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School empowerment discourse and the politics of the Federation of Secondary School Teachers in Greece

Amalia A. Ifanti

Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, University of Patras, Rion 26504, Patras, Greece.
E-mail: ifanti@upatras.gr. Tel: + 30 2610 997548, +30 2610 997797. Fax: +30 2610 997797.

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This paper explores the position of the Federation of Secondary School Teachers in Greece about school empowerment in the period 1975-2009, in an attempt to examine its politics on specific issues related to teachers’ training, school administration and management and parental involvement in the school work. The research material was collected from fifty one (51) issues of the official Bulletin of the Union published in the period under consideration. A qualitative content analysis was then carried out on the basis of three categories concerned with the aforementioned issues about school empowerment; each category was classified into three chronological periods. Research data revealed that, over the last three decades, the Federation highlighted the professional development of teachers through their lifelong training, their active participation in the school administration system and their cooperation with parents at school as important aspects of school empowerment. Despite these advocacies, the Federation is still expected to formulate specific suggestions for the achievement of this goal.

Key words: Empowerment, politics, secondary school teachers, Federation, Greece.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, research on school effectiveness and empowerment has been extensively carried out although each field has got its own theoretical background and different orientations (Creemers and Reezigt, 2005; Freeman, 2000; Gray, 2001; Louis et al., 2010; Mortimore, 2001; Mortimore and Whitty, 1997; Normand, 2008; Scheerens and Demeuse, 2005; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). In this context, a considerable number of studies has provided the idea that the work at schools plays an important role in students’ learning and can uphold their achievement (MacGilchrist, 2003; Mortimore et al., 1988a, b; Reynolds, 1985; Rutter et al., 1979; Wrigley, 2008).

School effectiveness research, in particular, is related to measurable learning results (Luyten et al., 2005; Mortimore et al., 1994), whereas school empowerment studies focus on the procedures that confirm the factors for school effectiveness advancement. Additionally, school empowerment is perceived as a concrete branch of research for successful educational change (Bennett, 2001; Nir, 2009; Sun et al., 2007). In other words, the first one has to do with “what functions in education and why it is functioning in a specific way” (Creemers and Reezigt, 2005, p. 359). The second one represents “a practice and a policy which are oriented in a desirable educational change” (op. cit.). In essence, school effectiveness research “is related to instrumental rationality (how to do things right) and not so much to essential rationality (how to do the right things)” (Scheerens et al., 2001, p. 132).

School empowerment, having a quite recent history, has passed through three distinct periods. At the end of 1970s and in the beginning of 1980s, many of the initiatives, which were related to school empowerment, were more floating rather than representing a systematic approach to school changes (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Reid et al., 1987). Among the most representative issues that were highlighted were concerned with the evaluation, the students’ achievement, the teaching methods and the curriculum reform (Normand, 2008;
In the early 1990s, the second period of school empowerment was initiated, which was characterized by the interaction of the research activity for school effectiveness and school empowerment (Stringfield, 1995). School empowerment attempts appeared to provide schools with instructions and strategies for the implementation of educational changes focusing on the classrooms. The suggesting changes in that period were related to teachers' professional development, cooperative teaching, and students' outflow (Hopkins and MacGilchrist, 1998; Wrigley, 2004). It had become clear that school empowerment was not merely a technical training, but it was mainly an active implication of schools' labor (Elliot, 1996; Goldstein, 1997; Hopkins and MacGilchrist, 1998; Reynolds et al., 1993).

The third period of school empowerment has started since late 1990s. The relevant research has mainly focused on educational reforms in various countries, and more specifically on teachers' development, collaborative patterns, networking, external support agencies and cultural changes (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Nir, 2009; Normand, 2008; Wrigley, 2003, 2008).

The interest in school empowerment issues encouraged the initiation for carrying out research projects, in an attempt to correlate the improvement of the classroom with the broader empowerment of the school (Creemers and Kyriakides, 2010; MacGilchrist, 2003). In such a research field, teaching and learning improvement is becoming an important component for school empowerment. How this effort could be accomplished? The answer has been mainly located in human capital of teachers through lifelong process (Day, 2000).

Hopkins (2001, p. 57) argues that school empowerment “focuses on the bottom up orientation of empowerment, which can be detected to school and its personnel”. Teachers have been considered to be the basic component of educational change, because every effort for educational change, at last, takes place into classrooms and the everyday school practices. In this regard, relevant studies have additionally underlined the power of school culture. The school empowerment activates three key components closely associated with the role of teachers: a) teachers' professional development; b) appropriate school leadership; c) parental involvement at school (Day, 2000; Hargreaves, 1995; Schoen and Teddie, 2008; Stoll and Temperley, 2009).

