

Teachers' Belief and Practices in Teacher-Centered Empowerment Reform in Taiwan

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Abstract

Over the past 2 decades, Taiwan has introduced a series of decentralization reforms in school administration and curriculum. Teachers, who are at the center of these reforms, are expected to enrich their knowledge and cultivate strong beliefs regarding these reforms; the teachers' beliefs and knowledge are not only affected by their personal profile but also by contextual factors of structure and culture at all levels. I conducted this study in order to explore these factors and determine how they affect teachers' beliefs and practices. Qualitative methods guided this study in which a case-study approach was used. The findings of this study highlight a variety of factors that were identified by teachers. Contextual factors of structure and culture identified by the teachers include the context of the classroom, school administration and top-down authority, teachers' culture, and government policy. The personal factors include personality, educational background and teacher preparation, demographic profiles, and teachers' abilities. For the purpose of developing a comprehensive and culturally sensitive model of belief development, implications for practice and future research are provided.

Keywords: teacher empowerment, teacher-centered reform, teachers' beliefs, Taiwan, teachers' thinking

Introduction

In this article, I examine teacher empowerment in the context of Taiwan's decentralization reform. The two dimensions of teacher empowerment addressed involve (a) a decentralization of the policymaking authority in schoolwide administration and (b) curriculum development. A case study of one secondary school and two elementary schools is used here to illustrate the factors that affect teachers' beliefs and practices while they

undergo transformation and start using their power and exerting influence on school operations.

Educational Reform in the Taiwanese Context: Decentralization of the School Structure

Because teachers are front-line education practitioners, they are widely considered to strongly influence the extent to which fundamental change might occur as a result of reform policies being implemented (Chang, 2001; Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). Thus, teacher empowerment has received considerable attention globally. Following this trend, Taiwan has introduced, since the mid-1990s, a series of educational reform movements in Compulsory Education for Primary and Junior High School by either amending education laws or instituting new laws in order to ensure decentralization, deregulation, and diversification in numerous aspects of school operation (Fwu & Wang, 2002). The Education Basic Law was passed in 1999 and it declared the significance of teachers' professional autonomy and involvement in school policymaking. Currently, school members and local governments are deeply involved in making decisions regarding principal assignment, teacher recruitment, and resource allocation (Chang, 1997). At the school level, the site council has been transformed to serve as the highest schoolwide decision-making body that enables school stakeholders to exert their power while helping improve the quality of school education. Teachers' leadership roles in school, such as their roles in the site council, principal-selection committee, and teacher-evaluation committee, are highlighted by the finding that teachers represent nearly 50% of the members of these groups.

Nine-year integration program

The empowerment program offered through the new curriculum framework not only devotes effort toward integrating over 20 subjects into 9 major learning areas, but also manifests the core essence of the Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum. In response to the demands of the advocates of the nationwide educational-reform movement, in 1993, the central government granted local governments, schools, and teachers the authority to select curricula and teaching materials in order to respond locally to individual differences in students' academic achievement. Schools can even develop their own teaching materials in an effort to provide a learning environment that promotes community values and culture. This large-scale curriculum reform not only means that school education is freed from centralized control, but also that teachers are reskilled, which encourages the teachers to include their practical experiences and knowledge when they plan their teaching.

Literature review

Teachers' beliefs and practice related to reform

Scholars of organizational behavior consider attitudes to represent the collection of beliefs, assessed feelings, and behavioral intentions toward a person, an object, or an event (Olson & Zama, 1993; George & Jone, 1997). Beliefs are established through individual perceptions about the environment, which then affects the evaluation of their feelings that connote the possibility of personal action (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Zalesny & Ford, 1992). How teachers think about reform might influence their inclination to maintain reform efforts. Teachers' thoughts can be examined in terms of their knowledge and beliefs regarding reform, which are affected not only by their personal profile but also by contextual factors that exist at the national or school level (Powell & Anderson, 2002). Teachers are exposed to numerous factors that might shape their everyday practice in the classroom or their involvement in management (Raymond, 1997). The messages that teachers receive from policymakers affect how teachers interpret and modify the policies when they implement them in their

teaching practice (Coburn, 2001). Teachers have also been reported to link their craft knowledge to theoretical knowledge and reflective practice, a necessary process that can be used to gauge the degree to which the teachers are likely to introduce reform ideas into classroom practice (Powell & Anderson, 2002). Furthermore, a combination of personal life experience, thinking patterns, perceptions, and professional background constitutes the essence of teachers' beliefs in education (Chung & Chu, 2002; Galindo & Olguin, 1996; Wu, 2003). Therefore, it is critical to understand the cultural values, life events, or educational backgrounds of teachers and other contextual factors.

