School-Based Management in Oman: Principals' Views and Understanding

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

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

The idea of school based management (SBM) is known by many different names surfacing across the globe (Moore, 2009). The aim of many of these initiatives is to promote innovation, allow schools to be more responsive to parents' wishes, provide students with expanded educational opportunities, and encourage more effective and efficient use of school resources (Briggs & Wohlstetter, 1999). According to Hanson (1990); Mohrman and Wohlstetter (1994); Czubaj (1999), in SBM system, central administration shifts decision making authority and responsibility for budget, personnel and curriculum from to the school level with a view to improving educational practices.

Furthermore, SBM system is a popular strategy that came out of the school reform movement, defined as the devolution of decision making authority to the school site (Oswald, 1995). In addition Adolphine (2008) SBM as a structure used to transfer relational power to schools, to be an ideal strategy for countering bureaucratic obstacles. Several studies (e.g. Caldwell, 2005; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Lewis, 2006; Malen et al., 1990) have found a relationship between school performance and school based management.

In short, the SBM system can empower school administrations and school teachers, increase participation in decision making, and provide opportunities to share authority at the school level. This has resulted in a healthier administrative environment leading to more efficient and effective schools with quality education (Gamage, 1998).

SBM reforms around the world are inevitably different from each other. Furthermore, governments differ of SBM, while the programs lie along a continuum in terms of the degree to which decision making is devolved to the local level; some devolve only a single area of autonomy, whereas others go further and devolve the power to hire and fire teachers and authority over substantial resources (World Bank, 2007). Kim, (2005) emphasized that from the viewpoint of the principal there have been some limits in the study regarding the implementation of SBM. Thus, the discussion of the implementation of SBM system is necessary.

Furthermore, Santibanez (2007) pointed out that a small number of these more rigorous studies support the claims that SBM system improves access to schooling and slightly reduces dropout and repetition rates, and evidence on SBM system effects on student achievement is mixed. In addition, Somech (2002) & Kim (2005) indicated that because the voice of the principal in the previous studies had been neglected, more research is needed to examine the principals' role in participative management. Duke (2005) also re-emphasized that more research is therefore needed to learn how principals are actually implementing shared decision making.

The Omani society, like other modern societies, is undergoing successive and rapid developments in the various domains of life, which necessitates that educational development becomes a permanent practice, which is affected by those developments and contributes basically to making them.

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

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

human resources needed for this development, especially in the educational field in general and for school administration specifically.

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

Consequently, a need has emerged for more specific research studies to investigate the implementation of SBM system. **Therefore,** this paper aims to find principals' views of SBM as a tool of management in Omani schools.

Research Question
This study has sought the answers of the following question to achieve the aim of the study
1.   What are the principals' views and understanding regarding the SBM system?

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

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

Findings
Four schools were chosen purposefully and four principals from those schools were interviewed. They are identified in this study as P1 (Principal of School A), P2 (Principal of School B), P3 (Principal of School C), and P4 (Principal of School D).

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

Increasing autonomy of school (Theme 1)
Respondents interviewed had unclear understanding of what was meant by the concepts of SBM system, and indicated clearly that the implementation of this concept is a complex and multifaceted concept comprising many elements. The elements can be interpreted differently, have different emphasis and serve different purpose. In addition, participants affirmed that SBM system encompasses a wide variety of strategies ranging from granting full autonomy to school over every educational, financial, and personnel matter, to more restrictive versions allowing limited autonomy over school operations. An examples taken from the interview data collected from participants during this study illustrates this reality:

> *Principal P1 stated: I think SBM system , include or suppose to include, increasing of school autonomy, greater responsiveness to school needs, and these lead to improving in decision making, which effect the school performance. (Int, F1, P1, 38-40)*

P1 elaborated that the SBM system refers to:

> *I mean that the Ministry of Education shifts a degree of autonomy, participation in decision making, and accountability to the school in order to create a particular reform.*

In addition, P1 replied when I asked her, this might be one of the practices that you do, but I mean what is your understanding, your concepts regarding SBM?

