School-based management in Oman: school community’s views and understanding

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Abstract

School based management (SBM) has been introduced recently in public schools of Oman. The aim of this policy is to decentralize the authorities from Ministry of Education to the local schools. In line with this aim, this study had the attempt to investigate the views of school community regarding SBM as a management tool. This paper used the qualitative approach, using multiple-case study in which data were collected through interviews, observation and documents analysis. The participants in this study were school community (principals assistant, senior teachers, and teachers) of four purposefully selected schools in Batinah Governorate of Oman. Data revealed that participants expressed divergent views concerning the SBM system in Oman. They considered the SBM system is a complex and multifaceted concept comprising many elements and these elements can be interpreted differently, have different emphasis and serve different purposes.

Keywords: school-based management; school community’s views; Oman
1. INTRODUCTION

Public education worldwide has encountered different trends where the school management emphasis shifts along a continuum of centralization and decentralization. In this context, Gamage (2008) asserted that one of the most significant reforms in the current restructuring of school systems has been the devolution of decision making authority to school level through a move towards school based management. Since the mid-1970s, the new concept of educational decentralization to Governatoral levels with devolution of power and authority to school level and community participation in school governance has been emerging as a new culture in education systems (Gamage, 2008).

School based management (SBM) is considered as a strategy to decentralize education decision making by boosting parental and community involvement in schools (World Bank, 2007). Bandur (2008) asserted that SBM has become the most prominent feature of the public school management system in most countries around the world. Odden & Busch (1998) affirmed that undoubtedly, SBM system is more successful when schools use their decision making authority to recruit and select staff who support and agree with the school’s vision. It is clear that SBM system has created opportunities for school administration achieve autonomy, flexibility, participation, and accountability.

Adolphine (2008) indicated that the leaders who participated in community school control experiments lacked real understanding of what community control involves as an operational concept, insufficient knowledge about principal role, limited teamwork and lack of problem solving skills has been identified as SBM implementation problems. Furthermore, Duke (2005) asserted there is no consensus on how successful principals manage their schools, or on how principals facilitate teacher participation.

Previous studies pointed out that under SBM, school communities (e.g., parents, teachers) have the opportunity, responsibility and accountability for many more decisions that affect them than they had before (Cranston, 2001). According to Duke (2005), principals reported frequent use of participative decision-making, though most retain the right to the final decision. Formal structures are in place for determining who participates, and teachers are most often involved in decisions related to school-wide instructional issues. Principals’ rationale for including teachers in decisions is based on their perception of an improved quality of the decision outcome; teachers are selected by principals according to their perceived interpersonal skills and relationships with colleagues. Duke (2005), found that female principals employed a more democratic decision-making approach than male principals who frequently used a more consultative decision-making approach. No conclusive
evidence was found of strong relationships between participative decision making practices and other principal and school characteristics.

The roles and responsibilities of principals change under SBM regimes, where the principals were required to make increasingly complex decisions in collaboration with others in their school communities; decisions typically taken previously by those located away from the immediate school environment (Cranston, 2001). Another element that will need more analysis as the study of SBM reforms evolves over time are political economy issues, such as the roles played by teachers’ unions and political elites, and issues of governance (World Bank, 2007). Furthermore, the extent to which a shared vision is a key element of different types of SBM reforms is an important future research issue (World Bank, 2007).

In Oman, Ministry of Education has taken care to develop a new school administration structure (Ministry of Education, 2005). Therefore, Ministry of Education has adopted SBM system with certain responsibilities devolved to pilot schools. One of the aims is to encourage local level decision making through a policy of decentralization (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Since its inception in 2006, the SBM system was implemented in about a hundred schools out of 1050. The initial plan of this system was to be applied gradually (two schools in each Governorate annually) (Ministry of Education, 2009). The Ministry of Education within the implementation this new system is trying to diversify education and to improve it qualitatively in order to keep up with the fast developments taking place. It has to provide the qualified human resources needed for this development, especially in the educational field in general and for school administration specifically.

Initial examination of previous studies has indicated an existing lack of research in the implementation of SBM in Oman. However, some related studies show the need for conducting research in the implementation of the SBM system. Al-Shehi (2003) studied the means of adopting the SBM approach to promote secondary school management in the Sultanate of Oman. In the light of the findings of the field research, the study has proposed some procedures, the most prominent of which are: amending the organizational regulations of general education in a way that enables principals to play a more substantial role in the process of educational decision making at the school level. In his examination of the degree of application of the school self administration system and its difficulties in Oman as perceived by supervisors, teacher, and principals, Al-Ghafri (2008) indicated a medium application degree of school self administration system on all study domains.
Consequently, a need has emerged for more specific research studies to investigate the implementation of SBM system. As a result, this paper aimed at investigating in detail the school community’ concepts, beliefs, experiences, and suggestions that will help to improve the implementation of the SBM system as a tool of management in Omani schools.

