

Decision making in the Sri Lankan Schools of the Programme of School Improvement is being: A Case Study with Reference to the Matara District Schools

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Abstract: In 2006 the Ministry of Education (MOESL) implemented the Programme of School Improvement (PSI) in the government schools in Sri Lanka. In order to gain success of the PSI, School Development Committee (SDC) and School Management Team (SMT) were introduced as the main decision making bodies in those schools. Participatory decision making is one of the key elements of the PSI system in Sri Lanka. Current decision making process is rather different than the earlier decision making in the government schools in Sri Lanka. Therefore the studying about the decision making process in the PSI schools is imperative. This study design to investigate the nature of the decision making process in the schools where the PSI is being implemented? This study used a qualitative case study approach to study the research problem with special reference to the Matara district PSI implemented schools. Purposive sampling technique employed to select participants in this study, and data analysed using thematic analysing technique. The measurement of community involvement in SDCs provides some indicators of low community involvement in decision making and management. The mechanism of selection members for the SDCs is not transparent, and the community of schools lack knowledge of the selection process in the SDCs and PSI concept. According to the responses of the majority of the past pupils, the parents and the teachers of SDCs, principals influence to select members for the SDCs in the PSI schools. Thus, it seems that there is no democratic and genuine participatory decision making process in the PSI schools. Moreover, the situation in the SDC meetings is also not much participative. It is needed for drawing attention of higher authority on the PSI implementation since now this implementation is taking place without any proper supervision.

Keywords: Participatory management, Shared decision making, School management boards, School-based management.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Sri Lankan version of the SBM was implemented as the Programme of School Improvement (PSI) in 2006. Prior to the implementing the PSI in the government schools, principal was the chief executive officer and the top manager of the school. Previously to the PSI implementation most of the decisions related to the school activities were made by the principal. Majority of the schools had School Management Committees but most of the members of the committee did not get themselves involved in the decision-making process. They did not concern of their responsibility in making important decisions related to the school. Therefore there were many issues related to management, and there was a lot of criticism against the school management. As a solution to this problem, the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka (MOESL) implemented the PSI in the government schools in Sri Lanka [6, 9].

In order to gain success of the PSI system, School Development Committee (SDC) and School Management Team (SMT) were introduced as the main decision making bodies in the school. SDC members are responsible for preparing the school policy, setting out mission, objectives, strategies, and all key school decisions are taken by them. SDC, SMT and relevant stakeholders are supposed to be involved in preparing school development plans and annual plans. Under this programme very close relationship is expected to be established with the community members of the school.

Principal of the relevant school is the chairperson, and one of the deputy principals of the relevant school, teachers, old pupils, parents, and one education officer are represented the SDC. SMT takes actions to implement the decisions, which have been made by the SDC. The composition of the SMT is decided by the SDC and the chairperson of the SMT will be the principal of the relevant school. A very close relationship is maintained with the community other than the implementation of the decisions [6, 7]. The members of the SMT help the SDC to make decisions when necessary. Accordingly the decision making process was changed in the government schools following to the implementation of the programme of school improvement. Consequently, other necessary changes also have been materialized and the role of the school managers' role was changed accordingly. The principals and the other members of the school community are supposed to be adapted to the PSI changes and to the new situation.

Decision making is one of the key elements of the PSI system. It is rather different than the earlier decision making in the government schools in Sri Lanka. Therefore the studying about the decision making in the PSI schools is very vital. However, there is a dearth of research studies on the decision making process in the PSI schools, and especially lack qualitative and in-depth studies have been carried out in relation to the decision making in those schools. Therefore the findings of this research may be very important for the decision makers in the PSI schools and the policy makers in education.

II. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

What is the nature of the decision making process in the schools where the Programme of School Improvement (PSI) is being implemented?

Following are the objectives of this study are to:

- Discover the nature of formulation and implementation of decision making bodies in the PSI implemented schools.
- Examine the perception of the community members on decision making in the PSI implemented schools.
- Identify the challenges faced by the decision makers in the PSI implemented schools.

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the decision making process in the schools where the PSI is being implemented, this research used interpretive paradigm and qualitative inquiry. Cohen *et al.*, [4] state that the research within the interpretive paradigm is often small scale, reaching social life, non statistical, subjective, personal involvement of the researcher, interpreting the specific and individual perspective. This study also a small scale, investigate social realities, and most of the above characteristics are common to this study also.

In general, qualitative research focuses on the inner experience of people, as they interact with others. “A primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness. Qualitative researcher places his/her validity on multiple realities, meaning structures and holistic analysis of a social phenomenon [4]. Therefore the qualitative research approach was most appropriate in this study, because this research designed to explore insights of the principals, the deputy principals, the teachers and the SDC members; parents, past pupils of the schools in relation to the decision making in the PSI schools. With reference to the Matara district schools in Sri Lanka, the researcher used a case study research approach to study the research problem. Simons [10], provides a definition for case study as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a real life context” [5]. Case study investigates social reality, and examines a social unit as a whole [1].

This study also planned to investigate the social information of the internal community members of the schools. Qualitative researchers use various methods for data collection: “observation (participant and non participant), interviewing, and document analysis”. In this study two data collection methods were employed: document analysis and semi structured interviews. In addition, informal observations also used to gather real life information from the participants. Sample was selected purposively, and selected three schools. Three principals, three deputy principals and six teachers, six parents, six past pupils participated in this study.