From the perspective of organizational psychology, NG and Cheng (1993) investigated teachers' attitudes toward school changes at the organizational level, and they reported that when teachers held a positive attitude and a strong sense of self-efficacy, they were highly prone to be involved in the implementation of management reform. Collective efficacy is one of the most critical contextual variables that influence teachers' beliefs regarding personal efficacy (Goddard, 2003). Congruence in teachers' cultural values and the goals and behavior of the leadership, which can be interpreted by teachers either as a threat or a validation of their beliefs and values, determines the extent to which teachers' organizational citizenship behavior is motivated (Ras, 2012). When teachers lack internal motivators (i.e., when their autonomy is low), the characteristics of work contexts can externally motivate teachers to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (Runhaar, Konermann, & Sanders, 2013). Regarding leadership behavior, principals' relationships with their teachers strongly and directly affected the teachers' attitudes toward their profession (Price, 2012). Teachers' trust in their principals was reported to be associated with their sense of personal meaning in their work and their sense of autonomy, which was substantially influenced by their work environment (Moye, Henkin, & Egley, 2005). Principals' leadership styles can serve as an indicator of the success of teacher-empowerment reforms and curricular and instructional changes (Blasé & Blasé, 1997; Davidson, 1994). Teachers feel empowered when they perceive their principals as being similar to them and willing to promote the welfare of the faculty (Rinehart, Short, Short, & Mona, 1998). Furthermore, the extent to which teachers perceive their level of empowerment is closely related to their sense of commitment to the organization and to the profession (Bogler & Somech, 2004). Therefore, teachers' involvement in decision-making processes, their organizational citizenship behaviors, their direct impact on school life, and their willingness to increase the effort they exert in helping achieve their schools' goals should be reinforced (Bogler & Somech, 2005). In conclusion, personal, structural, and cultural contextual factors interact to shape teachers' knowledge and beliefs regarding change (Woodbury & Gess-Newsome, 2002). Thus, with attention focused on teacher thinking, in this study, I investigated these factors and further related them to how teachers have reacted to teacher-empowerment reform in Taiwan.

Studies on teachers' beliefs and teacher empowerment in Taiwan

The literature on teachers' beliefs in Taiwan has mostly focused on teachers' beliefs regarding classroom instruction. Three types of research interests can be delineated. First, certain studies have investigated how case teachers in their beginning or practicum stage construct their teaching beliefs. For instance, in two studies, teachers in professional-development programs were observed, and the conclusion was that teachers reconstructed their beliefs through self-reflection, by reading the literature, by observing senior teachers' classes, and by engaging in dialog with peers (Lin, Chin, & Dong, 2010; Chang & Chiang, 2000). In the second type of study, the correlation between teachers' beliefs and practices has been investigated. Most commonly, scholars compared distinct types of teaching beliefs, which were identified by administering measurement tools to research participants and then making observations or questionnaires in order to collect data on classroom instructions in the case of each type of belief (Chen & Reimer, 2009; Huang, Chou, & Chen, 2001). Overall, no consistent correlation was detected between teachers' beliefs and practices. Lastly, based on the focus of

previous research, effort was devoted toward exploring the factors that prevent teachers from implementing their beliefs; these factors included the pressure created by entrance exams, students' abilities, a lack of team support, and a lack of continuous professional development (Chang, 2006; Chang, 2010; Cheng, 2001; Chung & Chu, 2002). Because most of the factors identified by teachers were external, maximizing the extent to which teachers' performance is accommodated might serve as a key condition for ensuring the success of teacher-centered reform (Wu, 2003). Moreover, Shen (1996) suggested that school restructuring can help teachers in Taiwan to increase the power they wield while working in a highly bureaucratic school system.

To date, only a few empirical studies have shed light on teachers' beliefs regarding empowerment or autonomy. One study revealed that teachers' beliefs regarding autonomy were influenced by individualism, conservatism, segmentation, structured constraints such as parental interference, the trifling nature of teaching matters, and time constraints (Chiang, 2002). In another study, researchers sought to construct a teacher-empowerment scale by dividing teachers' authority into four dimensions: professional development, professional autonomy in teaching, schoolwide decision making, and professional status; however, the scale was not applied to empirical data (Chung & Huang, 2000). One study revealed that the relationship between teacher empowerment and job satisfaction was mediated by salary and in-service professional development (Lee, 2003). In terms of the correlation between principals' leadership styles and school effectiveness, transactional leadership was reported to perform more effectively than transformational leadership when mediated by teacher empowerment (Lin, 2007). In another study, the results of document analysis and in-depth interviews indicated that teacher empowerment enhanced innovative teaching by teachers, teachers' professional development, students' learning, peer interactions, and interschool exchanges (Chang, Wang, & Ho, 2014). However, in Taiwan, teachers' beliefs regarding teacher empowerment have not been investigated comprehensively.

