enable them to manage disruptive students who challenge legitimate school rules and authority.

Teachers get frustrated because they're deprived of opportunities to express their opinions, which causes them to lose their motivation to work.... When they have problems with students, many teachers refer the matter to the head teacher who may not take any action in turn, which makes the teachers more disappointed...The teacher's inability to make decisions about disruptive students prevents other students from learning.

Research participants complained about central control over student discipline. They referred to ministerial decrees and central directives regulating the relationship between students and teachers and setting the boundaries for student sanctions. For instance, when asked what decisions she wanted to be devolved to the school, a head of department replied: "Decisions to do with student discipline. We actually participate in the internal administration of the school. Yet all decisions to do with student discipline come from above." According to many participants, the decisions that the schools are allowed to make about student exclusion are constrained by central regulations and made by the school board with limited or no input from the teachers concerned.

Hence it could be argued that what the participants meant by the educational process is everything that relates directly to their day-to-day work in the classroom. Part of this work is what and how they teach. Their concern with this issue stems from their belief that decisions falling within this area belong to them as classroom teachers. Another part of their daily work is their relationship with their students and how this affects the teaching and learning process. Decisions related to this area are significant to them as they regulate this relationship and enable them to do their job appropriately.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study found support for previous research concerning the types of decisions made in schools and the implications these might have for teacher participation (Alutto & Belasco, 1972; Conley, 1991; Kuku & Taylor, 2002; Mehta et al., 2010; Mohrman et al., 1978; Pol & Rabusicova, 1997; Rice & Schneider, 1994; Wadesango, 2010). The findings particularly confirm the value of using a multidimensional approach to exploring teacher participation in school decision-making. Different decision domains emerged in the participating schools and the teachers in these schools actually differentiated among these domains. The emerging domains included allocation, discipline, school activities, security, process of education and schooling, professional development, and day-to-day procedures.

Examination of the developed typology suggests that the model of management that underpins decision-making in Egyptian schools is different from that found in other international contexts. For instance, Bush and West-Burnham (1994) point out that school management is often considered in terms of three functional areas: finance, curriculum, and

human resources. The developed typology of school decisions showed the absence of curricular decisions in the sample schools. This finding was confirmed by a significant number of interviewees. As shown on Table 1, only decisions about teaching methods and curricular activities were present. These were perceived by the research participants as insignificant. Decisions about significant issues such as curriculum development and the selection of textbooks did not feature in the typology. This is in accordance with the highly centralized nature of curriculum in Egypt. The MOE is responsible for planning and developing the curriculum for all schools at all levels (Nasser-Ghodsi, 2006); this is a uniform curriculum which is so strictly enforced that “the same lesson [is] taught in the same week in all parts of the country” (Lloyd et al., 2003, p.450).

It is also noticed that while there are decisions about staff development (e.g., determining school-based training needs), other important decisions concerning human resources such as staff hiring and firing are absent from the typology. Again, Egyptian schools have no power over these issues as they are under the control of the MOE (Nasser-Ghodsi, 2006). Conversely, decisions about such issues featured in the typologies developed by Mohrman et al. (1978), Taylor and Bogotch (1994) and Kuku and Taylor (2002). This suggests that the balance of decision-making in Egyptian schools is different from that found in the educational contexts where these studies were carried out.

