Evolution of Decision-making: 
An Ethnographic Study in a 
Taiwanese Primary School

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Hsin-Jen Chen
University of Cambridge  Faculty of Education

This article examines the evolution of local decision-making at school level in a Taiwanese primary school. The mechanism of decision-making at local school has been facing a number of internal and external challenges which have transformed the core of school operation. This article identifies three stages of decision-making at school level: school-level decision-making used to be called ‘school affairs meeting’ in which all members of teaching and senior staff were entitled as commissioners to participate in and vote for pros or cons. The second stage was the establishment of school-level teacher association which had the right to negotiate with senior staff, including the head, according to the Taiwanese 1995 Teacher Act. At this stage, most school-level decision-makings had been done through both sides’ negotiation while conflicts were often to be found between two camps. In 1999, the Education Act had been revised to allow parent representatives to take part in the on-site decision-making processes of the school, which has brought some covert conflicts between parents and professionals due to diverse interests.

This study employs an ethnographic case-study approach to investigate the recent evolution of on-site decision-making, combined with documentary analysis, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Since I have been on the staff for 5 years, it was considerably easy to build good rapport with the researched. The emerging problem regarding research ethics, I may take a risk of being preoccupied bias towards the researched subjects and the school. In order to resolve this potential problem, I tried my best to collect various aspects, including the accounts from senior staff, teaching professionals and parents to make triangulation. The research argues that it could be an alternative to investigate the school where, if possible, you need to/are a(n) member/insider to ‘grasp’ the reality of on-site culture.

The research project suggests that the headteacher, as the leading figure of the school, should engage in more informal negotiations with trilateral camps (i.e. senior administrators, teaching professionals and parents) so that he could lead the processes of decision-making successfully.

Introduction

Change in schools is rarely politically neutral. Interests are enhanced or threatened by change. ‘Conflict and change are inevitably interlocked as any re-distribution of power and privilege will be sought by some and resisted by others’ (Kelly, 1969: 69). Furthermore, change does not usually arise within a set of social relationships which have been previously untouched by competition or dissension. Advocates and opponents typically ‘dig in’ along established lines of ideological dispute (Ball, 1987: 78).
The vicissitudes of school management in Taiwan are significant. Traditionally, school leaders have had a powerful influence on school members. George Terry (1960) defines the leadership as ‘how to influence people to strive willingly for the group goal’ (quoted in Leithwood et al., 1992: 6). Furthermore, the power of traditional leadership seems to be mighty. Nevertheless, owing to a series of educational reforms in Taiwan, the ways of the school operation, decision-making and leadership style have been considerably shifted.

School management has faced more challenges nowadays. On the one hand, the new trend drives globalisationally towards accountability or effectiveness and towards the employment of multi-participation to attempt to make schools more democratic and competitive. On the other hand, such democratic ‘imperatives’ re-structure the power game of school operation and create the need for critical awareness of the external imposition on school administration. With democratic voices from the external sources, the school is getting more emphases on local community’s needs or even on international changes and tidal currents.

This article examines the evolution of local decision-making at school level in a Taiwanese primary school. The mechanism of decision-making at local school has been facing a number of internal and external challenges which have transformed the core of school operation. This article identifies three stages of decision-making at school level: school-level decision-making used to be called ‘school affairs meeting’ in which all members of teaching and senior staff were entitled as commissioners to participate in and vote for pros or cons. The second stage was the establishment of school-level teacher association which had the right to negotiate with senior staff, including the head, according to the Taiwanese Teacher Act in 1995. At this stage, most school-level decision-makings had been done through both sides’ negotiation while conflicts were often to be found between two camps. In 1999, the Education Act had been revised to allow parent representatives to take part in the on-site decision-making processes of the school, which has brought some covert conflicts between parents and professionals due to diverse interests.

**Literature Review and Research Background**

The following I would like to examine different kinds of school-based decision-making; that is, whole-staff school affairs committee meeting, the introduction of school-based teachers’ association and finally, parental involvement in the process of school decision-making.

**Whole-staff school affairs committee meeting**

The mechanism of whole-staff school affairs committee meeting had a long history. Regarding the whole-staff school affairs committee meeting at the investigated site, as a ritual, all staff greeted each other first and then administrators (staff in Academic Studies Office, Discipline Office, General Affairs Office and Guidance Office) in turn gave a report of administrative affairs and conveyed the requirements from the local educational authority (LEA). The headteacher emphasized the whole staff worked together as a team or a family. Sometimes, one or two teaching staff will propose questions but in fact, most of the time
The head teacher or some of them chat privately in the meeting. The larger the teaching staff the less communication (cf. King, 1983).

The whole-staff school affairs committee meeting was a regular event in the researched school. The main purpose of staff meetings, as McLaren (1993, p. 121) points out, could be an occasion to “discuss problems of morale, to provide information on forthcoming workshops and events, and to serve as a collective forum to signify unity”. However, Gronn (1988) maintains that “it is a time when teachers relax, expecting to listen to the principal addressing them, and is not normally seen as an opportunity for discussion or debate” (p. 301).

The whole-staff school affairs committee meeting are characterized by a high level of participation in decision-making which makes teachers feel a sense of community (Acker, 1999). In Acker’s case study, she describes how the staff in the investigated school share and discuss in the staffroom or in staff meetings and every member feels that he/she is fully participating in decision-making. Thus, collaboration and participation are highly valued.

However, Rudduck’s study (1991) uncovers that teachers’ attitudes toward staff meetings seem to be indifferent. As one teacher points out:

Eventually, things come down to a staff meeting. The head does his best. He suggests what he wants to happen and then there’s a strained silence because no-one else has been involved. … It’s disastrous (Rudduck, 1991, p. 127).