1.1 Research Question

This paper has sought the answers of the following question to achieve the aim of the study: What are the school community’s views and understanding regarding the SBM system?

2. METHODOLOGY

In this paper researcher was guided by a qualitative research design, in order to investigate and explore how the Omani school principals’ view and understand the implementation of the SBM system in the Sultanate of Oman. In this study multiple case study design was used, including a cross-site analysis. For the purposes of this study, the case study unit of analysis was principals, principals’ assistants, senior teachers, and teachers in selected schools. Researcher used purposeful sampling to identify the four Omani public schools.

2.1 Instruments: Validity and Reliability

The semi-structured open-ended interview was used in this study. The researcher used open-ended, neutral, singular, and clear question. During the interview the researcher taped all of the interviews and took field notes during the process. In addition, the researcher used direct observation by watching, and making notes. In an attempt to gather rich descriptive data, the researcher kept a daily journal that was used to describe observations made during each school visit to collect insightful data. Finally, the researcher tried to review any documentation available and related to the implementation of SBM system. By using these procedures, the researcher was able to triangulate data from different sources and strengthen the research design. In this paper a variety of strategies were used to ensure reliability and validity. These included adequate engagement, in-depth observation, and triangulation. The researcher conducted open-ended interviews and audio recordings of respondents, participated in direct observation, and reviewed documents. Prolonged engagement was achieved by spending at least one month at each school site. Furthermore, the researcher supported validity in this study by thick descriptions generated from the data gathering at the school site.
3. FINDINGS

Four schools were chosen purposefully and nineteen participants from those schools were interviewed. They are identified in this study as (PA1 Principal Assistant, ST1 Senior Teacher, and T1 Teacher of School A), (PA2 Principal Assistant, ST2 Senior Teacher, and T2 Teacher of School B), (PA3 Principal Assistant, ST3 Senior Teacher, and T3 Teacher of School C), and (PA4 Principal Assistant, ST4 Senior Teacher, and T4 Teacher of School D).

Regarding research question, the three themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews with the participants are as follows: increase autonomy of school within the policy of Ministry of Education, manage the school's resources independently, involvement in decision making process and importance of the implementation of SBM system. The following extracts discussed these themes.

3.1 Increasing autonomy of school (Theme 1)

Respondents interviewed had unclear understanding of what was meant by the concepts of SBM system, and indicated clearly that the implementation of this concept is a complex and multifaceted concept comprising many elements. The elements can be interpreted differently, have different emphasis and serve different purpose. In addition, participants affirmed that SBM system encompasses a wide variety of strategies ranging from granting full autonomy to school over every educational, financial, and personnel matter, to more restrictive versions allowing limited autonomy over school operations. An examples taken from the interview data collected from participants during this study illustrates this reality:

This understanding was expressed by principal assistant (PA1) from School A, she stated:

SBM was considered as a kind of decentralization. Yes MOE has transferred authority to school, but with the understanding that the delegated authority can be withdrawn at any time.

Senior teacher ST1 was clearly more negative about SBM system. She commented in this regard:

I don't know exactly, but as I heard that, SBM is no more than the shifting of management responsibilities from the Ministry to schools in such a way that the central Ministry of Education remains firmly in control.

However, she claimed that the authority transferred by the Ministry was vary from school to school.

The degree of responsibility and authority of decision making that is transferred by the Ministry was vary from school to school, while some schools simply adjusting workloads within central Ministry organizations, other diverting of all authorities. That
what I have seen when I visited ladies schools. So in other words, this system should be revised from time to time because schools’ demand are change.

Furthermore, she complained:

In my opinion, SBM is not a adoption of a system that some countries was applied. it should be the handing over of some amount of administrative authority or responsibility to school within the Ministry of Education control. We like to manage our school, but the responsibilities are too much. The officials in General Directorate don’t tell us exactly what to do, they don't explain the system before the implementation, only personal efforts, but if they visit the school they are quick criticize if they notice something wrong.

In addition, PA4 replied when I asked her, this might be one of the practices that you do, but I mean what is your understanding, your concepts regarding SBM?

