Obstacles and Challenges Confronting Principals in the Development of School Democracy Policies in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Democratic ideals are the foundations of public education. All educational practitioners are accountable to recognize inequity and develop inclusive school communities to fulfill the individual needs of every student. However, obstacles and challenges might emerge in the development of democracy in schools. The main purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of school principals at the elementary and junior high school levels and understand what problems they encountered when transforming the school power structure into a democracy. The qualitative method was employed in this study, and this method entailed an in-depth interview approach. Twenty school principals in central Taiwan were randomly selected through purposeful sampling. The dilemmas identified included an interest-based conception of democracy over the common good, failure to communicate through official channels, lack of accountability for power sharers, constraints on principals' power, struggles between participatory and representative participation, and democracy as an obstacle to school effectiveness. The implications for the future development of school democracy are presented in this paper.

Keywords: School democracy, principals, holistic democracy, Taiwan

INTRODUCTION

Taiwan has initiated numerous educational reform movements in compulsory education for primary and junior high school since the mid-1990s by amending or instituting educational laws to ensure decentralization, deregulation, and diversification in most school operations (Fwu & Wang, 2002). The Education Basic Law was passed in 1999 and declared the relevance of teachers' professional autonomy and involvement in school policymaking. School members and the local government are now involved in decision-making on principal assignment, teacher recruitment, and resource allocation. At the school level, the site council has been transformed to serve as the primary school-wide decision-making body, which empowers school stakeholders to exert their influence to improve the quality of school education. School stakeholders' leadership is illustrated by the fact that they represent more than 50% of the membership of the site council, principal-selection committee, and teacher-evaluation committee.

Democracy is the foundation of public education. All educational practitioners are accountable to recognize inequity and develop inclusive school communities that fulfill the individual needs of students (Perry, 2009). Democracy in education should involve all aspects of education, including instructional content, student counseling, classroom management, student discipline, administrative procedures, and school decision-making. However, expectations and requirements for public schools have become increasingly complex and diverse. Cultural and ecological transformation at schools, induced by either education policies or social change, creates conflicts as to how to meet the diverse needs of students, how teachers manage their classrooms when power relationships change between teachers and students under the zero corporal punishment policy, how to address the demands of parents, and how principals resolve differences and solicit teachers' cooperation despite the rising awareness of individualism of teachers (Wall & Callister, 1995). Conflict can have positive or negative effects, depending on conflict perception and emotions, conflict patterns, and decision-making (McShane & Von Glinow, 2010). Achieving social justice in daily interpersonal interactions at school might be compromised by conflicts of interest that diminish the effectiveness of organizational democracy. However, conflict resolution also reflects the degree of school members' understanding and implementation of democracy. Examining school democratization practices is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of policy implementation and enabling schools to improve democratic practices. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of school principals at the elementary and junior high school levels and to understand what problems they encountered when transforming the school power structure into a democracy. In this paper, research findings are discussed to illustrate the applications of democracy in Taiwanese schools, roles of principals and other school members in the reform process, and deficiency of government policies regarding Taiwan's educational system.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents empirical research on school democracy and analytic frameworks for data analysis. School democracy movements decentralize power from the central to local schools to improve the quality of schooling. However, relationships between democratic practices and the improvement of educational quality depend on the clarity of guiding government regulations, competence of school stakeholders, and resource allocation. The school leader has considerable decision-making power in the democratic process (Chikoko, 2009). To promote and sustain a democratic planning culture, Hess, Johnson, and Reynolds (2014) suggested that educational leaders should possess the leadership qualities of hospitality, participation, mindfulness, and humility as well as cultivate organizational mutuality, appreciation, and autonomy.

Wasonga's qualitative study of school principals' perception of school democracy asserted that lack of shared values of public participation in decision-making, and "doing what is best for kids" results in lack of student learning. Therefore, synthesizing democratic communities and social justice may be imperative to improving democratic leadership (Wasonga, 2009). Mullen, Harris, Pryor, and Browne-Ferrigno (2008) also attempted to develop accountable democratic leadership, which required school leaders to make decisions based on input from various stakeholders to benefit students or citizens. In addition, school leaders must assume responsibilities such as implementing ideas and programs, resolving conflicts, and ensuring the equity and equality of the democratic community.