In this case, the staff room meeting is dominated by the headteacher so that teachers feel excluded from involvement. This could correspond to what Stephen Ball (1987) calls “pseudo-participation”. In Ball’s study (1987), some teachers recognize their rights of participation are merely, in Lukes’ term (1977), a political “ritual”, which lends support to what is in reality the existence of authoritative leadership, by bestowing “spurious” legitimacy on it. This seems to correspond to what Ball coins “pseudo-participation” in school decision-making. Ball cites one teacher’s statement as follows:

I think there was a lot of feeling last year in terms of the new head’s appointment and the fact there was no involvement. A lot of staff felt they ought to have a lot more say in the kind of head they had; and there sort of wasn’t any formal way for them to have any— formally they had no say whatsoever. But the head did maintain that she listened to what the staff wanted (Ball, 1987, p. 126).

In this case, a headteacher’s leadership is a potential source of institutional conflict. Likewise, using qualitative inquiry, Blase & Anderson (1995) indicate that principals’ authoritarian leadership tends to have a negative effect on teachers’ perspectives. According to their analysis, 42 teachers use terms such as apathetic, alienated and less satisfied to express their attitude toward the principals’ leadership (p. 37). 76 teachers report that they are “fearful” of control-oriented principals if they would like to make suggestions on school improvement (ibid.). The effects of exposure to an authoritative leadership has been well documented by
Lewin et al. (1939) who point out that the headteacher’s authoritative leadership prevents the staff from voicing their opinion.

The introduction of school-based teachers’ association
Compared with some western countries’ history of the development of teachers’ unions or teachers’ associations, the establishment of teachers’ associations in Taiwan seems to be later by a century. Due to the step of democratization moving forward very fast in Taiwan, teachers’ associations have remarkably influenced the school-level management. Teachers are empowered to organize themselves into strong associations to address their concerns about their conditions of workplaces and their professional activities – aspects of teaching that are in fact inextricably bound together (Ironside & Seifert, 1995).

With a series of political reforms and democratization in the late 1980s and 1990s in Taiwan (cf. Law, 2002), the educational development has been considerably influenced and corresponded to economic and socio-political transformation. Gutmann (1987) and Carr and Harnett (1996) have pointed out the notion of the ‘double democratization’ of society and education as two indivisibly and intrinsically related parts. It could be argued that the enactment of the Teacher Act could be viewed as the production of socio-political and educational transition. Borrowing from Lawn’s (1996, pp. 89-90) analysis, the implementation of the Teacher Act and establishment of the teachers’ association, could be viewed as ‘a watershed in the political and work relations of education’ in which ‘direct intervention and control of teaching [and school administration] has replaced the old idea of consensus in policy making and management’. According to the Teacher Act, teachers have the legal right to bargain the terms and conditions of their employment regarding educational policies at the school, local and national levels. The following several findings have been identified based on my ethnographic data in which a new educational ecology both at the national and school-site levels has emerged.

The introduction of the teachers’ association into the school governance has brought about a significant impact on school ecology. Since the implementation of the Teacher Act has recognized that the school-based teachers’ association has the right to negotiate with the senior management group, and this has had breakthrough the longstanding domination of the single sub-group over school management. In other words, the teachers’ association shares the power game with the administrative bloc.

One of the significant changes in school administration turned the managerial authority into participatory management. On the one hand, it could be argued that the teachers’ organization is regarded a threat even a rival on managerial authority; on the other hand, it may be better understood as ‘a flanking movement’ that restructures the force of school management (Kerchner & Mitchell, 1988).

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7 According to Barber (1992), the development of British National Union of Teachers (NUT) can be traced to 1870s.
Trilateral system of decision-making mechanism: parental participation in school-based decision-making

From the ideal point of view, parents and teachers have much in common in that both, supposedly, wish things to occur for the best interests of the child; but in fact, parents and teachers usually live in conditions of mutual distrust and enmity. Both wish the child well, but it is such a different kind of well that conflict must inevitably arise over it. The fact seems to be that parents and teachers are natural enemies, predestined each for the discomfiture of the other (Waller, 1932: 68).

In recent years in many countries, school-based management and lay participation in local school policy-making have been developed (Deem, 1994: 35). The introduction of parental involvement in school governance may raise school effectiveness and improvement due to external forces imposing on school administration. Likewise, in his work, *School-based Decision-making and Management: International Developments*, Caldwell (1990) identifies that current educational trends in the globe tends to develop a decentralised system of school governance, and in particular, more and more state governments require all public schools to institute school councils composed of teachers, parents and other members of the school community. Taiwan, as a member of the global village, is inevitable to be influenced by international education developments and trends. Thus, the Amendment of Compulsory Education in 1999, at the same year with the implementation of headteacher selection, legislatively empower more parental involvement in the internal decision making processes of the school, which resulted in wild participation in the school affairs committee, with representatives of the local school community, including senior staff, teaching staff and parents.

The roles of three parties, senior administrative team, parent representatives and teacher delegates, were seen as changing significantly in relation to each other. This committee would determine the school’s educational needs and priorities, deploy the resources and develop a management plan. The headteacher, assuming the role of the chief executive officer (CEO) of an enterprise, would play an essential role in the committee, assisting it in formulating the school development plan, while securing its implementation with the collective support of the whole staff.

To sum up, the processes of school decision-making through different mechanisms tend to be diverse as discussed above. In this article I would like to explore the evolution of school decision-making at the researched school in Taiwanese context. In particular, I will centre on how the headteacher, as a leader of the investigated school, ‘manage’ the processes of decision-making at the different phases.