> *No, no of course this is my understanding. As a principal to this school, I believe that the SBM system is giving more freedom to the school to manage its affairs, and at the same time giving interest to the teachers and administrative staff, because in my opinion, teachers and administrative staff at school level are who understand their problems and their own needs better. So that they can play vital roles in the determining operational policies in schools to conform with the educational policy of the Ministry of Education.*

Principal (P2) expressed that

> *In my perception, SBM system is a kind of decentralization in which the Ministry of Education gives new roles and responsibilities to school principal.*

Principal P3 was clearly more negative about SBM system. He commented in this regard:

> *Frankly speaking, I think that, Our Ministry is only using this system which called the SBM system to dump more work on us without any training programs or workshop to clarify the system before the implementation. All the work that the Directorate does not want to do anymore is shifted towards us to do ourselves; I guess that is what is meant by SBM system.*

However, he claimed that these authority transferred by the Ministry was vary from school

to school.

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

Furthermore, he complained:

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

Furthermore, P4 expressed that her understanding to the implementation of SBM system

> *I think SBM system is an authorities or a set of laws and principles governing the functioning of the educational system at school, enforcing of these laws belongs to the principal at the first place.*

In addition, principal P4 claimed that SBM system does not achieve the minimum of his expectations. He stated:

> *I expected that the Ministry of Education would give school the authority to recruit and select teachers and the other staff who support school vision and contribute in the hard work to put our goals into practice. However, in reality, the Ministry of Education has given only superficial attention, and when the General Directorate are asked about this issue they said, it requires many years to implement completely.*

Involvement in decision making (Theme 2)

Participants stated that implementing SBM system requires giving administrative staff and teachers an opportunity to involve in decision making process through transferring of responsibilities to the school level. In the following an examples were given by participants. Principal P1 affirmed that currently, decision making authority is shared between the principal and school teachers. Principal typically said:

> *The implementation of the SBM system in this way will lead to an improved decision making process as well as school performance.*

P2 expressed her understanding of the implementation of SBM system by saying:

> *I think that the main idea behind the implementation of SBM system is that it focuses mainly on involving teachers in the school decision making process rather than putting them entirely in control.*

On the other hand data analysis revealed that, participants expected that their school will become independent within the implementation of SBM system. In his expression, Principal P 3 said:

> *The fundamental concept in SBM as I believe that is the devolution of authority to the school, in order to encourage school administration to manage their resources at school rather than General Directorate or the Ministry of Education.*

Importance of the implementation of SBM system (Theme 3)
Respondents expressed the importance of the implementation of SBM system. An example taken from the interview data collected from participants during this study illustrates this reality: P1 asserted that:

> *The implementation of SBM system at our school definitely important, first and foremost it is useful for the school, I myself can learn from this system so many different managerial skills.*

P1 clarified the importance of the implementation of SBM system and said**:**

> *In my opinion, within the process of implementation of SBM system there is a creating of collegial and collaborative working environments particularly between the school principal and teachers. Automatically, it has tailored the transparency in decision making especially in terms of annual budget, school cooperation association and other activities, as well as high participation in decision making process.*

Principal (P2) claimed:

> *There is no doubt about that, of course it is important. The implementation of SBM system has provided input to improve the teachers' participation in the process of decision making in the school. In addition, this system has guided us focusing in school concerns, creating a greater responsibility, and increasing our interactions within the school community.*

She elaborated:

> *In my perspective yes of course, the implementation of SBM system is successful, because the teacher has become fully responsible of the decision making process for the upgrading the school. The school administration is characterized by good planning and proper management because of cooperation between the school administration and teachers, and because it makes the school financially and administratively independent.*

Principal P4 has supported the principal's ideas regarding the importance of SBM system implementation at school level, when asked if the SBM system is implemented perfectly do you think that SBM would be an effective system to your school. He replied:

> *Of course, if the Ministry of Education and General Directorate have allowed the school administration to apply the system without any intervention this will contributes positively in the process of decision-making and it will support the ideas to participate in the process of educational development. In addition, the system will participate in offering solutions and alternatives to face the problems and challenges.*

He added:

> *I think the SBM system has opened the gate for wider teachers' participation in the process of decision making by transferring authority to the school.*

In contrary, Principal P3 considered the implementation of SBM system as something unimportant He stated:

> *Actually, I haven't seen the important change with the implementation of SBM system. In spite of the clarity of the meaning of the SBM system, where it was defined as a decentralization of decision making authority and transfer the responsibilities to the school site. However, through my experimental I have not seen this system accomplishes any substantial changes.*

Discussion and Conclusion
Principals view and Understanding Regarding SBM

As stated in the literature there is no easy definition of the concept of SBM. Furthermore, definitions of SBM vary as do the rationale for its implementation (Barcan, 1992; Smyth 1993; Whitty et al 1997). Therefore, unsurprising, respondents in this paper expressed divergent views when they were asked to comment on the meaning of SBM system in Oman. To the principals who is supposed the receivers and the implementers of the SBM system, increase autonomy of school within the policy of Ministry of Education, involvement in decision making: and importance of the of SBM system were perceived as characteristics of SBM system.

Increasing Autonomy of Schools

Findings showed that SBM system emphasized on transfer the authority which stressed on the principle of school autonomy where the responsibility of each school within the policy of Ministry of Education framework. Where the principal has perceived the SBM system as increasing autonomy, new roles and responsibilities, or handing over of some amount of administrative authority or responsibility to school's principal within the centrality of the Ministry. Comments made by principals interviewed were in line and congruent with what is found in the literature on SBM. According to Bandur, (2008) that the implementation of SBM in Indonesia has resulted in shifting power and authority to the schools for making decisions relating to school policies and issues. Moreover the respondents considered that the power and authority vested in school councils as adequate. Caldwell (2005) emphasized that there are two central themes at the center of SBM reform initiative, school autonomy and shared decision making.

On the other hand, school principal (P3) from school C was clearly more negative about SBM system, as he claimed that Ministry is only using SBM system to dump more work on them. He added, all the work that the Directorate does not want to do anymore is shifted towards us to do ourselves. Moreover, he indicated that authority transferred by the Ministry vary from school to school. According to Principal (P3) some schools are simply adjusting workloads within central Ministry organizations, other diverting of all Authorities. This point of view was also expressed explicitly by school principal (P4). This definition was expressed explicitly by Several recent studies of SBM (Oswald, 1995; Gertler et al., 2007; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990) that focussed on using of decision making authority provided to the school some benefits which justify the existence of the system as giving school-level actors more autonomy over school affairs and ensuring higher quality decisions because groups instead of individuals make them.

Involvement in decision making

The views of the principal seemed inclined towards what means involving school community in decision making of the SBM system. These finding is aligned with the finding of Bell et al (1996) who provide evidence that principals' needed continually to involve staff in collective decision-making as key aspects of their job. In addition, Sackney and Dibski (1994) noted that the majority of activities required to be carried out by principals needed to involve collaborative decision making.

An example taken from the interview data collected from school principal (P2) during this study illustrates this issue. Principal P2 stated that main idea behind SBM system is that it focuses mainly on involving teachers in the school decision making process rather than putting them entirely in control.

5.0 Conclusion

The data revealed that the principals believe in SBM system as an important system that helps them in devolution their responsibilities. School Principal (P4) from school D has indicated that if the Ministry of Education allowed school to apply the system without any intervention this will contributes positively in the process of decision making and it will support the ideas to participate in the process of educational development. In addition, the system will participate in offering solutions and alternatives to face the problems and challenges. This finding is supported by Cranston, (2000) that revealed that there is a common understanding among the principals interviewed that the SBM as an important system that helps them in developing their decisions, in particular, and is useful for the school, in general. On the contrary, the findings of the study revealed that the school principal (P3) considered SBM system as something unimportant for school. He stated that this system didn't accomplish any substantial changes.

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