To provide an analytic framework for school democracy, Woods (2011, pp. 10–11) proposed a model of holistic democracy based on empirical studies and advocated the importance of the meaning of human life as well as spiritual awakening. The four dimensions of the model include (a) holistic meaning (b) power sharing (c) transforming dialogue, and (d) holistic well-being. Under this model, school members develop a sense of belonging, connection, empowerment, self-esteem, happiness, and competence through democratic participation and agency. Holistic democracy also highlights the relevance of spirituality. Establishing democratic cultures in schools can help cultivate students' spirituality, enabling students to reach their full potential as human beings and actively participate in society. Regarding democratic consensus-building in schools, Marsh (2007) proposed "joint work" combined with a deliberative democratic model. The deliberative democratic ideal aims to pursue the common good and make decisions through reasoning, which contributes to decisions that are more legitimate, impartial, effective, and equitable. Joint work is a process in which educators and other school stakeholders sit together at a table to construct new roles and routines toward a shared goal for improving the quality of school education. This process involves four dimensions, namely who is at the table, what is on the table, how the process operates, and what is accomplished. The basic principles are outlined as follows: (a) Meaning is generated through negotiation, in which differences are recognized, (b) meaning is not entirely controlled by outside forces, but rather controlled by some members, and (c) a shared sense of responsibility among members enables differentiation between major and minor aspects. The aforementioned school democracy conceptions indicate the relevance of the common good and interests of students. Despite notions of the advantages of open dialogue and collaboration, the accountability of participants is emphasized. These models were applied in the data analysis of this study to examine school organizations that have numerous conflicts of interest to gain an insight into the dilemmas Taiwanese school principals encounter in developing school democracy policies.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This paper reports part of the findings of a qualitative research that entails using a purposive sampling technique to ensure the maximal diversity of participants of interest (Kao, 2015; Patton, 2001). First, the online database of the Bureau of Education of Taichung City, central Taiwan, was surveyed to collect the list of elementary and junior high schools. Second, the schools were arranged according to their size, and six elementary schools and six junior high schools were randomly selected by fixed intervals. Third, a "snowball" approach was used to select key informants who could provide in-depth explanations of the development of democracy policies in Taiwanese schools. In this approach, two senior teachers who were familiar with the schools in Taichung were requested to recommend principals they considered democratic (Bertaux, 1981). Furthermore, four elementary schools and four junior high schools were selected from the recommendation list according to their sizes. A total of 20 principals were interviewed (Table 1). All interviews were conducted at the selected school sites. The interviews were tape-recorded with the interviewees' permission for creating verbatim transcripts. The interview protocols mainly consisted of semi structured and open-ended questions, which probed for comprehensive meanings in responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interview protocols were used to ensure that the same procedures were followed in each interview. Data were then categorized and conceptualized using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Table 1. Backgrounds of the 20 principals interviewed

Terms Served[a]	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
	8	7	1	3	1
Education	Bachelor		Master	Doctoral	
	1		16	3	
School Size[b]	~700	701~1400	1400~2100	2101~	
	5	8	4	3	

[a] One term of the principal is four years long.
[b] The number of students enrolled.

FINDINGS

The research data were analyzed and the results indicated that school principals face numerous dilemmas in the context of school democracy. Most of these dilemmas relate to value incongruence between teachers and administrators. The application of Marsh's dimensions of democratic joint work (2007) in this section calls attention to the rules of conduct in decision-making, perceptions of purpose, responsibilities of participants, and effectiveness of democratic participation.

Interest-Based Conception of Democracy over the Common Good

In Woods' framework of holistic democracy (2011), the pursuit of truth and meaning is critical for the development of school democracy. In this framework, school members should desire to recognize the long-term value, meaning, and purpose of school education, which should aim to develop students' spiritual, cognitive, aesthetic, affective, ethical, and physical abilities. However, most of the principals interviewed claimed that students' well-beings were their first priority. Teachers do not always agree with principals' decision-making (Wasonga, 2009). The recent reform of school management in Taiwan was primarily aimed at promoting teachers' rights and interests by empowering them in school decision-making and affording them the right to organize a teachers' union. Teachers' interests sometimes conflict with those of students.