**Methods**

This project is basically of an ethnographic approach, via observing, interviewing, and collecting written documents, in order to portray the reality of school assembly. More specially, the foci of the routine of assembly will be on the relationship between organisational structure and individual agency to delve into the daily, explicit or implicit,
practice of school life. As to research sampling, this project employs the case-study approach to investigate a Taiwan’s primary school as my fieldwork site. This school is located in northern Taiwan, and composed of 48 classes, about 1500 pupils and 100 staff. It has been established for more than eighty years. The headteacher is on the leadership of this school for around four years. Regarding data collection, participant observation and interviewing are employed for this study. In order to enter the investigated site, I get permission from the headteacher before the school starts. The duration for data gathering is 10 months (from 30 August 2001 to 28 June 2002) based on intensive participant observation and interviewing. In the matter of research subjects, administrators and teaching staff are included. It is my first task to build good rapport with the researched from the time I first entered the investigated site. After getting permission from the head, I was introduced to the whole staff to whom I explained the purpose of my initial research purpose in order to obtain their cooperation. Before interviewing the researched, I gained their consent and told them that the interviewing data will be used only for academic application and would not be leaked out.

Findings and Discussions
Based on qualitative data, the evolution of school decision-making mechanism could be divided into three phrases: whole-staff school affairs committee with powerful leadership, the introduction of school-based teachers’ association highlighting teachers’ negotiation rights, and finally, trilateral system of school governing body influenced by the name of parents as clients as well as management partners.

Before 1995: Whole-staff School Affairs Committee Meeting

Reinforcing collegial intimacy
At the Riverside the staff meeting is a moment for collegial intimacy to flourish. There are chats, conversations both serious and light. Especially birthday celebrations once a month are marked as a “joyful occasion”, as my notes frequently mentioned. Some examples from the field notes convey the sense of togetherness. For instance, the celebration for every member’s birthday held in the staff meeting is organized by the Riverside Teacher Association. The atmosphere was very pleasant and warm. With the music of “Happy Birthday to You” as the background, everyone enjoyed the music and sing together, claps following the rhythm and the meeting was full of jollification. The president of Riverside teacher association said, “we would organize the birthday celebrations in future every month and the celebration would be held at last week’s staff meeting. We hoped everyone could enjoy the celebration even though you were not the “birthday star” on this joyful occasion. Now let’s sang the song together…”

“Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to our colleagues. Happy birthday to you …” (repeated)

In the process of celebration, every birthday star received a present and a flower from
the headteacher. And he/she had a photo token with the head. Although it lasted for around 40 minutes beyond the scheduled, 20 minutes, “it was worth it to celebrate our colleagues’ birthdays” as the headteacher said. (Observation notes)

This scenario made teachers’ school life more joyful and left a sense of “busyness” (Ball, 1990) and “overwork” (Cusack, 1993) behind for a moment. The idea of celebrating our colleagues’ birthday(s) was to agglomerate all the members’ affections and to enjoy the cheerful atmosphere. More specifically, with regular monthly birthday celebrations, the whole staff looked forward to the next celebration with great anticipation because they highlight the significance of collective cohesion. As the President of Riverside Teacher Association put it:

The staff birthday celebrations had been held for two years and most teachers regarded it as a way to draw the whole staff closer… When the music was played, I got an excited feeling about how we were becoming closer. I thought it was a way to cohere our colleagues’ friendship and collegiality.

Collegial intimacy could be found at the occasion of staff meetings where staff collegiality had gradually been strongly cohered. The benefit of collegiality for organisational health/development was essential. As Shulman (1989) maintains, “teacher collegiality is not merely important for the improvement of morale and teacher satisfaction… but are absolutely necessary if we wish teacher professionalism to be of the highest order” (with some modification, quoted in A. Hargreaves, 1991, p. 47). In short, collegial working relationships are the vital element in school operations to some extent (cf. Rudduck, 1991).

Transmitting information through pseudo participation

The staff morning meeting in the investigated school was like a routinized meeting and the main purpose was to transmit the prescripts from the local educational authority (LEA) and to require teaching staff to follow them, even though senior staff might deliver the attitude of “wish”. As the same program had been delivered ever since it was organized four years ago, “the process of staff meeting became “monotonous” and “nothing special” as usual”, as one class teacher emphasized. She continued to demonstrate her impression of the meeting:

Administrative staff reported some information and requirements from the LEA and the head didn’t monopolize the meeting, but I found myself expected as a robot to receive trashy information. … I hoped the meeting could be like an occasion in which we teaching staff could discuss some issues, such as the topic of post-selection…or even to make some decisions on the process of staff recruitment…(A year 4 class teacher)

The staff morning meeting at Riverside was typically dominated and controlled by the administrators and the teaching staff often found themselves in a passive role, becoming recipients of information rather than participants in discussion. This situation was very similar to what Ball (1987) describes:
The appearance of openness is in effect a moment of closure. The degree of formality which surrounds these events [i.e. staff meetings, my addition], the situational constraints entered into, and the ritual re-enactments of hierarchy that they display normally provide for a preemption of available forms and topics of talk (p. 237-8).

However, some of the teaching staff considered that the staff morning meeting was a regular gathering in which the mission of senior staff and teaching staff was different: the former for delivering/retailing information or prescripts from the LEA while the latter just for listening and receipt instead of discussion on various issues. This is due to limited time. As one teacher explained:

The staff morning meeting lasted merely for 20 minutes and there were many administrators’ reporting and we hoped the meeting time could be controlled within the schedule. If the meeting time was exceeded, the next routines, cleaning time and class-teacher time, would be diminished. … We hoped the time for meeting would be shorter so that we could make the most of the time to prepare curriculum and instruction or other matters, like grading pupils’ assignments. (A year 3 class teacher)

One senior member of staff with 20-year teaching experience added that the staff morning meetings were quite similar in several schools, no matter which the previous or the present school was. “I had become used to listening and note-taking from administrators…I did not agree with the idea that staff morning meeting was for participant discussion.” In a sense, “the staff meeting is typically an opportunity for the official definition of the school to be rehearsed and re-enacted. The teachers are cast in the position of audience” (Ball, 1987, p. 239). Gradually, the staff morning meeting becomes a non-decision but information-given occasion. Perhaps Gronn has made a fair statement:

What the transcripts disclose is standard, unspectacular, and mundane, and replicated in hundreds of [staff] meetings across the state school system. An administrator has directed his staff to see part of the organisational world in his terms. He has defined the situation and they are expected to fall in line with that view (Gronn, 1983, p. 12).