This study was conducted in order to explore the personal and contextual factors that affect teachers' knowledge and beliefs regarding decentralization reform and, furthermore, their practices in Taiwan. I addressed three main research questions. (a) What are the personal factors that affect teachers' knowledge and beliefs regarding teacher-empowerment reform? (b) What are the contextual factors of structure and culture that affect teachers' knowledge and beliefs regarding teacher-empowerment reform? (c) How do teachers' knowledge and beliefs regarding teacher-empowerment reform affect their practices?

Methods

Decision-making structure in schools in Taiwan

Diverse committees operate in Taiwan and these include the Committee of School Curriculum Development, the Site Council, the Teachers' Association at the School Level, the Teacher Evaluation Committee, and the Committee of Seven Learning Areas. The Committee of School Curriculum Development is responsible for reviewing the annual school-curriculum plan and teaching materials developed for the upcoming year. In this work, the principal, the representatives of administrators and teachers, and parents are involved. According to the law, site councils represent the highest authority in schoolwide decision making. The mission of a school's teacher association is to protect school teachers against any mistreatment related to interference in teachers' professional autonomy or to resolve conflicts between administrators and teachers. The teacher-evaluation committee, which mainly handles teacher recruitment, includes teachers, principals, administrators, and parents.

Selection of the case study schools and participants

I used purposeful sampling to select the research sites and the study participants based on my research interest. The schools and participants were selected as follows. First, I surveyed the online database of the Bureau of Education of the counties in central Taiwan and selected two elementary schools and one junior high school that I considered suitable for addressing my research interest. Two of these schools have received awards for excellence in their performance in the Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum Reform. The student enrollments of two elementary schools were 1,831 and 1,041, respectively, and the grades ranged from first to sixth. The student enrollment of the junior high school was 2,448, and the grades ranged from seventh to ninth. Other key criteria were the feasibility of the study and access to the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1994). From the school principals, I received permission to enter the premises and the consents for conducting the interviews.

Second, in terms of the selection of study participants, five teachers from each school were the primary participants in this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). A purposeful sampling technique was used to maximize variation. By obtaining referrals from principals and administrators, the key informants in the research sites were identified. Participants were also selected based on their years of teaching experience and on their degree of involvement in school policymaking, which I considered to be a key factor. Half of the teachers were recognized to be highly involved in decision-making processes and the other half were considered to be the least involved in decision-making processes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Seidman, 1991).

Data collection

Data were collected by conducting interviews, observing participants, and obtaining archival collections; interviews were conducted after data had been gathered from participant observation and archival collections. To observe the participants, meetings of school site councils, committees, or other decision-making bodies were attended; moreover, the teachers who participated in the studies were observed in their classrooms. Permission was obtained from the study participants to observe them in order to mainly investigate the schools' context that affected the teachers' beliefs and knowledge regarding the reform. The data collected using this method facilitated the discovery of the cultural values and events of interest in the selected schools (Spradley, 1980). In the second approach, documents and records were collected from the three schools; these included school website contents, meeting minutes, newsletters, and archives relevant to this study. To ensure participant confidentiality, all information was identified only by a code name or number. Lastly, in the case of interviews, the 15 teachers were interviewed twice for roughly 30 to three hours. The second interview was conducted mainly to solicit feedback from the participants about the preliminary analysis of the first interview (Maxwell, 2005). All interviews were conducted at the selected schools, and the questions asked were selected based on my interest in exploring the personal and contextual factors that affects teachers' beliefs and knowledge regarding the decentralization reform. After obtaining the interviewees' permission, the conversations were recorded in order to generate verbatim transcripts.

Data analysis

Field notes and documents were analyzed using the contact and document summary form developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). In the contact form, I recorded the contact type, date, time, and the key information obtained from each observation. All documents were reviewed and summarized in the document summary form and then analyzed further. The results of the observations and archival collections mainly served two purposes: to triangulate the data gathered from the interviews and to develop the interview questions. The constant comparative method guided the analysis of the interview transcripts, which were performed in order to categorize and conceptualize the data and develop emerging themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The computer program ATLAS.ti 5.0 was used because it is considered to be capable of facilitating coding procedures and

linking data. The emerging themes developed for each site were further explored using matrices and networks (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The configurations of the interview data allowed me to develop distinct types of theoretical framework and perform cross-case analysis.