> I believe that democratic mechanisms are not intended to serve the interests of teachers, but as an approach to successfully teaching students, which is the purpose of school democracy. Most people believe that the rights and interests of teachers are crucial, and schools should emphasize the importance of teacher rights and interests and give teachers as much space as necessary to enable them to successfully teach students. However, I believe that this approach misplaces the focus. Teachers should consider how students can learn successfully. This is what teachers should strive for.

Teachers might prioritize their own welfare over students' welfare. For example, at one school that was undergoing building reconstruction; the faculty debated the location of the new parking lot. The principal insisted that the space along the wall should be reserved for students and that the parking lot should be moved inside; however, the faculty objected because this was to their best interest. Another principal provided an example of teachers' interest-based conception of democracy involving favoritism in decision-making that influenced teachers' self-interests (Marsh, 2007).

> Regarding remedial classes, teachers may consider that instead of the school, they should determine when the school can have remedial classes, and indicate when students should have them. In such a situation, the teachers would believe that the school should listen to them. Nevertheless, the teachers would not be actively involved in the future development and plan of their school.

The government policy has stipulated that the number of teachers in certain committees must be more than a half of the total number of members. Despite the participation of parents or administrative representatives, the participants believed that "tyranny of the majority" exists because teachers account for more than 50% of total members. Accordingly, teachers tend to consider their own interests and not the long-term development of the school and the rights and interests of students, because humans invariably protect their own interests. The dilemmas constantly encountered by school management are what should be prioritized. From a human-relations perspective, the welfare of organizational members relates to their performance (Homans, 1950; Mayo, 1945). However, for organizations like hospitals or schools, the welfare of employees may be compromised by that of their clients or customers.

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Teachers' perceptions of being treated unfairly may intensify their disagreement with the administration regarding what is vital for schools.

Failure to Communicate Through Official Channels

Democratic school organizations should provide an arena for members to exchange and explore various views in transformational dialogue. Narrow interests can be thoroughly investigated and challenged through open debate (Woods, 2011). However, principals were generally observed to use informal channels to solve conflicts among school members. Because of the high power distance culture in Taiwan, teachers and principals do not feel comfortable openly challenging each other (Hofstede, 2001; Oyserman, Coon, & Memmelmeier, 2002). The length of time necessary for consensus building also diminishes the principals' willingness to involve all school members in meetings that sometimes undermine their authority.

> After committee members pass a resolution to form a consensus, and some teachers might disagree with the resolution when it is announced. Therefore, decisions pertaining to school affairs might be delayed or could be difficult to execute. Numerous schools have encountered such problems. However, at our school, which is a large school that has 150 teachers, if a proposal was discussed in this manner, then a consensus would be difficult to achieve and decisions would be difficult to make. The only solution is to make decisions by voting.

The lack of a standard for when all school members should be involved in resolving a matter places school principals in a difficult position, and principals constantly receive complaints from teachers for failing to respect their viewpoints. One of the principals desired open communication in meetings to avoid controversies after meetings.

> I think everyone should have the responsibility to express their views directly in the meeting. I personally disapprove that people do not speak out in the meeting or when we solicit their opinions, they are unwilling to let us know their ideas. But after decisions are made, which disfavor their sides, they started to grudge behind our back or refuses to comply with the decision.

Lack of Accountability for Power Sharers

For successful implementation of school democracy, participants must actively contribute to creating institutions, culture, and relationships, which includes involvement in decision-making processes and accountability for these processes (Woods, 2011; Woods & Woods, 2012). Power sharing among participants ensures the inclusion of diverse perspectives and prevents the concentration of power in one person's hands. However, according to the Taiwanese government's policy, the principal is mainly accountable for the decisions made by all school committees. In other words, the relationship between power and accountability is not clearly manifested in the system (Mullen et al., 2008). Teachers and other school members have the power to participate in various school committees, but are not accountable for the consequences of school decision-making. Participants pointed out that rights entail obligations, and people with power have more responsibilities than those with less power. However, the system itself is defective. Schools adopt the presidential system, whereas the system that schools adopt to make decisions is the directorial system. The statements of one of the principals are outlined as follows:

> The greatest advantage of democracy is that people make decisions through the directorial system (or through the apportionment of liability). In other words, people

> share their responsibilities. However, when problems occur, the principal must be responsible for the problems teachers encounter because the principal is in charge of school affairs and is considered the final decision-maker for administrative affairs.