In this sense, participation can be reduced to an appearance of participation without access to any “decision making”, and this could be viewed as “pseudo-participation” (Lukes, 1977; Ball, 1987). In Robert Merton’s term, the manifest function of staff meetings is to convey administrative information and requirements but the hidden function is to transmit information, as a political ritual, to legitimate what the meetings would be and should be “no reaction” (Saunders, 1981).

**Building a sense of community**

As regarding the staff morning meetings, it provides a regular occasion in which school staff can make contact and break the “cellular” organisation of school instead of a perceived sense of “isolation” (Lortie, 1975). It is also embedded in one another and can be mutually
reinforcing in the signals they set for teachers’ professional lives and collegial relationships (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1996). During the period of the staff meeting, teachers and administrative staff exchange their different opinions on some agendas and this seems to develop a sense of “shared professional community” (A. Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996, p. 10) or “solidarity” (Jeffrey & Woods, 1998). For instance:

The staff meeting held once a week provided an occasion in which we got much more familiarized with other colleagues, especially those who were not working in the same year group or under the same subject. There were around 100 staffing members in this school and everyone was busy teaching; however, the staff meeting could be viewed as a good opportunity by which we could share opinions and communicate with each other. In this sense, I thought we indeed worked together in the school rather than worked in each classroom separately. (A year 2 class teacher)

This motto, “we are family”, as the head emphasizes, has become the ethos of the investigated school. In this rationale the staff meeting emphasizes community and harmony, which may be also influenced by Confucianism. It embodies claims about consensus and collective endeavor to bind school members together.

McLaren (1993) maintains that the promotion of staff morale could be achieved through the periodical staff meetings, serving as a collective forum to signify unity. As his field notes shows, teachers’ complaints can be rescued by other teachers inquiring what was wrong and then encouraging them to “hang tough” and “stick it through” (p. 121). In this respect, the staff meeting could be viewed to “revitalize teachers’ morale” and to “regulate the discharge of collectively accumulated anxiety and emotional distress” (ibid.). This situation also happened in the researched school where teachers valued the significance of “sharing” and “empathy”. For example:

When I talked to other teachers about the pupils’ problematic behavior, it made your problems seemed all the less troublesome because you knew that others were also facing similar cases. … And then we shared each another’s experiences about dealing with such troublesome children. … I felt much more relaxed even though we did not find better solutions to handle disruptive pupils…(A year 6 class teacher).

**Coming into conflict due to diverse interests**

Although the staff meeting regularly takes place, the hidden tension/conflict between senior and teaching staff can be unearthed on some occasions. The tension or conflict, to some extent, is related to the divergent interests between the two camps. The senior staff’s concern is to defend their traditional positions while the teaching staff aims to pursue their personal interests. During the process of interest-pursuing, the conflict will emerge. As Mack & Snyder (1971) argue, “tension … may induce the demands which are made upon the existing pie” (p. 12). For example:
Two years ago I was the president of the teacher association…once I proposed that all senior staff except directors had to serve as duty teachers in turn as other teaching staff did. And this proposal had been reached to conclusion last semester between the director of disciplinary affairs (DDA) and me (on behalf of all members of the teacher association). But you knew, the DDA went so far as to forget the conclusion…then I lost my temper accusing him of being a “tape recorder” who remembered every word we made except the conclusion … later on the DDA said that I had spoken evil of him and he would retain the right of legal prosecution. … Finally, the headteacher persuaded both to concede…(May, a former president of the Riverside teacher association, currently year 2 class teacher).

To some extent, conflict is the nature of the respective roles of the parties in decision-making with respect to different interests. As Baldridge (1971, p. 15-6) puts it, the conflict processes may occur when one interest group tries to gain advantage over the other. We also should take into account the power relationship between two parties. In this case, May, on behalf of the teacher association, strove for members’ interests while the DDA might feel that his authority had been undermined (cf. Smith, 1998, p. 54). If we see the school as a complex communal society, there will tend to be more direct, face-to-face interpersonal conflict (Baldridge, 1971, p. 15). After the conflict incident, May would not speak to the DDA because the hatred had been implanted into both. Whilst it is probably possible to criticize a member, s/he won’t like you, and of course, the colleague will treat you in the same way (Smith, 1998).

Another incidence of conflict happened between the head of year 6 class teachers and the officers of disciplinary affairs (ODA). The source of conflict was from respective perspective on “flexible work”:

The head of year 6: on that day all the year 6 students and teachers had a school trip and we had a good time… You knew, a few days later the ODA came to me and required the class-meeting minutes of each year 6 class to make up. I replied that it was impossible. … At today’s staff meeting I without hesitation raised my question about making up the class-meeting minutes. I thought that some administrators viewed themselves as “experienced old hands” who I blamed as “one-dimensional man” without flexible minds.

(After interviewing the head of year 6, I received the ODA’s explanation)
ODA: I reckoned that the cause of the conflict arising was from the lack of communicative understanding. … She (the head of year 6 class teacher) failed to understand my point of view on recording the class-meeting. My stance was to make up the minutes if year 6 class teachers would cooperate by making a time; or if they couldn’t, they could do nothing, that was all I meant. … But I felt considerable frustration about her reaction.