Findings and discussion

Background and overview

The three selected sites were given the pseudonyms Maplewood, Peoplehood, and Uphill. In the following introduction, I describe the schools' basic features, principals' backgrounds, and the functions of committees.

Maplewood elementary school

When this research was conducted, Maplewood employed 51 faculty members. The school is located in a suburban area in central Taiwan and it was chosen because for two consecutive years, it had received awards for excellence in performance in Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum Reform. During the research period, the principal's eighth year in office was starting and the principal was expected to continue for another four-year term after the forthcoming principal election. In this school, textbooks were selected based on grading multiple editions of textbooks obtained from six to eight publishers; the grading was completed in two phases, first according to the grade level and then by Committees of Seven Learning Areas. Based on the grades assigned in the first phase, the Committee of School Curriculum Development made the final decision regarding which edition of a textbook was to be chosen for the next year. Site-council meetings were held only twice per semester, once at the beginning, once at the end, and all school members were involved. The school-teacher association included almost all of the teachers in Maplewood, who joined the association voluntarily. The teacher-evaluation committee included teachers, the principal, administrators, and parents. The committee was originally developed to serve as a panel for reviewing teacher recruitment and teachers' misconduct. However, because teacher recruitment has been taken over by the Bureau of Education, this committee now plays a limited role in schools.

Peoplehood elementary school

During the research period, Peoplehood employed 81 faculty members. The school is located in a downtown area in central Taiwan and it was chosen based on the recommendation of the Taichung City Local Teacher Association. When this research was conducted, the principal was starting the first year in office after completing 21 years of teaching. The functions of each committee in this school were similar to those of the corresponding committees in Maplewood. However, the textbook-selection process at this school was distinct from that at Maplewood; here, textbook grading was only conducted according to grade levels and textbooks were not graded by the Committee of Seven Learning Areas. Another difference was that the site council was composed of teacher representatives who were voted for by all faculty members. The teacher association functioned effectively in Peoplehood because it was led by one of the administrators, who served as a staff member of Taichung City's local teacher association. The association leader's efforts to promote teachers' status in the school clearly guided the power redistribution in the school.

Uphill junior high school

Uphill employed 142 faculty members at the time of this research. The school is located in the downtown area of Taichung city and was chosen it has received awards for excellence in performance in the Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum Reform. The principal was starting the fourth year in office. As in Maplewood and

Peoplehood, several committees were established in Uphill. The responsibilities and compositions of the Committee of School Curriculum Development were identical to those of this committee at the other two schools. Moreover, as in Peoplehood, textbook grading was completed according to grade level only, and the committee made the final decision regarding which edition of textbooks was to be chosen for the upcoming year. However, unlike in the other two schools, the members of the site-council meetings in Uphill were mixed with members of the Committee of School Curriculum Development. The functions of other committees were similar to those of the corresponding committees at Maplewood and Peoplehood.

Teachers as agents of change: Factors that affect teachers' beliefs and knowledge

Teachers who were involved in the reform process received professional-development and teacher-preparation training so that they could become agents of change. However, transformation is a complex process that involves motivation, which resides internally in the teachers, and contextual factors, which the teachers perceive as being supportive of their transformation toward desired outcomes. Data analysis identified eight factors that contributed to teachers' motives and attitude toward the reform, which are presented next. Here, I also discuss the strategies that teachers used to cope with belief conflicts.

Contextual factors of structure and culture

Context of the classroom: Parents and students. Teachers' knowledge regarding reform was transmitted primarily through professional-development workshops that were conducted by the government. However, theory-oriented professional-development programs were too vague to allow teachers to grasp the main concepts of the new curriculum. The teachers suggested that they can fully understand the requirements of curriculum reform only through classroom experience.

I did attend workshops but perhaps because they were official workshops, I found them to be somewhat unclear and I did not fully understand what type of message they were trying to deliver... However, if at that time I did not completely grasp the concept, I would figure it out through teaching in my classroom.

The teachers who participated in this study cared most about their students' requirements. The teachers stated that their beliefs regarding the reform were primarily based on the observations of their students' academic performance. The teacher did not pay substantial attention to school management and focused on their students. One teacher said, "One of the reasons why teachers did not get involved in decision making at school was that they did not have the time and they would rather spend most of their time taking care of their students."