While real democracy means that people should participate jointly in making decisions, the question is whether people agree with the type of democracy involving both rights and responsibilities. The avoidance of responsibilities is another concern. One of the participants indicated that members of the evaluation committee refused to attend meetings convened for addressing the declining performance of a teacher because no one wanted to be the "bad guy".

Constraints of Principals' Power

Currently, principals tend to have increasingly less power. Regarding the power of leadership, the participants perceived they were euphemistically considered leaders. As mentioned, most school agendas are determined by committees. Principals cannot lead teachers without the majority of votes, and can only lead teachers indirectly.

> We might have professional authority and referent power, we might use our personality to influence teachers, and we might use our expertise in education administration to lead teachers. However, we have no legal power, and which we must have (or at least bureaucratic power). Bureaucratic power is the most basic power level we can have, even though we do not necessarily use it. However, the entire system does not provide bureaucratic power.

When a teacher is punished or reprimanded, the principal must explain why to the teacher evaluation committee. Although principals have the right to administrative discretion, meaning that they have the right to make decisions based on their judgment and expertise regarding the appropriate course of conduct, numerous unknown factors affects the execution of administrative discretion and school democracy. In addition, the question of how the discretionary power of principals is determined is confusing. For example, their professional authority is questioned by some teachers who question why a principal can determine who is an incompetent teacher because education authorities do not give executive power to principals or provide relevant training for them. Thus, some participants in this study concluded that an adequate degree of democracy can exist in a bureaucratic system; however, a completely democracy system can lead to numerous problems.

Struggles between Participatory and Representative Participation

The general forms of democratic participation can be divided into two categories: participatory and representative participation. A participatory democracy honors widespread public participation, which is considered to ensure the representation of all people's needs and interests. Representative participation conjectures that the full participation of alienated people would damage the quality of consent (Marsh, 2007). Although government policy requires parental participation in various school committees, some principals restrain parents' decision-making power because parents do not have professional knowledge. One of the participants said "I would not allow parents to decide on teaching-related matters. Although parents have education options, teachers' professional knowledge should be acknowledged. Teaching-related matters cannot be decided by vote and should be determined by teachers and the principal." The notion of professionalism also applies to school committees. Some participants pointed out that the committee should have a complete understanding of what they are responsible for. For example, teacher performance is appraised and punishment is determined on the basis of a discretional evaluation of evidence. Teachers are not provided with relevant training or equipped with relevant knowledge. In addition, most students are still maturing, both physically and mentally. Therefore, their participation in school decision-making is limited to some degree.

Stakes in decisions served as another criterion for participants to determine who should be involved in decision-making. Numerous studies on teacher empowerment and decentralization have indicated that teachers are unwilling to participate in all school decisions, preferring to be involved only in agendas directly related to teaching and teachers' benefits (Conway & Calzi, 1995; Enderlin-Lampe, 1997; Smylie, 1992; Smylie, Lazarus, & Brownlee-Conyers, 1996). One of the participants subscribed to this notion.

> My principle is that if a matter is related to the rights and interests of most people, then all people should participate jointly in making related decisions; if a matter is related to only some people, then representatives should be elected to make decisions.

In addition, determining who should make decisions depends on the scale of the involved activity. For example, people can jointly decide which company provides lunch, but only a principal can determine the disbursement of funds. In other words, a principal has the power to decide where to use funds according to priorities. Each person participates in decision-making processes depending on his or her position.