If teachers' empowerment is to be successful, teachers should think of themselves as lifelong learners, willing to be trained, to cooperate with their colleagues and be involved in educational research activities. In this framework, schools can be flexible and capable of adapting to change (Reezigt and Creemers, 2005). The second component is referred to the appropriate school leadership. This type of leadership should be decentralized, devolved and distributed within school's workforce (Louis et al., 2010; Pounder, 2006). It is important for teachers to participate in school leadership, because school improvement efforts can have positive results in school community (Reezigt and Creemers, 2005). The third parameter is concerned with parental involvement in school practices, which is thought to reinforce the school culture. Parents could support teachers’ job through regular meetings so as to be informed about their children’s individual needs and contribute to the improvement of schools (Davies and Coates, 2005).

In this study the politics of the Federation of Secondary School Teachers in Greece about school empowerment are examined, in relation to teachers’ in-service training, school administration and management, and parental involvement at school. For the purposes of the study, the Official Bulletins of the Federation issued in the 1975-2009 period have been studied (Federation of Secondary School Teachers, 1975-2009). In 1975, a new Constitution was established in Greece soon after the fall of the seven years dictatorship and the restoration of democracy (1974). By the end of 2009 the collection of the research material was completed.

Making a quick reference to the Federation of Secondary School Teachers in Greece, this was established in 1924. It is consisted of all state secondary teachers’ unions of the country and aims to enhance the professional and civil servant rights of them. It is a very active education interest-group and acts as a member of teachers’ international organizations.

This piece of work deals with the assumption that teachers can undertake a significant role in school empowerment process through their life-wide training, their engagement in the school administration and management and their cooperation with parents. The presentation of the research study is as shown.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research data were derived from the Official Bulletins of the Federation of Secondary School Teachers in Greece (Omospondia Leitourgon Meses Ekpaideuses, O.L.M.E., in Greek), which were issued during the period 1975-2009. Studying the Bulletins on the basis of the specific key points related to school empowerment, that is, teachers' training, school administration and management and parental intervention, fifty one (51) issues were finally sorted out and classified into three decades. Such a chronological classification was related with the three main phases of the broad school empowerment discourse in this period as well the main educational reforms that took place in Greece during the last three decades and have undoubtedly affected the Federation’s politics about school empowerment.

A qualitative content analysis on the Federation’s positions about school empowerment over the last thirty years was then carried out. The research material was examined on the basis of the following three categories of the analysis: a) teachers’ training, b) school management and administration and c) parents’ involvement in schools.
RESULTS ANALYSIS

Teachers' training

The period 1975-1989

The demand for teachers' training had already been raised by the Federation since the mid 1970s. The Federation had stated that the improvement of schools should be depended upon teachers' development and had insisted that any effort for the enforcement of the educational system cannot be implemented without teachers' active participation (Bulletin, 1975, vol. 439, p. 5).

During 1980s, the Federation proposed three main stages of the teachers' training: a) An introductory training stage: this would be offered before teachers' appointment at schools and would provide them with the appropriate theoretical background and skills for their entrance to schools. b) The one-year full time training stage, aiming at the teachers' scientific and pedagogical support; teachers should have got at least five years teaching experience in schools. c) Short-term seminars with specific educational topics: "teachers should become familiar with any curriculum innovation before its implementation in the classrooms" (Bulletin, 1982, vol. 550, p. 13).

According to the Federation's positions, in-service teachers' training programs should be carried out by the Regional In-Service Teachers' Training Centers (P.E.K., in Greek) (Bulletin, 1985, vol. 575-576, pp. 29-30). The courses should aim at the upgrading of teachers' background and provide them current findings of the educational research. Such an in-service program should also reinforce teachers' active participation in school practices. It could also develop their skills in order to be able to effectively collaborate with their colleagues, their students and parents (Bulletin, 1987, vol. 596, pp. 16, 18; Bulletin, 1987, vol. 602, p. 12).

Furthermore, the Federation supported the idea that each in-service program presupposes the exploration of teachers' needs, the assessment of the program's goals and the careful preparation of the teaching material (Bulletin, 1985, vol. 578, p. 21). In general, the Federation's perceptions of teachers' in-service training were mainly related to the decentralization of the decision-making, the enhancement of teachers' profession and the organization of seminars and workshops for their in-service training (Bulletin, 1987, vol. 595, pp. 16-17).