In line with the comments of most teachers, student comprehension in major learning areas such as language, mathematics, natural science, and biology has declined. The teachers were extremely worried about the students' future survival skills. The teachers' observations indicated that the academic-performance pressure that the students faced had become even higher than that faced in the past. Increasing numbers of students relied on using tutorial schools to learn subject contents that were not taught at their schools. Consequently, in the context of their classroom, the teachers were troubled by the large variation in the levels of performance of students who had been taught dissimilarly in distinct tutorial schools. Lastly, parents complained that the new curricula were easier than previous curricula had been, and this pressured the teachers into providing additional educational materials. The teachers considered themselves to be powerless because they were unable to effect policy changes. The only thing that the teachers could change was their classroom practice. One teacher said

For me, as long as the parents recognize what I have done in the classroom, it is unnecessary to conform to the mandates of the government. The new curriculum has been criticized widely. I would feel guilty if I

did only what the policy asked me to do.

One of the major purposes of the educational reform instituted over the last two decades in Taiwan has been to alleviate the competition stress faced by students. However, in Taiwan, parents' expectations for their children's academic performance are higher than those of parents in Western countries. Therefore, reform efforts that are aimed at countering the belief rooted in our culture that high academic achievement is essential for future success are likely to fail at some point.

School administration and top-down authority. The relationships between the administration and the teachers at the three schools were traditional relationships in which the teachers concluded that they participated in decision making at school only to follow the demands of the administration. The teachers functioned merely as consultants and did not readily speak up in the meetings. One teacher said, "The principal would ask us to follow orders. Of course there are complaints, but when most teachers comply, it feels strange if you do not." Another teacher said, "At the meetings, it was clear that there was a sense of hierarchical difference between administration and teachers."

The administration's attitude toward teacher involvement also affected the teachers' willingness to speak out. One teacher said

If they (the administrators) are willing to accept teachers' opinions, the teachers will be willing to get involved in and contribute to decision-making processes. However, if they are self-centered and not mindful of teachers' opinions, teachers would choose to keep quiet.

The teachers also indicated that the leadership of the principal served as an indicator of how the teachers perceived reform. What the principal asked the teachers to do shaped their perceptions regarding the reform. One teacher said, "If you follow what the principal wants you to do, you can decipher what this reform is about. It goes something like this: If the principal encourages us to develop, for example, creative teaching strategies, we suspect that the Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum expects teachers to be creative."

Parental involvement was another influential factor in the school context, and particularly in the elementary schools, parents were highly involved in school policymaking. The administration frequently reached a compromise with parents regarding funding and support for facilities and equipment, but this caused teachers numerous problems, and the teachers hesitated to exercise their reform power in order to implement any innovative ideas that they considered to be beneficial for students. One teacher said

I think our school should limit parents' power and tell the parents what they can do and what they cannot do. Pressure from the society is growing. Many parents sue teachers... I think our government or society guarantees that parents have an advantage over teachers.

Workload and time pressure represented another major concern of teachers. The teachers complained that they lacked the time required to develop and implement new ideas. Because of heavy workloads, the teachers were unable to spare adequate time to search for any required information outside of the school. The isolation caused by the school culture partly prevented the decentralization reform from effecting changes. Some of the teachers who sought to make changes considered a supportive school culture to be critical because receiving endorsement from the school administration or from fellow teachers would legitimize what they did in the classroom.

Teachers' culture: fear of change, silent audience, and peer pressure. In terms of their empowerment in school management, the teachers did not appear to wish to make changes in their schools because they took comfort in their high job security. Thus, if the teachers dominated the process of change, it was highly likely that they would favor keeping things as they were. One teacher said, "If we were the ones who made all decisions, I think we would say "no" to every event outside our classroom so that we could concentrate on teaching, as in the case of teachers at some other schools that do not offer many extracurricular activities." In Taiwan, women consider teaching to be a high-priority career choice because women are the main family caregivers.

If you are serious about a career in teaching, you will devote a lot of effort to it. However, even if you want to take care of your kids and family, teaching can be right for you. Therefore, I think that if site-based reform empowers teachers as school decision makers, it is highly likely that teaching would become even easier than it is now. I believe that most teachers do not favor changes, and so it is my opinion that teacher-centered reform (i.e., reform intended to transform teachers into decision makers) has a remote chance of success.