Table 1: Research Participants

Participants	1AB	1C	Total
Principals	2	1	3
D. Principals	2	1	3
Teachers	4	2	6
Parents	4	2	6
Past Pupils	4	2	6
Total	16	8	24

Source: Research Data

All together 24 participants provided information in this study. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data in this study. Thematic analysis can be understood as the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work. Themes were emerged within the transcribed data gathered through interviews and documents. Those themes was organized, described and interpreted [2]. Thematic analysis is one of the most common approaches of qualitative data analysis [3, 8] and it was the most appropriate method for analysing qualitative data. Therefore, data was analysed using thematic analytical method in this study.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- *SDCs and Decision making*

The PSI provides opportunities for community members to be involved in decision-making. Selecting members for the School Development Committees is very important element in the PSI implementation. It seems that according to the responses provided by the members of the SDCs except the principals, selection mechanism of SDC is not much democratic. Majority of the teachers and parents argues as: “most of the outside members of the SDC are nominated by the principal, and then he asks us to be agreed for his nomination, our duty in the SDC is to approve his agendas”. One principal confirms the above statement as: “principal is the top manager in the school; he/she is responsible for all the things happened in the school. Therefore principal must have power to select members for the SDC, and the principal knows well who should be appointed to the SDC”. It seems that the principal in the PSI schools still has more power in decision making on human resources in the school. It is evident that the participatory management is not being practiced in the majority of the PSI schools in this regard. Moreover one deputy principal said that: “every outside community members do not have sufficient knowledge on the concept of the PSI or SBM, and even school management. Therefore we must select knowledgeable members for the SDC, otherwise selection would be ineffective”.

- *Community involvement in the school decision making process*

According to the regulations and directions provided by the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka (MOESL), all the PSI schools are anticipated to establish a SDC to make school decisions with the participation of the principal, deputy principals, and representatives of the teachers, parents and past pupils. The SDC selection process must be democratic. However, it seems that in order to select knowledgeable and suitable members for the SDC, selection process is controlled by the principal.

However, the measurement of community involvement in SDCs provides some indicators of low community involvement in decision making and management. The mechanism of selection of the members for the SDCs is not transparent, and the community of the schools lack knowledge of the selection process in the SDCs. According to the responses provided by the majority of the past pupils, parents and teachers of SDCs, most principals of the schools influence to select members for the SDCs. Thus, it is evident that it is not put into practiced a democratic and genuine participatory decision making process in the PSI schools. Moreover, the situation in the SDC meetings is also not seemed to be much participative. One teacher provides proofs for that as: “Community participation in the SDC meetings are only a formality for the purpose of legitimacy. Everything is previously arranged by the principal and what is required from the members of the SDC is their agreement and signatures”. It is also useful to note that this teacher perceived the role taken by the principal as too dominant in the SDC meetings.

According to the information provided by the majority of respondents excluding the principals, in most of the occasions, only a half or less of the outside SDC members invited to attend the meetings, and these are always the same people in each time. It seems that only a limited number of outside SDC members are actually active enough to attend the SDC meetings. Thus, most of the time, only the same members in SDC actively engaged in the meeting.

Comments made by the majority of the parents and the past pupils during the interviews it was clarified that the monthly SDC meeting is seen as a mechanism for informing and consulting with members of the SDCs on school decisions rather than as a mechanism for decision making. The principal has previously designed the school's plans, and at the meeting SDC members are asked to approve this particular scheme. It is likely that even though members should be in a position to bargain, the principal hold more power than they concerning this decision.

- *Challenges faced by the school community*

In the data collection, most of the participants explained the real nature of the challenges faced by them in decision making process in the school. Majority of the principals indicated that the SDC members' lack of experiences and poor knowledge in school management. Other SDC members; parents, past pupils and teachers argue about the poor leadership qualities of the principal displayed in school management as a big challenge in decision making. According to the responses made by majority of the principals and the teachers, schools face challenges finding financial and physical recourses for school development. One of the other major challenges in the decision making is the poor attitudes of the community members towards the school decisions. Therefore, they do not provide their maximum support for the school decision making. Since most of the community members are not financially strengthen, school has to find new ways for finding resources for implementing school decisions. Some schools face challenges for selecting suitable, dedicated, committed and educated community members for the school governing boards like SDCs. It seems that the majority of the community members are not better awareness on the concept of the PSI or SBM. Therefore, they are lack of understanding how to be involved in school decisions in the PSI schools. However, some members of the SDCs have not been empowered for contribution in the SDC meetings for their respective school development. School leaders face difficulties since the proper supervision and necessary guidance in relation to the PSI is not provided by the higher authority of education.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the context of education decentralisation through the PSI, community participation in school management, particularly regarding access to and control over decision making and challenges faced by the stakeholders was investigated in this study. Overall, the characteristics of community participation in the areas of decision making, attendance at the annual meetings, and control over financial resources changed very slightly as a consequence of the PSI implementation. Moreover, it seems that the schools unwilling to involve external community members may also lead to lack of trust, since trust is related to school openness and, therefore, cannot be established if external community members' expectations for increased involvement fail to materialize.

The selection process in the SDC is not much democratic as expected by the PSI formulators. It is evident that the participatory management is not being practiced in the PSI schools in decision making. Most of the decisions still made by the principal, or he/she is directly influence for the school decisions. Majority of the members in the SDCs are not empowered for participatory decision making in the PSI schools.

It should be provided several opportunities for the different community members to increase their involvement in setting school policy, planning and decision-making. Therefore, very democratic manner should be adopted to establish SDCs, selecting members and conducting SDC meetings. Since the lack of awareness of stakeholders of the schools on the concept and regulations of the PSI, at least the SDC and SMT members should be given opportunities for participation for the effective PSI awareness programmes. Those programmes needed to be organized by the higher education authorities, and in addition, it should be established a better monitoring system or governing body to supervise the schools where the PSI is being implemented. Those governing boards will provide such inputs for the improvement of this PSI system and would make necessary recommendations and guidance for the benefit of essential parties and stakeholders of the PSI schools.

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