According to the Federation, both the achievement of educational goals and the quality of education provided to the in-service teachers depend basically on the teacher himself/herself, who must be regarded as a researcher in his classroom (Bulletin, 1982, vol. 548, p. 13). The Federation maintained that teachers' in-service training program should correlate educational research with school practice so as educational action research could be connected with educational matters (Bulletin, 1982, vol. 553, pp. 17-18). It also underlined the need for teachers' familiarization with innovative teaching methods and the results of various topics on education research (Bulletin, 1987, vol. 595, p. 17) for their professional development (Bulletin, 1987, vol. 596, p. 19).

The period 1990-1999


Teachers' training programs should offer either introductory or one-year courses as well as short-term seminars (Bulletin, 1995, vol. 645, pp. 13-15). The Federation had underlined the importance of teachers' participation in the design and evaluation of any in-service training program, because they were considered to be acquainted with the teaching and learning matters in schools (Bulletin, 1994-1995, vol. 644, p. 8).

The Federation also claimed teachers' familiarization with scientific and pedagogical research (Bulletin, 1995, vol. 645, p. 13); it specifically stated: "the educational research must develop the unexploited gold-mine, which is called teacher" (Bulletin, 1995, vol. 647, p. 12).


The period 2000-2009

Teachers are perceived to be the key-interest group for educational changes (Bulletin, 2007-2008, vol. 694, p. 13). The Federation insists that teachers' training must be perceived as an integral part of their continuous professional development, which is considered to be associated with the efforts for educational changes (Bulletin, 2003-2004, vol. 678, p. 8). The Federation thus demands updated and effective in-service teachers' training courses (Bulletin, 2002-2003, vol. 674, p. 10) so as to be closely related to the new educational trends (Bulletin, 2003, vol. 675, p. 3).
Consequently, the Federation claimed effective introductory training courses for teachers -before entering the classes- and one-year full time training programs for in-service teachers (Bulletin, 2004-2005, vol. 682, p. 9). Following the Federation's position, the one-year teachers' training program would offer the following advantages:

a) Plenty of time for systematic training.
b) Teachers could attend the training programs without having the anxiety of their everyday duties at school.
c) Teachers who live far away from the in-service training centers would take the opportunity to attend the classes.
d) Teachers' unemployment would be reduced, because some young teachers would temporarily work in the position of those who attend the training programs during the school year (Bulletin, 2005, special issue, p. 15).

For the Federation, this type of training should be universal, whereas Universities must contribute to its implementation. The training program is also suggested to be financed by the state (Bulletin, 2004-2005, vol. 682, p. 9). All in all, it has been pointed out that teachers' education and training greatly contributes to the school improvement process (Bulletin, 2005-2006, vol. 686, p. 15).

It is thus apparent that teachers' in-service training has accepted greater attention in the new millennium than it used to get in the past, mainly because of the rapid technological and scientific changes. The reinforcement of teachers' mobility in the schools of the European Union countries has also been underlined (Bulletin, 2007, vol. 692, p. 6). In general, the Federation links teachers' professional development with educational research mainly focusing on the following issues: a) Teachers' participation in postgraduate programs at the Universities; b) initiation of state in-service programs for the enhancement of teachers' professionalism; c) schools should become places for research and innovation (Bulletin, 2007-2008, vol. 694, pp. 28-29).

School management and administration

The period 1975-1989

In the period under consideration, the Federation claimed meritocracy and democratic procedures for the appointment of head-teachers at schools. It recommended that some specific criteria should be taken into account for the candidates' selection, as for example the appropriate educational background, the administrative and managerial skills, the scientific training and the democratic beliefs (Bulletin, 1985, special issue, p. 4; Bulletin, 1989, vol. 613, p. 5).

Additionally, the Federation provided the need for teachers to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills in order to be able to actively participate in the educational planning and put effectively into practice educational decisions (Bulletin, 1982, vol. 548, p. 13; Bulletin, 1985, vol. 581, p. 10; Bulletin, 1986, vol. 593, p. 9).

The period 1990-1999


Head-teachers were expected not only to supervise and accomplish the daily school matters, but also to cooperate with teachers in the decision-making process at school (Bulletin, 1993, vol. 636, p. 13). They should thus have administrative, scientific and pedagogical qualifications and should be selected among the most experienced and well educated teachers (Bulletin, 1993, vol. 619, pp. 9, 25).

The Federation also demanded pluralistic approaches to the administration and the organization of schools (Bulletin, 1993, vol. 619, p. 7; Bulletin 1993, vol. 639, p. 19). For the Federation, teachers should have got a vital role in the decision making process. In this way, they would be involved in the daily school practices, the planning and evaluation of educational matters, the design of the curriculum, the writing of the textbooks and the selection of the vice head-teachers (Bulletin, 1991, vol. 619, pp. 3-8; Bulletin, 1993, vol. 639, p. 19).