The teachers were not adequately cohesive as a group and were unable or unwilling to integrate and exert their power and influence over the school decision-making process. Most teachers were silent because given the school hierarchical structure, they were expected to conform. One teacher stated this confidently: "We (teachers) are all obedient and cooperative because we have reached the consensus that we want to focus on students. We all agree on this."

The egalitarianism prevalent among the teachers undermined their pursuit of leadership. For example, sharing teaching experiences in official meetings was likely to be interpreted as "showing off." One teacher said

We feel comfortable sharing teaching experiences during casual conversations. At official meetings, we do not like to share these experiences because all teachers are considered equal. When you share your teaching experiences, it appears to us that you think you are superior to other teachers.

Because the teachers considered themselves to be equal, congruence at departmental or grade level was regarded highly; thus, the teachers hesitated to experiment with new ideas in their own classrooms. Furthermore, one teacher noted that "if teachers from the same learning area as you were highly supportive of reform, you would be highly willing to get involved." Pressure might also be exerted on teachers because of the expectations of partners. One teacher, who described the unique culture of the grade level that the teacher taught, said, "If you want to do it alone and without consensus from the team, it is fine. However, you should be aware that you might encounter problems sooner or later, such as complaints from parents." Some of the teachers indicated that they maintained a low profile when implementing any innovation and that they attempted to avoid conflicts with their colleagues. One teacher said, "The problem is probably that you want to challenge yourself and try out new ideas, but someone in your team might prefer not to do so. Thus, you feel discouraged and finally give up."

Teacher-empowerment reform not only challenges top-down authority but also teachers' assumptions regarding their parallel relationships embedded in the school culture. Empowerment does not mean increasing access to school decision-making processes; it entails reshuffling the established power structure among teachers, and this raises the possibility that some of the teachers might cross established boundaries because an equal distribution of power among teachers is not assured.

Government policy: Performativity and policy comprehension. The government-based leadership has paid excessive attention to performativity but has not conducted an authentic evaluation of the implementation of

policies in school practice. While teaching, teachers were concerned about what to include in their performance portfolio. The teachers spent a considerable amount of time on paperwork and they did not get a chance to sit with students and discuss their learning and their views on the teaching. One teacher said

At the beginning of the reform process, we were scared because we were busy taking pictures and conducting experiments. We felt that the Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum was all just about paperwork. I remember at a faculty meeting, a teacher stood up and mentioned feeling extremely tired. What the teacher had done thus far for the reform made the teacher feel like a data collector and not a teacher.

Moreover, the competence indicators of student learning of the Grades 1–9 curricula were incomprehensible because the indicators included terms that the teachers considered to be exceedingly theoretical and academic. Some of the teachers were reluctant to employ the indicators in their teaching.

The problem is that I do not know how these indicators can help me with my teaching. I cannot understand the purpose of linking teaching to the indicators. You cannot evaluate your students by merely applying indicators because at times even the meaning of an indicator is not well explained. I cannot understand the indicators and I never use them.

The government has amended its policies several times during the reform process. Thus, the teachers were concerned about the direction of the reform. A lack of understanding of the prevalent policies and the constant amendments diminished the teachers' motivation to actively contribute to making changes and dampened the teachers' enthusiasm for reform. The teachers sensed no empowerment in terms of either making curriculum decisions or participating in school management. One teacher said, "Frankly, I do not know... Who is the focus of this reform? I really cannot say what difference the reform has made. Site-based reform, for example, has done little to transform our teaching. Therefore, I doubt that the reform policy had transformed school education. At least, I do not sense any transformation."

Personal factors

Personality. Teachers attributed their willingness to implement site-based reform to their personality. One teacher claimed being reform-oriented by nature and indicated a willingness to become involved in any reform work that empowered the teachers in their efforts to improve the working environment of their schools. "I think it is because of my personality. I like to pursue new challenges... I do not think it has anything to do with my academic background. I just like to learn." Conversely, some of the teachers were not interested in any form of teacher empowerment. One teacher indicated an unwillingness to be visible and a preference to maintain a low profile: "...personal willingness (to participate in decision-making processes)? As a matter of fact, by nature, I do not like to speak out. I am not very willing to participate in things."

Reticence represented another aspect of the teachers' personality. When their views on education conflicted with those of school or national policy, the teachers chose to focus on their autonomy in the classroom instead of devoting efforts toward formal schoolwide decision-making processes. Some of the teachers considered themselves to be conservative and they typically did not to use legitimate power for improving their work conditions. These teachers did not accept that it was possible to derive any benefit from teacher empowerment. One senior teacher said

I prefer not to use the official channel to gain power or resources. It does not work for me that way. I perceive my relationship with the administration as being reciprocal. When they ask me to do something, I typically do not turn down the request. I believe that when I require support from them, they will return

the favor.