Exploring teachers’ perceptions about school decisions unveiled a gap between actual and desired decision domains. This corresponds with previous research (Kuku & Taylor, 2002; Mehta et al., 2010; Mohrman et al., 1978; Sarafidou & Chatziioannidis, 2013; Wadesango, 2010). Actual domains were seen by most participants as “meaningless” and “routine” because, according to them, most significant decisions are retained by central administrators. This was not surprising because it is consistent with centralized control as a characteristic of Egypt’s education system (Hammad & Norris, 2009; Hanson, 1990). Teachers’ responses suggested that it is not whether they participate in making school decisions or not that counts, but rather to what extent the decisions in which they are involved are significant and relevant to their classroom work. This reflects the teachers’ understanding of participation as a “relative” rather than an “absolute” construct (Conley, 1991). In fact, they wanted to be involved in specific decisions, mainly those related to curriculum. This conclusion is supported by previous research indicating that teachers are more interested in technical decisions directly related to their classroom work Bacharach et al., 1990; Cheng, 2008; Kuku & Taylor, 2002; (Mohrman et. al., 1978; Pol & Rabusicova, 1997). Teachers’ emphasis on curricular decisions is based on the fact that they are most aware of their students’ needs, which qualifies them to make the best decisions on curriculum and pedagogy. This is consistent with the view held by many leadership and management researchers that “teachers need to shift from the traditional role of curriculum users to a new role of curriculum leaders” (Ho, 2010, p. 618). As suggested by the findings of this study, Egyptian teachers are not expected, at least in the short run, to make such a shift as they have no discretion over school curriculum.

Teachers also expressed interest in decisions related to student discipline policy which they thought to be the preserve of school administrators. Similar results were reported in Wadesango’s (2010) study on secondary teachers in Zimbabwe. Teachers’ interest in this type of decision stems from their belief that effective teaching cannot take place in the absence of student discipline. As Wadesango (2010) suggests, excluding the teacher from decisions about student discipline “is tantamount to incapacitating the teacher.” Problems associated with poor student discipline have been cited as one of the main reasons for teachers’ dissatisfaction with the teaching profession (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Identifying the discrepancy between actual and desired decision domains was crucial as it is relevant to understanding why participation is not functioning fully in Egyptian schools (see Al-Mahdy, 2007; Abdurasool, 2010). The fact that most participants perceive the decisions

in which they participate as insignificant presents a challenge to greater teacher involvement. As suggested by relevant literature, the question of what kinds of decisions are shared and what impact these might have on teachers' work has implications for willingness to engage in the process (Bridges, 1967; Hanson, 1979; Sergiovanni, 2001). Based on the findings of this study, it may be plausible to argue that one of the factors contributing to lack of teacher participation in Egypt's schools is that teachers are not willing to participate in decisions they perceive as irrelevant. These decisions fall within their zones of acceptance (Simon, 1947).

The results of this study have implications for policy makers and practitioners, especially in the Egyptian context. The study is consistent with the current interest in decentralization and increased participation in school decision-making. Policy makers may benefit from these results if they are to promote democratic approaches to school management in Egyptian schools. Indeed, there is a need to devolve meaningful decision-making powers to school level in order to encourage teachers and administrators to engage in participative decision-making processes. Teacher participation is not expected to develop within the current culture of centralized control whereby central administrators exert powerful control over schools.

The results of this study may also be beneficial to practitioners as they attempt to implement decentralization and on-site teacher participation arrangements in Egyptian schools. It is envisaged that school administrators, particularly head teachers, will gain a better understanding of the nature of decision participation and the role they are expected to play in facilitating participatory practices through establishing a school culture that is conducive to participation. In order to promote effective teacher involvement, head teachers are particularly encouraged to extend genuine opportunities for teachers to be involved in making decisions they see as meaningful and relevant to their concerns. Based on the results of this study, decisions relating to teachers' immediate work such as what and how they teach as well as student discipline are most desired by Egyptian teachers.

Final Remarks

While the findings of this study resonate with a considerable body of literature on teacher participation, they also broaden this knowledge base by providing further evidence from the Egyptian context. Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study is the development of a typology of decisions in Egypt's secondary schools. Little attention has been given to this particular topic in school management studies in Egypt. What adds more value to this achievement is that it is based on qualitative data. This is unlike other studies available to date which used quantitative approaches to studying this phenomenon. It is hoped that this qualitative attempt will further our understanding of the complexities of decision-making as a key aspect of school management, not only in the Egyptian context, but in other international contexts too.

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