Democracy as an Obstacle to School Effectiveness

In the previous school administration system in Taiwan, principals made decisions independently and were not required to subject their decisions to democratic procedures. Participants indicated that a principal at that time is an excellent example of a powerful principal. Currently, principals cannot fully utilize their abilities because of relevant regulations. Goals can only be achieved over time. Formal meetings must be held; however, meetings usually do not yield favorable outcomes, but only waste time. In such cases, principals would not be able to perform their job effectively because they have no power. Without power, principals are not trusted or respected by teachers. One of the principals was worried about delays in students' learning because the democratic process is more time consuming than the traditional hierarchical command-and-order system.

> The development of children cannot wait. During the waiting process, where can you place children? Children would be sacrificed during the waiting process, which I consider to be inappropriate. I consider that democracy is necessary. When people jointly make decisions, there is generally less resistance to change and accomplishments can be achieved, although the involved processes are typically lengthy.

Making decisions by voting does not always yield the optimal decision, because requirements vary among teachers. Although they try to satisfy each teacher as best as possible, excessive democracy can cause difficulties in school administration processes; therefore, in cases where democracy is limited and cannot satisfy everyone, a higher education principle such as social justice must be adopted (Chikoko, 2009).

> I believe that if a school has an effective democratic system, then school affairs can progress effectively. However, a democratic system can be an obstacle to achieving this. Ensuring that the democratic system operates fairly and justly is crucial. If resolutions passed accord with social justice, then school affairs would progress; otherwise, such affairs would be impaired by the democratic system. Compared with other problems, "people" are more difficult to deal with.

Participants also classified democracy as harmonious and discordant. Harmonious democracy is conducive to school effectiveness, whereas discordant democracy impedes school effectiveness. Harmonious and respectful democracy is an effective democracy. Harmonious democracy yields positive outcomes and discordant democracy yields negative outcomes. Whether democracy impedes or improves school effectiveness depends on the type of democracy.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

People who work in democratic organizations should feel empowered and confident, and this generates a sense of belonging and connectedness within organizations. School administrators should cultivate the community by involving teachers, students, and parents in various events and pursue holistic well-being when developing school democracy policies (Woods, 2011). Lai (2014) conducted a study on principal leadership to establish a capacity for change and suggested that the model of participatory growth, which empowers teachers to make decisions and initiate school change, requires principals to change school norms and structures including authority, people, time, and space. Accordingly, most of the conflict between school teachers and administrators stems from the failure to successfully transform school norms and structures. In addition, the principals who participated in this study believed that democracy should prioritize the common good or public interests, which is supported by theoretical frameworks (Marsh, 2007; Woods, 2011). However, whether the common good should be defined primarily as the most favorable interests of students should be subject to scrutiny to balance the interests of various school stakeholders. For example, the pursuit of high academic performance constitutes a mainstream value in Taiwanese society. One of the participants mentioned that school teachers are expected to devote extra time to prepare students for entrance examinations and often work during summer breaks for this purpose. Teachers might perceive this as an impairment of their rights. Student performance may be the most vital indicator of school effectiveness; however, as school managers, principals are also accountable for the welfare of teachers and other school members as well as the development of teachers' abilities (Lin & Lian, 2014). As mentioned, democracy is the foundation of public education. However, the pursuit of equity and social justice should be applied to the individual needs of students as well as the needs of teachers. Although democratic processes are lengthy, providing procedural justice for teachers strengthens their commitment and improves their levels of job satisfaction (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002; Mokoena, 2011).

This study determined the following dilemmas confronting school principals at elementary and junior high schools in Taiwan: an interest-based conception of democracy over the common good, failure to communicate through official channels, lack of accountability for power sharers, constraints on principals' power, struggles between participatory and representative participation, and democracy as an obstacle to school effectiveness, which resulted from problems in policy regulations, school leadership, and the shared visions of school stakeholders. For school practices, the Taiwanese government should amend policies that create accountability for teachers and other committee members or change the composition of committees to ensure representativeness in school decision-making. School leaders may introduce communication development programs and invite teachers to participate in school dialogue (Chikoko, 2009). Future research should examine the complex power dynamics in school democracy policies. Measuring the influence of each stakeholder and how different sources of power interact to affect school decision-making will allow for a feasible and practical model of school democracy to be developed.

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