Such mis-understandings may bring out inter-group strife, which corresponds to what Baldridge (1971) calls, “communication fallacy”. In fact, many problems of organisational
governance are related to poor communication because the two sides do not understand each other’s views. In order to promote bilateral understanding, the channels of communication should be multi-variant and the depth of communication is needed to heighten. The purpose is to work towards a win/win situation in which the two sides are willing to respect the different standpoints and being committed to finding a mutually workable solution (cf. Brown & Ralph, 1994).

1995-1999: The introduction of school-based teachers’ association

**Conflict between senior staff and the association’s core members**

With rapid educational reforms in Taiwan during the latest decade, the educational ecology within both the macro-societal level and the micro-school context have been changing a lot. One of the significant changes is to allow teachers to organize teachers’ associations, according to the 1994 Teacher Act. While the teachers’ associations provide a public arena where the whole school staff can discuss the educational problems facing the school and take part in the process of school decision making, it may result in increased interpersonal or intergroup conflict among the staff, a breakdown of some pre-existing relationships and much interpersonal hostility (cf. Reynolds, 1991).

In the first instance of the establishment of the Riverside teachers’ association, many explicit and implicit conflicts had occurred between senior staff and the association’s central members. The former director of disciplinary affairs (DDA) recalled that some senior staff became ‘unwelcome’ figures who were even refused to have the right of being elected as the president. He stated angrily:

> What a ridiculous decision made by some activist teachers! Legally, all the teachers in one school, except the head, were qualified to be elected as commissioners or the president. I felt very disappointed and deprecated their absurd conduct. Henceforth, I never joined the association even though the present president had invited me…

In the beginning, some activist teachers of the Riverside teachers’ association had hostility towards senior staff and “they were afraid if one of the directors was elected as the president, teaching staff might lose the ‘power game’ of decision-making”, according to the former DDA. This had subsequently planted potential conflicts between some directors and central members of the teachers’ association. As Brighouse (1983) remarks, this may reflect the growing conflict of management and teaching staff relationships (p. 101). With the institution of the school-based teachers’ association, the conflict produced new divisions and resulted in “massive breakdown in communication … between senior management and staff” (Gewirtz, 1997, p. 145). According to Kerchner and Mitchell (1988), the level of conflict coupled with the length of time since the induction of unionization will be the highest degree in the first instance while it will lower because both sides endeavor to engage in conflict-reducing techniques such as smoothing, avoidance and compromise (pp. 26-27). As Seifert (1991) comments, “the cornerstone of conflict avoidance here is the openness and formality of agreed procedures on all aspects of managerial decision making, and the welcome
participation in the process of the [association] representatives” (p. 38). In fact, senior staff at the Riverside had to face the reality of the establishment of teachers’ association and tried to open the channels of communication with the association’s representatives.

Nevertheless, conflict still occurred during the formal occasions and meetings. One of the most turbulent conflict incidents took place when all the school discussed the proportion allocation of representatives of the teachers’ recruitment committee among the senior management, teaching staff and parents. The former director of academic affairs (DAA) realized the stance of the teachers’ association – wanting more representatives taking part in the committee but he still could not recognize some central members’ attitude of aggressiveness:

   It seemed that teaching staff had played the silent group … but the enactment of the Teacher Act gave them powerful support in school decision making. … I could understand they wanted to strive for one more representative in the teachers’ recruitment committee but they appeared to bloat themselves rather than to consider a more reasonable representative proportion among trilateral sides.

Nevertheless, a former president currently serving as the officer of guidance (OG) gave his opinions:

   I remembered that the first president at that time wanted to promote the status of the teachers’ association and compete with the senior/administrative group. I had to acknowledge that the association played a catalyst to wake up most colleagues to challenge the organizational hierarchy.

The nature of teachers’ associations, legally, is recognized as a kind of civil organization instead of as a formal educational organization. The former president continued to express his point of view:

   We felt that even though the school-site teachers’ association had been organized, the former headteacher and most members of senior staff viewed the organization as informal, and was even regarded as a ‘second-class organization’, ranking second to general administrative offices. Owing to this ‘organizational crisis consciousness’, we had no alternative but to challenge senior staff in order to truly obtain their recognition.

Not only core members of the teachers’ association at the researched site tended to ‘struggle for existence’ (Hall, 1999, p. 191), but also did they attempt to promote the organizational level to be recognized as a formal educational organization like other general offices. With reference to power relations, it could be argued that core members try to ‘get somewhere’ (Thompson, 1993, p. 200) in terms of organizational formalities.
Conflict and tension between members and non-members

According to the Teacher Act, teachers may make a choice of either joining the school-site teachers’ association or becoming non-members of the organization. Nevertheless, the clash between members and non-members at the researched school seems to exist since the teachers are divided into two groups. According to the statistic figures, members of the teachers’ association become the majority group in the light of the figure between membership and non-membership. The ratio may vary from year to year yet it changes slightly in the around 8 : 2 or 7 : 3.

The issue of identification can be a useful lens to investigate the distinctiveness between membership and non-membership. Tajfel & Turner (1979) maintain that individuals who define themselves to an extent in terms of their social group membership tend to seek a positive social identity. Such positive social identity could be achieved by comparing one’s own group with other groups to establish a positively valued psychological distinctiveness for the in-group. The individual member has a sense of belonging, as an emotional significance ascribed to the entitled by membership. In order to make clear intergroup differentiation, members belonging to one social group seem to favor the in-group and convey negative sensibility towards the out-group (Hewstone & Greenland, 2000). My interviewing data disclose some core members’ negative attitudes towards non-members’ perspectives on the teachers’ association:

Some non-members did not recognize our endeavor to negotiate with the senior management group. I felt very disappointed about their opinions. More startlingly, few non-members, standing in front of me, had the front to say that they could still share the outcome of the teachers’ association’s efforts as members could. Their childish attitudes really made me disgusted…(The present president interview).