No, no of course this is my understanding. As a principal assistant to this school, I believe that the SBM system is giving school some discretion to plan and implement programs, within guidelines set by MOE. The reality is they devolved only authorities, which are trivial.

Senior teacher ST2 elaborated that the SBM system refers to:

Transferring responsibility of decision making authority, to schools and they have to conform within a set of policies determined by Ministry of Education. As we have seen nothing has changed, the responsibility of these tasks still refer to Ministry of Education or General Directorate.

This thought also supported by senior teacher (ST4) from school D, he emphasized that:

We were given the authority to manage school based on the guidelines of MOE, with continued intervention of the General Directorate. So we are still within the general framework of educational policy.

These findings are inconsistent with senior teacher (ST3) from school C who suggested that:

Actually, it not clear enough for me the conception of SBM. As I heard, decision making authority was transferred to school. At the same time, as more decisions making reverts to school, General Directorate officials who are most likely to lose the authority, resent the loss.

3.2 Manage the school's resources independently. (Theme 2)

The study found that the understanding of SBM system differs specifically according to the school community views. They indicated that the SBM system refers to empowering
school community to manage their resources independently. They considered school as the primary educational unit for decision making within the implementation of SBM system. This idea was expressed by two representatives in this study:

Principal assistant (PA4) stated:

The main idea behind SBM is to make school as independent unit of decision making. He added, I think Ministry of Education aims to consider school as source of the decisions making. SBM relies on the decision making authority given to principal. and in this case principal can practice his work independently.

On the other hand data analysis revealed that, participants expected that their school will become independent within the implementation of SBM system. In his expression, Principal assistant (PA1) said:

The core idea behind SBM is that those who work in a school should have greater control of what goes on in the school. I believe that SBM refers to the management of resources at the school rather than Ministry of Education or General Directorate.

Principal assistant (PA2) has supported this idea and said:

SBM is a modern way, to encourages school's community to manage the school independently.

Principal assistant (PA3) elaborated:

It was supposed under SBM, schools become deregulated from the Ministry of Education control. I think, school being given greater responsibility for their own affairs, I mean Ministry of Education was supposed give schools independency in decision making process.

The other indication by principal assistant (PA2) who expressed

The SBM is a modern way, to encourage school's community to manage the school independently.

Senior teacher (ST4) expressed his understanding of the implementation of SBM system by saying:

SBM means that school is responsible for itself without returning to MOE, which means school principal could make decisions independently.

3.3 Involvement in decision making (Theme 3)

Based on the findings, the implementation of the SBM system can lead to high participation in decision making process at school, through transferring of responsibilities to the school administration. Respondents perceived that the Ministry of Education wants to focuses mainly on involving school community in the school decision making process rather
than putting them entirely in control. In the following an examples were given by participants. Principal assistants (PA1) emphasized that:

*If the Ministry of Education transfers the authority to the school, the school's teachers involvement in decision making would be increased within the Ministry’s policy.*

This idea was expressed also by principal assistant (PA4) who stated that

*The main idea behind SBM is to make school as independent unit of decision making.*

He added, *I think Ministry of Education aims to consider school as source of the decisions making.*

The other indication by principal assistant (PA2) who expressed

*The SBM is a modern way, to encourage school's community to manage the school independently.*

Teacher (T3) from post basic education school, shard the same thought by saying that:

*The main target of SBM is, that Ministry of Education wants to focuses on involving teachers in the decision making process.*

### 3.4 Importance of the implementation of SBM system (Theme 4)

Respondents expressed the importance of the implementation of SBM system. They believe that the SBM is useful and opened wide gate to participate in school decision making authority. An example taken from the interview data collected from participants illustrates this reality. Principal assistant (PA1) affirmed that currently, decision making authority is shared between the principal and school teachers. Principal assistant typically said:

*If SBM system is effectively implemented. I am sure it is very useful, because it gives teachers a chance to take part in the issues concerning their school. I mean if the Ministry of Education transfers the authority to the school, that will help school to plan its programs depending upon its real needs.*

Principal assistant (PA2) claimed:

*SBM is very important, because it gives the principal an effective role in decision making.*

Principal assistant PA3 clarified the importance of the implementation of SBM system and said:

*I believe this SBM system is very important, It provides the principal full authority to make decisions.*

Principal assistant (PA4) added:

*I consider SBM system – of course with full authorities- as the basic principle of school administration improvement. At the same time, I am sure SBM system will help school*
to solve problems effectively and positively.

