

Autonomy of Schools: School Based Management Initiatives in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Autonomy is an organizational property (Collier, 2002). School autonomy is one of the methods of school management in which schools are provided with decision making authority and power over their businesses, by higher level education authorities in waiving off their existing power and authority on school management (Patrinos, 2011). Research findings provide evidence to prove the nature of authority that has been provided to schools to make decisions at the school level. Accordingly, the degree of autonomy may vary from system to system of School Based Management (SBM), from country to country and sometimes from district to district or from province to province, where the SBM is implemented. In Sri Lanka, the School Based Management system was implemented in 2006 as titled as the Programme of School Improvement (PSI), one of the key characteristics of the PSI is the autonomy provided by higher authorities for decision making at school level. Although, the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka (Mo ESL) expected to provide much autonomy to the government schools through implementing the SBM system, according to the anecdotal experience, it appears that still schools are facing some problems in decision making due to lack of the autonomy.

Research Problem and Objectives

The researcher had an intention to investigate the experience of stakeholders of schools on the utilization of autonomy in the government schools with the implementation of the SBM. Consequently, the main aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of the stakeholders of schools in implementing SBM in their schools, and specially, it was aimed to explore their experiences of utilization of autonomy which has been provided by their higher-level authorities on decision making at school level.

Theoretical background

Education systems throughout the world are managed by different methods, such as centralized; semi-centralized and decentralized methods in order to achieve their different educational goals. Among those different methods, SBM is mentioned as a decentralized method of school management. The SBM is an organizational approach that expands the local school site responsibility and authority for the improvement of school performance. Ideally, it provides local mechanisms for the introduction of new approaches to education that result in enhanced outcomes and fulfill the needs of the local community better. The implementation of SBM represents a fundamental and systemic organizational change to increase the local presence of four key resources, such as power, information, knowledge and skills, and performance - based rewards (Banicky, Rodney, & Foss, 2000; Fallahi &

Matin, 2016; Gamage, Sipple, & Partridge, 1996; Sumintono, 2007; Vally & Daud, 2015). Briggs & Wohlstetter (2003), Cheng (1993) and Raihani (2007) list common characteristics of SBM schools as a shared mission, school based staff development, participation of stakeholders in decision-making, shared school leadership, participatory and democratic decision-making, and power distribution. In the Sri Lankan programme of SBM also has many key features like international SBM programmes (Mo ESL, 2013, 2014). Even though it appears that the SBM model in Sri Lanka is almost similar to the other SBM systems, the autonomy which has been provided to schools are problematic in the way of implementing of SBM in Sri Lanka (Kasturiarachchi, 2012).

Methodology

This study was a qualitative case study research. It was used a multiple case study research approach to study this research problem (Yin, 2009). The research site was the Colombo district government schools, and it was purposively selected three schools from the Colombo Education Zone as the sample of this study. The School Development Committee (SDC) members of three schools were the participants in this study. Mainly semi structured interview, questionnaire and document survey were used to gather information. In addition, informal discussions, informal observations were also employed and thematic analysis and basic statistical tools were used to analysis of the data in this study.

Findings

It was revealed that the real perception of the majority of principals, the existing autonomy that has been provided to schools is not sufficient; therefore, they suggest providing schools more power and autonomy, especially, on human resource management and financial management. One principal stated that, she will be happy if schools are provided authority to hire and fire staff members in schools. The teachers of the government schools are recruited by their higher-level authorities. Hence, the schools do not have an opportunity to select suitable staff member for their schools as they wish.

The majority of participants in this study commented that schools still have not been provided sufficient decision-making authority. As stated by a principal, there is a shortage of teachers in his school, and according to him, they do not have autonomy, power or authority to employ or deploy teachers to the school. However, they are responsible for increasing performance of students and development of the school. The principal and also the deputy principal in this school expect more autonomy for decision making on human resource management and financial management. Perception of the other staff members and the outside members of the SDC (more than 60%) is totally different in this regard. They believe that the existing power and authority of principal on human resource management are more sufficient, and they suggest minimizing or distributing existing power of principal on human resource management among deputy principals.

The majority of principals and SDC members of all the schools (More than 80%) agreed that the autonomy that has been provided to the schools in decision making is greater than earlier. According to the policy regulations of SBM, schools have autonomy to form governing boards, set up school plans, implement projects for school development and

generate funds for school development. Some SDC members (less than 40%) commented badly about the autonomy that the schools presently have been provided. This may be due to a lack of knowledge of SDC members on SBM. They commented about the selection process and the autonomy and the power that the principal has to select the members of the governing boards. The majority of outside SDC members have a misunderstanding about the principal's power of selecting members for the governing boards and members for the committees of the school. The real situation is different from the perception of the SDC members. However, the staff members of every school are sensitive about the autonomy, which schools have to implement SBTD activities. Anyway, some staff members, principals and deputy principals are not contented about the autonomy that schools have been provided for SBTD. They expect much more autonomy for generating funds, spending funds on SBTD and also making other relevant decisions on SBTD.

According to the guidelines of the Mo ESL, the schools have been provided financial autonomy than earlier. Therefore, some schools utilize maximum autonomy that they have been provided. They stated that the financial autonomy that they have been provided had been limited with the Mo ESL circular 05/2015. The financial authority that the schools have been provided through the SBM was appreciated by principals, deputy principals.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It was appeared that the schools have not yet been provided autonomy for hiring and firing of their staff members. It was noticed that the schools have not yet been provided sufficient financial autonomy. However, the autonomy that the school utilizes is greater than before the implementation of the SBM. However, schools must be provided some more autonomy on human and financial resource management. There is a need to have an efficient mechanism for monitoring schools where the SBM is being implemented.

Keywords: Decision Making; Financial Autonomy; School Autonomy; School Based Management

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