A former vice president delivered a similar account of unsatisfactory views towards some non-members’ refusal to join the association:

Once I was asked to urge some non-members to reconsider joining the Riverside teachers’ association, it appeared that their major reason of unwillingness to become members was to save their money (i.e. membership fee). What a selfish and unacceptable reason. … All of our elected commissioners served our colleagues without any pay and I agreed that it was reasonable to award them with a teaching hours reduction. But some of the non-members accused us of the pursuit of self-interest if somebody was elected as a commissioner. I really felt angry about their ludicrous minds. … Right now I had nothing to comment…

Researchers (e.g. Fiske, 2002; Drury & Stott, 2001; Brewer, 1999) have pointed out that intergroup biases become more pronounced when group members strongly identify with the in-group and when the relative status of the two groups is salient. In this case, core members’ hostility towards some non-members’ was considerably manifest owing to ‘a feeling of non-
members’ distorted prejudice’ (a present commissioner’s perspective). Likewise, non-members might be perceived as “unwelcome” (a non-member’s comments).

As we have discussed so far, apart from tension remaining between core members and the senior management team, it also emerged between core members and some non-members. Members’ formation of in-group identification, as we discussed above, could be related to intergroup conflict in organizational behavior studies (Hennessy & West, 1999). The source of hidden conflict could mainly lie in the allocation and selection of positions approaching the end of school year. One activist non-member, Ken, serving as a subject teacher for teaching Art, mentioned that inter-group conflict between core members and non-members could be traced to one critical incident a few years ago while the Riverside teachers’ association was being established:

I recalled that … the decision about each teacher’s teaching hours per week had been made between core members and the DAA but they did not consult our (non-members) opinions. … I felt we were outsiders of the school and also angry about their behind-closed-doors negotiations. … According to the Teacher Act, each member’s interest in the school should not be sacrificed but we felt we were the victims…

Indeed, conflict often occurs due to limited resources (here they refer to the teaching hours allocated to each member) (Cox, 1996; Bolman & Deal, 1984). Most decisions that organizations make involve the allocation of resources that are scarce. The Teacher Act indicates that the school-site teachers’ association has the right to negotiate with senior administrators regarding any school affair or teacher’s interests. Since most teachers as members, core representatives of the teachers’ association often proclaimed that they on behalf of most members/teachers negotiated with senior staff. In this case, non-members became the minority group while the majority group, those members, might hold advantages in the power structure of school organization (cf. Randolph & Blackburn, 1989). Such a situation could explain how intergroup conflict between the majority and minority group happens. Ken further remarked the power structure was asymmetrical:

They (members) seemed to take an overwhelming stance in the process of school decision making with senior managers. I reckoned the decision could be a form of ‘majority violence’ – it appeared that we, non-members, became silent lambs…

Such comments by Ken could be viewed as the ‘minority-group-size-inequality hypothesis’ (Blau, 1977; Blalock, 1967) which means that the minority often faces interests being deprived. Nevertheless, one possible solution to resolve intergroup tensions relies on the third party’s mediation (Daft, 2002). At Riverside, the head or the director participating in negotiation with the representatives of the teachers’ association usually played an essential role in intercession. Even though the head cannot join the association in accordance with the Teacher Act, the present head placed emphasis on the traditional value – harmony. As he conveyed his idea at the staff meeting:
I realized that everyone here was concerned about the next year’s post arrangement at the time approaching the end of the school year. As usual, some representatives of the teachers’ association would discuss how to calculate ‘points’ based on the on-site experiences at Riverside as the base to select posts. Here I would like to stress that some non-members’ interests could not be ignored during the negotiation of point calculation. I hoped that the result of post arrangement might satisfy everyone’s wish and we could still live at Riverside harmonically.

In sum, the tensions between members and non-members of the teachers’ association at the investigated site brought about the psychological ‘boundary’ amongst school members. From the micropolitical perspective, inter-group conflicts are generated due to diverse interests or competition for limited resources. With the establishment of the Riverside teachers’ association, it can be regarded as ‘school reorganization engineering’ (Pettit and Hind, 1992) while it also results in intergroup tensions between the membership and non-membership. The head, as the leader, needs to be aware of staff relationships and school climate, especially in the hidden conflict among members. If necessary, the head should ask both parties and collaboratively work towards a win-win solution. If the solution satisfactory to the both sides cannot be reached, the head may hold the final decision which seems to make a compromise between social justice and democracy.

After 1999: Trilateral system of decision-making mechanism: parental participation

**Conflict between teacher delegates and parent representatives**

While the rhetoric has maintained that teachers should treat parents as partners in their children’s education (cf. Epstein, 1995; Bastiani, 1993), teachers may experience anxiety or even conflict about their relationships and interactions with parents. Particularly with the introduction to parental participation in school-based management in the first instance, there is a tension between the teacher professionalism and the forces of parental empowerment regarding the processes of school decision-making. As Bowe et al. (1992) point out one senior staff interviewed delivered his awareness of such tension:

> I must admit, I am in a divided situation here, because I do believe very fundamentally that teachers should have the right to decide the best way of organising something to achieve the aims. … On the other hand, I do believe that we are serving a public. Now if a public, who now have four governors, whereas the teachers only have two, if the public don’t see eye to eye with the teachers on something you have the makings of a really big row… (p. 52).