Educational background and teacher preparation. In Taiwan, teacher-preparation programs are mainly provided through traditional teacher education and at teacher-education centers. The teachers mentioned that because the cultures of the two types of institutions are distinct, their attitudes toward reform might differ. Typically, the teachers trained through traditional teacher education were more conservative than the teachers trained at the teacher-education centers were and, therefore, they were relative less accepting of the reform that empowered teachers in curriculum design and school policymaking. One reason for this is that in traditional teacher education, the culture emphasizes discipline and the strict regulation of student behavior by means of implementing a variety of policies such as dress codes. One teacher recalled

The culture at our school was conservative. We were like senior high school students, and we wore mainly T-shirts and jeans... This is very different from what teachers trained at other universities experienced... I think that the influence of the ethos is inconsistent with the spirit of the current curriculum reform that encourages teachers to experiment with new ideas and diversify teaching approaches.

The teachers trained at teacher-education centers were also considered to be more enthusiastic than teachers who obtained traditional teacher education because the center-trained teachers deliberately chose this career path when they potentially could have chosen otherwise. These teachers were also more open-minded regarding changes than other teachers. One teacher said, "Because I was not trained by means of traditional teacher education, I think, based on my experience dealing with colleagues, that I am more open-mind and liberal than they are. I tend not to confine myself to certain possibilities alone." Another aspect of the educational background was the teachers' majors in undergraduate education. Six of the interviewed teachers had majored in business and they indicated that because of their major, they were typically more flexible and less resistant to changes than other teachers were.

I think majoring in business management had positive effect on me. I learned how to see things from distinct perspectives. Why did I say that? When recruiting teachers and serving on the evaluation panel, some of the teachers acted childishly and were not accepting of diverse views. Some people are a little conservative.

Demographic profile. In this category, I mainly discuss the teachers' years of teaching. Some of the participants in this study stated that they had less than five years of teaching experience and that they were unable to fully understand how things worked in their school, such as the power relationships among distinct parties, school and national policies, and decision-making processes.

Maybe because of my personality or seniority, I have not often spoken up at meetings such as those of the School Teacher Association. I have listened and then voted based on what I have heard. However, if someone wanted me to voice my opinions, I would be reluctant to do so because I am new here and thus should learn only by observing and listening.

In Taiwanese society and especially in Taiwanese schools, inexperienced workers are discouraged from participating actively in decision-making process. Acknowledgment of seniority in the school culture has prevented new teachers from participating in school decision-making processes. One young teacher indicated that the fear of not be taken seriously undermined this teacher's enthusiasm to exercise legitimate powers: "I think most new teachers should simply follow orders. Others do not take you seriously and will not listen to

you because they think you are not senior enough to make anyone care about what you say.”

Teachers' abilities. The teachers complained about their voice being unheard but did not wish to be more powerful than the school administration. One reason for this was that the teachers were not confident that they were adequately competent to make any changes when playing a key role in reform. In terms of empowerment in curriculum development, the new policy encourages teachers to design teaching materials that can replace textbooks; the materials can be designed in any manner the teachers consider appropriate, as long as the content of the subject corresponds to the Competence Indicators of Grade 1–9 Curriculum. However, the teachers considered themselves to be incapable of contributing to curriculum development.

Because in the case of learning areas like language and mathematics, to develop curriculum, teachers must understand how children at every school level reason things... Otherwise, there is a risk that you might develop a curriculum that appears to be too easy or too difficult for the students.

The teachers' knowledge regarding school management might also not be adequate for making informed decisions. One teacher said

When I wonder, for example, why a person was hired to take charge of the budget in our school, I realize that it is because that the person has expertise in finance and is qualified for the position. If you ask me to take charge, I might not understand the concepts of budget management and thus would be quite likely to make mistakes.

Despite the aforementioned doubts, the teachers wanted their voice to be heard during decision-making processes in their school. One teacher said, “It is my personal belief that teaching should be the focus of school management. Teachers should speak out and guide school practice by negotiating with the administration in order to meet the requirements of school members.”