The main aim of the Federation was the decentralization of the administration system (Bulletin, 1995, vol. 645, p. 22). In this regard, a chairman of the Federation had specifically pointed out: “Decentralization must be a process in our educational system and not a way of transferring responsibilities” (Bulletin, 1995, vol. 646, p. 14).

The period 2000-2009

The Federation pointed to the need for objective and democratic procedures for the selection of the educational administrators at the regional and the school level. They were expected to be the efficient stakeholders aiming at the betterment of the school education (Bulletin, 2008, vol. 695, pp. 7, 16).

Parents’ involvement in schools

The period 1975-1989

For the Federation, teachers, parents and students represent a strong social basis for the implementation of any educational effort (Bulletin, 1985, vol. 575-576, p. 24). More specifically, the Federation supported the idea that parents’ unions should take part in the organization and management of the school life (Bulletin, 1982, vol. 547, p. 15) and suggested the participation of their representatives in the school’s council and -occasionally- in the school teachers’ committees (Bulletin, 1985, special issue, p. 4).

The period 1990-1999


Additionally, the Federation supported the idea that all the education interest-groups should participate in the educational policy formation (Bulletin, 1991, vol. 619, p. 3). In particular, parents’ representatives should take a position at all levels of the school administration system (Bulletin, 1994-1995, vol. 644, p. 14; Bulletin, 1995, vol. 647, p. 7). For this purpose, the Federation demanded the development of a training system for any education interest-group, such as parents, teachers, administrators (Bulletin, 1993, vol. 636, p. 12).

The period 2000-2009


Discussion

Taking into account the results of this study, it becomes obvious that the Federation of Secondary School Teachers in Greece strongly underlines the role of teachers in the efforts for educational change and school improvement. As early as 1980s, the Federation has already insisted that any educational change cannot be effectively attained without the active participation of teachers (Bulletin, 1987, vol. 600, p.11; Bulletin, 2002, vol. 672, p. 2). This idea has broadly expressed by the union in the period under consideration and it has been in accordance with the relevant discussion and educational research on this topic in the European context.

More specifically, the Federation has pointed out that teachers receive the failures of the implementation of educational policies at schools and has urged the need for teachers’ in-service training along their career (Bulletin, 1994-1995, vol. 644, p. 24). This issue has also been regarded as an important factor for school empowerment. Such a training program should have been related with decentralized and meritocratic educational policies. In this regard, the Federation highlights the need for the development of integrated scientific and pedagogical training programs, which would contribute to the upgrading of teachers’ educational background and the promotion of their professionalism.

In particular, it has demanded introductory training courses for the newly appointed teachers, one-year full time courses for the in-service teachers and short-term specialized educational courses during the school year. Moreover, the Federation considers teachers’ motivation for participating in education action research as a very important issue for their professional development during their work at schools. In such an approach, the Federation suggests the implementation of research activities in the classrooms and the strengthening of teachers’ appropriate skills for problem-solving in the every-day battle at school.

Regarding school leadership, the Federation appears to make reference to the school administration system instead of leadership. This can be explained by the fact that, in the Greek centralized system of administration, the head-teacher mainly acts as an administrator trying to manage the everyday school matters. Nevertheless, in such a context, the Federation underlines the necessity for changes in the school head-teachers’ selection procedures. It suggests the initiation of decentralized decision-making policies and the active participation of teachers in such a process. However, it has not provided yet specific propositions on how teachers could exercise the control at schools. It rather focuses on some administration issues that teachers are thought to be concerned.

Additionally, teachers, parents and students are perceived as dynamic education interest-groups for the
betterment of the school system. Since 1980s the Federation has particularly recommended the active involvement of parents in the school matters and has underlined the need for teachers’-parents’ close cooperation for the school improvement. Nevertheless, it must be stated that the Federation’s suggestions do not provide specific guidelines for the attainment of this purpose.

Conclusion

It can be stated that, over the last three decades, the Federation’s school empowerment politics are closely related with the advancement of teachers’ roles in schools, who, in turn, are considered to be the basic factors for the school improvement. In this approach, the professional development of teachers through their lifelong training, their active participation in the school administration system and their cooperation with parents at school are mostly provided as important aspects. These issues are also being highlighted as key points in the current literature about school empowerment. However, although the Federation firmly advocates policies for the attainment of the education quality at schools, it is expected to articulate more constructive propositions regarding teachers’ reinforcement matters, head-teachers’ leading role at school and the ways of parents’ intervention in the school life. Meanwhile, educational politics in Greece should encourage the Federation for active participation in the education decision-making process aiming at innovations in the school culture and the school empowerment.

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REFERENCES