In this case, it seems that teachers encounter parents’ challenges and disagreement. Similar situation had been found at the researched school in Taiwan. Back to the practical context at the investigated school, some explicit arguments had been found between teacher delegates and parent representatives. A teacher delegate who stood on behalf of the teachers’ association complained about the over-demands from parent delegates:
The president of the parent association, as a member of the school affairs committee, often raised some ‘unreasonable requests’ for our teachers to arrange some extracurricular activities, even during weekends, such as organising a basketball club or a calligraphic society. More offensive, she accused us of lacking in educational enthusiasm and being unqualified as educational practitioners. …You know, it seemed that they trespassed against our teaching professionals…

Taking a pessimistic view of introducing parents into such a committee, it could be inevitable to face parents’ ‘selfish’ thoughts regarding their pupils’ learning. This could be echoed in what Sexton (1987: 4) predicts that his proposal, ‘Our School: A Radical Policy’, stressing parent power, will be ‘bound to offend an enormous vested interest, namely that great army of educational practitioners’. (quoted in Ball, 1990: 45, italic my revised).

Obviously, owing to parent representatives’ requests, some teachers possessed, to some extent, the attitude of hostility towards parental participation in decision-making mechanism. Faced with the introduction of ‘new consumerism’ (Murphy, 1998) in education, relating to consumer control through change to school governance, has led to a sense of ‘deprofessionalisation’ amongst teachers (cf. Densmore, 1987: 148-9; A. Hargreaves, 2000: 231). The basic assumption of introducing parental involvement in school governance lies in the philosophy in reference to parents as consumers and ‘encouraging the consumer to expect and demand that all educational bodies do the best job possible’ and the ‘ [educational] standards will rise in all schools as we introduce a competitive spirit’ (Backer, 1987, quoted in Macbeth et al., 1995: 2). This viewpoint can be related to Kogan’s (1986) ‘consumerist control mechanism’ which is based on parental partnership whereby the parental vision of their children’s schooling can be shared for the school (cf. Brown, 1990: 76-9).

In this case, it seems that the teaching professionals were forced by more parental pressures into additional efforts, such as the requests for after-school or weekend activities to be imposed, and propelled teachers out of a sense of professional dedication. Or as Gewirtz (1997) points out, the decision to cast parents in the role of consumers in the educational workplace demands the destruction of alternative form of school administration, including professional autonomy. This could be viewed as a new form of school governance to dilute teacher autonomy. Caldwell (1990) argues that power inequalities between those inside and outside school governance have been changed with the introduction of parental participation. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) maintain that such change of organisational operation aims at pushing members to direct growing amounts of effort to value consumer awareness. As the president of the school parent association delivered her remarks:

Since the government allowed parents to enter the school decision-making circle, it represented that schoolteachers had to respect parental involvement and voices as regard school affairs. More importantly, we have the right to express our needs and recommendations to improve, even to restructure the school status quo. … I realised that such implementation of parental participation in school-based management would bring about, in a degree, teachers’ dissatisfaction towards parents’ opinions. Yet I did
believe that the school was serving for the general public not merely determined by
schoolteachers per se.

Perhaps, this was the first time to empower parents to take part in school-based decision-
making committee, the relations between teacher delegates and parent representatives were
tensional and need to progressively build up ‘workable and peaceful’ rules of power game. In
a sense, such unclear relations between parents and teachers in this Taiwanese school may be
echoed in what Kogan (1986: 51) has pointed out that the consumerist control does not make
clear the role relations between teachers and parents or between parents and boards of
education.

**Collaborative possibilities though diverse interests and perspectives**

So far we have discussed, the device of parent delegates entering the highest school policy-
making circle, on the bright side, positively introduced community resources and the
philosophy of parental involvement in school management. The former DAA who had
become an acting headteacher in another school, commented on the advantage of the
introduction of parental involvement into the school policy-making committee:

> We have to value parents as our educational partners rather than our supervisors. The
> approach of the trilateral system could bring in parental voices and demands which can
> be viewed as major reformative forces due to their different perspectives on education
> and school operation.

Obviously, organisational change and school reform is an extremely complex process.
Particularly teaching professionals need to open up their minds to face more and more
external demands and challenges. As one teacher representative commented:

> The form of the school governing committee can be viewed as a team whereby we take
> an opportunity to collaborate with administrators and parents and also learn different
> perspectives from some of them. In my view, the recent educational reform places
> emphasis on the school as a learning organisation in which teachers should transform
> their previous passive roles into active positions. Especially, our teachers may
> experience the reality of participatory democracy – encountering more parents’ dissents
> and challenges.

Parental involvement, to some extent, could be regarded as the ‘desirability of a fully
participative democracy’ (Vincent, 1996: 8). Such involvement in the management of state
institutions would allow citizens (i.e. parents) to develop a sense of ‘ownership’ over
organisations which are previously perceived as alienating (Dale, 1989; Seddon et al, 1990).

The former DAA indicated that both teachers and parents needed to open up bilateral minds in
order to break through two sides’ dissents. As Bastiani (1993) has pointed out:
[The] successful schools go well beyond the basic legal requirements to develop effective, two-way communication, are accessible in a variety of ways. … and above all, [to] build a sense of shared identity and common purposes – the beginning, at least, of a genuine partnership (p. 103).

Indeed, perhaps the both sides, teaching professionals and local parents, need a period of time to establish bilateral understanding about diverse standpoints and interests. Since parental participation in school-based decision-making is an irresistible trend, educational practitioners should learn how to deal with diverse and complex clientele in order to handle social uncertainty, reduce anxiety and pressure, and above all, obtain parental respects due to professional performance and judgement. The head expressed his vision of school management in relation to school-community development:

We are now facing a time in which schoolteachers needed to build much closer relationships with parents … and the parental involvement in the process of policy-making could be viewed as an arena in which teachers understood more about parental needs and expectation towards school administration and development. In my view, it was also a way in which the school had to build closer relationship with the local community. Parents, not only could play the role of supervisors overseeing the school management, but also they could work with us to provide better educational ideas, resources and support to our next generations.