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that teachers' opportunities for participating in school decision-making processes have increased since the introduction of decentralization reforms. However, the teachers still do not exert adequate power to influence the schoolwide policies, including policies related to budget and personnel. Most of the teachers in this study do not recognize any improvement in collaboration and communication among teachers. The teachers also do not consider themselves to be empowered after the implementation of teacher-empowerment reforms and, ironically, feel increasingly powerless. Additional disappointment arises when the involvement of the school participants in school-reform movements requires them, especially teachers, to devote increasing amounts of time to the work and increase their workloads, which leaves little time for the development of the skills and ideas necessary for implementing instructional changes (Malen & Ogawa, 1992). The school leadership appears to lack the support of teachers and it provides insufficient resources to teachers, including the time that teachers must invest to improve their quality of teaching.

Four potential reasons might explain teachers' indifference toward teacher empowerment. First, empowerment methods that are effective in Western countries might fail in Eastern countries in which the power distance is wide (Hofstede, 2001; Oyserman, Coon, & Memmelmeier, 2002). Thus, teachers in Taiwan might consider it awkward to have power over their superiors. Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) emphasize the significance of the social context in their approach of social-information processing, which is centered on how people adapt their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs to the social context and to their past and present behavior and situations; social information regarding past behaviors and the opinions of fellow members of an organization might affect a person's views regarding the manner in which to construct their attitudes or define their

requirements. Some of the teachers provided examples of their interactions with administrators, and they clarified that the challenge they previously faced in communicating with the administrators discouraged them from presenting their opinions or ideas to the administrators again. Second, the teachers responded that they are incapable of managing schools, and in Taiwan, few professional-development programs transform teachers' beliefs and provide knowledge that is indispensable for effecting changes. During the transformational process in which schools are restructured and teachers' roles in decision making are changed concurrently, new environmental pressures might emerge. Therefore, the challenges that teachers confront stem not only from knowledge transmission and acquisition but also from their adjustment to the pressures of the entire school environment. Third, in Taiwan, the school administrative teams led by the principals and several directors have long been granted the authority to administer and manage schools. Teachers who are not placed in any capacity of authority hold a teaching-oriented professional identity as per the distinct divisions of teaching and administration in the school structure. Empowering teachers means crossing this boundary from both sides. Lastly, because all teachers are considered equal, teacher empowerment might threaten the equal distribution of power and disturb the relationships among teachers.

According to the assumptions of Weick (1989), schools must depend on teachers' professional knowledge to define the reasons underlying their unexplained inputs and their value in order to evaluate their preferences. However, the implications of their value and expertise are perceived as being inadequate. The outcome of a decision-making process does not reflect the professional or organizational goals of teachers. Moreover, the decision-making processes are simplified and do not allow teachers to agree on values and standards. One of the challenges is the hierarchical structure retained at the three schools. When making schoolwide decisions, the teachers remain tightly under the control of top-down management. Therefore, the leadership comes primarily from the principal. Conversely, teachers focus on making teaching-related decisions and strongly depend on the administrators when it comes to reforming knowledge delivery. However, principals and administrators are inadequately experienced in teaching to understand how to implement reform ideas in classroom teaching. Thus, knowledge gaps on both sides undermine the possibility of success of the reform.

Implications of the study

The findings of this study suggest that certain practices of teacher participation must be adopted in the three site-based managed schools. Some of the key findings are reviewed here and are presented as suggestions for practice and research.

In terms of practice, first, time constraints were identified as one of the biggest obstacles hindering teacher participation in the reform process. In order to meet national standards, the teachers had to spend substantial amounts of time when completing their assignments. Thus, site-based managed schools must be aware of the appropriate amount of responsibilities to allot to teachers, and they must help the teachers in using their time optimally.

Second, a major problem identified at the three selected schools was that teacher leadership did not receive adequate attention. School operations were controlled predominantly by administrators. The schools should strive to eliminate this top-down influence by rotating the leaders at a variety of meetings (Weick, 1989).

Third, training is critical for enabling the study participants to completely understand the concepts of teacher empowerment and improve their communication and leadership skills. Schools must ensure that all teachers receive training that improves the manner in which they function in the process.

Lastly, the teachers obtained most of their information only within their own schools. They did not frequently engage in fruitful interactions with teachers from other local schools. Thus, teachers must be

encouraged to share teaching information and experiences outside of school.

In terms of research, this study provides a preliminary understanding of the factors that affect teachers' beliefs and knowledge regarding teacher-empowerment reform in Taiwan. This subject warrants extensive future investigation because the results could help researchers understand how teachers perceive reform movements. This study was focused on the context within which teachers form their beliefs and acquire knowledge. Belief development is a complex process and it might be culturally sensitive. To develop a comprehensive and culture-sensitive model of belief development, researchers must integrate additional potential indigenized elements into their study.

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