Senior teachers have supported the principal’s assistant ideas regarding the importance of SBM system implementation at school level, when asked if the SBM system is implemented perfectly do you think that SBM would be an effective system to your school. They replied: Senior teacher (ST3) stated:

*SBM is considered as an effective system, where it provides principal control over school activities, and allowed principal to be more transparency with school teachers.*

Senior teacher (ST4) emphasized:

*I think SBM is important, because it leads to increasing financial allocation; school administration became fully responsible in decision making.*

In contrary, Senior teacher (ST2) considered the implementation of SBM system as something unimportant He stated:

*Actually, it is not easy to measure success; SBM must be coupled with school level accountability for results.*

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 School community view and understanding regarding SBM

As stated in the literature there is no easy definition of the concept of SBM. Furthermore, definitions of SBM vary as do the rationale for its implementation (Barcan, 1992; Smyth 1993; Whitty et al., 1998). Therefore, unsurprising, respondents in this paper expressed divergent views when they were asked to comment on the meaning of SBM system in Oman. To the school community, increase autonomy of school within the policy of Ministry of Education, manage the school's resources independently, involvement in decision making: and importance of the of SBM system were perceived as characteristics of SBM system.

4.2 Increasing autonomy of schools

Findings showed that SBM system emphasized on transfer the authority which stressed on the principle of school autonomy where the responsibility of each school within the policy of Ministry of Education framework. Where the school community members have perceived the SBM system as increasing autonomy, new roles and responsibilities, or handing over of some amount of administrative authority or responsibility to school's community within the centrality of the Ministry. Comments made by school community interviewed were in line and congruent with what is found in the literature on SBM. According to Sumintono et al. (2012) analysis of the policy shows that its construction and content has some limitation of empowering school in terms of the context of decentralization to school level. Moreover the
respondents considered that the power and authority vested in school councils as adequate. Supporting this findings Riesgraf (2002) revealed that SBM increased the decentralization of decision making for special education in some areas, while decision in other areas remained centralized. However, special education decision making remained more centralized than decision making for general education. Administrators had concerns about SBM effects in the areas of organization structure, participation, process, and resources. Furthermore, these understandings are consistent with the understandings of Santibanez (2007) who pointed out that through participative decision-making and autonomy, schools under SBM are expected to be more efficient in using resources and are more responsive to local needs.

On the other hand, senior teacher (ST3) from school C was clearly more negative about SBM system, as he claimed that Ministry is only using SBM system to dump more work on them. He added, Actually, it not clear enough for me the conception of SBM. This definition was expressed explicitly by Several recent studies of SBM (Oswald, 1995; Gertler et al., 2007) that focused on using of decision making authority provided to the school some benefits which justify the existence of the system as giving school-level actors more autonomy over school affairs and ensuring higher quality decisions because groups instead of individuals make them.

4.3 Involvement in decision making

The views of the school community seemed inclined towards what means involving school community in decision making of the SBM system. These finding is aligned with the finding of Cranston (2000) who indicated that previous studies pointed out that under SBM, school communities have the opportunity, responsibility and accountability for many more decisions that affect them than they held previously. Furthermore, these findings are parallel to Briggs and Wohlstetter (1999) who asserted that the successful implementation of the school based management requires structures that include teachers in decision-making. In addition, Murphy (1997) offers a similar view of SBM that is relevant here, arguing it is primarily a strategy to decentralize decision-making to the individual school site. An example taken from the interview data collected from school community during this study illustrates this issue. Respondents stated that main idea behind SBM system is that it focuses mainly on involving teachers in the school decision making process rather than putting them entirely in control.

This finding is inconsistent with Heyward et al. (2011) who stated that the respondents perceived that the school committee was not an independent body.
5. CONCLUSION

The data revealed that the school community believe in SBM system as an important system that helps the principals in devolution their responsibilities. Principal assistants (PA1) from school A has indicated that If the Ministry of Education transfers the authority to the school, the school's teachers involvement in decision making would be increased within the Ministry's policy. She added, this will contributes positively in the process of decision making and it will support the ideas to participate in the process of educational development. In addition, the system will participate in offering solutions and alternatives to face the problems and challenges. This finding is supported by Cranston (2000) that revealed there is a common understanding among the school community interviewed that the SBM as an important system that helps schools administrations in developing their decisions, in particular, and is useful for the school, in general. On the contrary, the findings of the study revealed that the senior teacher (ST1) considered SBM system as something unimportant for school. She stated that this system didn't accomplish any substantial changes.

REFERENCES


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