As Hargreaves & Goodson (1996) maintain, a new relationship between school members and parents is needed where teachers may learning how to engage with parents in relationships of mutual or reciprocal learning and sharing each other’s point of view. The idea is to regard parents as co-workers rather than as superintendents to re-build new school governance and to support children’s learning together.

**Limitations of parental commitment**

Verhoeven & Heddegem (1999) maintain that parents are, generally, insufficiently aware of their rights and obligations in the participatory body. Even though the president of parental association, sometimes, raised some inquiries to teachers’ representatives during the meeting of school affairs committee, most of parental delegates, tended to adopt a mouth-shut manner and refused to express their opinion in this formal and open occasion. As the vice president of parental association maintained:

In such an open occasion, it was very easy to hurt teachers’ faces if you did say something against their advice or opinion. So I tried to keep silent and would not express much diverse points of view regarding school affairs. Above all, teachers are professionals in education and school management compared with us.

In this case, this might be due to the Chinese or Asian parents’ *politeness* (Gao et al., 1996;
Leung & Yuen, 2001) which superficially puts emphasis on teaching profession in educational administration. That is to say, lay participation in the process of school decision-making seems to be subordinate. To some extent, it may retrospect to the impact of Confucius, who has been recognised as the teacher of all teachers. Indirectly, the teacher status in Confucian societies/countries seems to be considerable high. With the traditional idea implanting in the general public, parents regard teachers as teaching and educational ‘experts’ (cf. Hsu, 2001) with high status and informative knowledge in school management and primary pedagogy. Owing to the implicit impact of traditionally cultural values, parental delegates may become the teachers’ silent partners -- maintaining a respectful distance from the teacher (cf. Shimahara & Sakai, 1995). Nevertheless, the construction of partnerships with parents could be a way of encouraging a ‘new professional development’ whereby school insiders need to conform the educational trend in order to promote partner relationships between the school and the community. If the form of relationship between parental and teaching representatives appears to be unbalanced, it could not be helpful to restructure school culture and management.

Even though the former DAA revealed that the school needed to make efforts to value parental participation and opinion, parental delegates often stated that they acted as ‘rubber stamps’ due to a sense of pseudo-participation.

I often felt that we just sat in the committee meeting and listened to what school administrators’ reports about school affairs. Before the meeting, I really had no idea about the agenda until occasionally I got the written data or documents. Most of time they (administrators) talked and discussed about some educational jargons, like school-based curriculum development or something else. … Anyway, if possible, I hoped that I would not do this job again next year (a parental delegate interviewed).

In this case, it seemed that school administrators did not provide sufficient information related to forthcoming school affairs or changes to parental representatives attending the school affairs committee. Jennings (1981: 40) points out that there are three ‘gatekeeping functions’ made by school administrators during the school council’s meeting, such as information monopoly, issue control and manipulation of alternatives.

We often talk about the partnership in education, of course, parents have a right to expect schools to provide good education, and that is why we are undertaking radical reforms of the education system. But perhaps we lay insufficient stress on the responsibilities of parents in that partnership (Baker, 1987, quoted in Bastiani, 1993: 111).

Nevertheless, it could a dilemma for educational practitioners to face a series of education reforms particularly regarding parental participation in school-based management. They may be afraid that their professional image would be undermined by lay involvement in school operation whereas parents feel that they will become marginal members in the school affairs committee due to some limitations mentioned above.
Conclusion

In this article I try to explore some salient characteristics of three stages of school decision-making. At the first phase at the investigated school, it was the whole-staff school affairs committee meeting in which the school culture presented a more harmonic relations among the members of school staff while the headteacher seemed to dominate the process of decision-making. Such leadership dominance of the staff meeting could correspond to the legitimacy of organisational hierarchy. However, it has been criticised by educational researchers since such a traditional leadership fails to create a democratic atmosphere of school policy-making. Nevertheless, the whole-staff committee meeting had its positive advantages such as the formation of community and the reciprocal sharing of sentiments among school staff.

Since the Teacher Act had implemented in 1995, the school-based teachers’ association had a significant impact on policy-making at school level. The research findings have identified that activist members of the Riverside teachers’ association summoned more colleagues to join, whereas some tensions had been formed between members and non-members, including a few directors. Although the head attempted to act as the mediator to mitigate overt disagreement between the two sides concerned, the crack seemed to be still existent and it may become larger and larger if the two sides’ conflicts continue on and on. Overall, the construction of teachers’ association, in a sense, could be viewed as a milestone of educational change in policy making and educational management. With its legal power, teachers are empowered to voice their professional viewpoints to affect the emergence of education policy through collective negotiation and bargaining.

With the implementation of the Amendment of Compulsory Education in 1999, the political ecology of school-based decision-making had undergone a critical shift. The introduction to parental participation in school-based management, ideally, tends to build partnerships with local parents involving in the mechanism of school-based decision-making. According to my qualitative data revealed, however, teachers may encounter professional crisis with external demands and pressures. As A. Hargreaves (2000) maintains, ‘if teachers want to become professionally stronger, they must now open themselves up and become more publicly vulnerable and accessible’ (p. 232). On the other hand, such top-down process of mandating educational change may be viewed as a learning opportunity whereby educational practitioners need to re-learn how to cope with external pressures and develop new professional techniques and communicational skills through in-service workshops and training (Bailey, 2000). In order to achieve ‘real’ partnerships with parents, the school has to empower parents’ right and provide sufficient information on school operation and management so that the parental delegates could feel a sense of ‘authentic participation’ in school-based management.

References


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