Democratic Operation and Organization of the School Leadership

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Abstract

This research study comes to highlight findings in relation to issues of democratic organization and operation of the school leadership. For the needs of the study, the quantitative methodology was followed and an electronic questionnaire (google form) was delivered through the Directorates of Primary Education of Greece to teachers' emails. The sample, which was consisted of 358 individuals, was selected by following the simple random sampling technique. An electronic questionnaire with 14 close-ended questions was constructed, whereas there was also a session of demographic and vocational data including questions regarding gender, age, additional studies, years of service, and training in democratic operation and organization of school units. According to the findings, the participants do not state in a clear and unequivocal way whether they are satisfied or not with their participation in school decision-making, with the ability of students to influence school events or whether the Greek school can function in a democratic way. They somewhat agree that the school principal distributes responsibilities to the members of the school community, and treats equally all the staff members, as partners. Finally, statistically, gender, years of service, and training in issues of school democratic organization and functioning seem to affect some subscales.

Keywords: Democracy, leadership, operation, organization, teachers, primary education.

I.   Introduction

School units constitute an important social organization and therefore consist of actors, each of whom has special characteristics, talents, experiences and competencies. Administration is called upon to develop and combine its actors in a way to create a sustainable competitive advantage and an important intellectual capital (Hargreaves, 1999). In this vein, leadership could operate as a process of influencing thinking, feelings, attitudes and behaviors of a small or large, formal or informal group with the aim of implementing goals effectively (Bouradas, 2005; Fullan, 2002; Gallego, 2010), organizational change, responsiveness and improvement (Hargreaves, 2013).

With regard to educational organizations, there are several peculiarities and contradictions regarding the delimitation of the purpose of their operation (often unclear), its roles, the intended results, the existence or lack of administrative autonomy. To clarify, "the goals of education policy are neither static nor permanent, thereby requiring ongoing research to analyze changes over the course of time, as well as changes in goals, instruments and actors" (Žiljak, 2019).

In any case, however, the organization of the educational unit constitutes a process of defining work, transferring responsibilities and authority, establishing relationships that allow individuals to work effectively and efficiently (Brinia, 2008). The areas of organization may concern the content of studies, the management of human resources, its logistical infrastructure, resources, internal operation as well as the connection of the educational unit with the environment and the local community.

The overview of the relevant literature reveals significant references to different types of leadership: shared leadership, transforming leadership, transactional leadership, passive leadership, democratic leadership. The intense scientific interest in this field is linked to the necessity of investigating educational results

systematically as well as the contribution of the leader to the effective operation of each school unit (Bush, 2008; Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994).

In the context of this work, the interest will focus on the model of democratic leadership that advocates rights to all individuals, participation in decision making, equity and fair treatment to all, and informed choice (Brčić Kuljiš & Gutović, 2019; Davies et al., 2002).

In addition, it recognizes the necessity of the participation of many actors in the production of policy in the organization and in the decision-making process and to some extent it is related to the type of distributed leadership (Balias & Bestias, 2016). It also involves teachers at higher levels of participation through the utilization of their diverse mindset and skill-set and encourages knowledge and practices sharing, innovation and initiatives (Panagiotopoulos, Karanikola, & Zogopoulos, 2018). The aforementioned type is significantly promoted by the Greek legal framework through initiatives, such as, the director collaborates with the teachers' association, the teachers' association participates equally in decision-making, etc.

In this vein, this study attempts to shed light onto teachers' perceptions in relation to issues of democratic organization and operation of the school leadership and at the same time its readiness to implement corresponding policies.

II. Materials And Methods

Abiding by the aforementioned research aim, primary education teachers were called to respond to the following research questions: Does the Greek public school demonstrate elements of democratic organization and operation in terms of leadership? Is there a correlation of participants' perceptions with their demographic and professional characteristics, such as gender, years of service and relevant training in the democratic functioning of the school administration?

For the needs of the study, the quantitative methodology was followed and an electronic questionnaire (google form) was delivered through the Directorates of Primary Education of Greece to teachers' emails. Quantitative research approaches are applied to "describe current conditions, investigate relations, and study cause-effect phenomena" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012, p.9).

The construction of the questionnaire was based on relative literature review. It is also worth mentioning that it was piloted to a smaller sample size of 20 individuals in order to identify any misinterpretations, to assess whether or not the whole project is feasible, and realistic and make any required changes (Thomas, 2004).

The sample, which was finally consisted of 358 individuals, was selected by following the simple random sampling technique. This sampling selection is out of the researcher's control and allows a random procedure to select the sample (Robson, 2007).

Regarding the ethics of this educational research, an attempt was made to apply the following ethical principles: to benefit the participants and not to harm them; to establish relations of mutual trust; to promote accuracy and honesty; and to respect dignity and worth of all people (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). In addition, participants had complete anonymity, since the researcher did not know them and their identities were hidden (Bryman, 2016).

Following, the data were analyzed with the statistical software package SPSS 28.0 for Windows. Frequency distribution analysis, percentages, means and standard deviations were performed for descriptive analysis of quantitative variables. A normality test of the variables was applied (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test), which showed that there is no normal distribution ($p=0.000<0.05$).

The correlation of the organization and operation of the School Administration with demographic and professional characteristics of the sample (gender, years of service and training on the operation of democratic school administration) was carried out with the non-parametric test Kruskal–Wallis H and

Mann-Whitney U. In addition, a test of reliability, apparent validity and internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha) of the 14 questions about school leadership was applied and as a whole showed 0,898 (a=0.898>0.70), which represents satisfactory quality of the measurement (see Table 1).

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha test

	Number of questions	Index
School administration	14	0,898

Research results

Regarding the demographic and professional characteristics of the respondents (see Table 2) in terms of gender, the majority (75,4%) are women and the majority (63,1%) belong to the age group of 23-40 years. Regarding their studies, 54,3% have additional studies (2nd degree, Master degree, PhD degree), while a remarkable percentage (45,8%) has only the basic degree. In terms of years of total service, the majority (55,9%) have 1-10 years. Regarding their participation in training in democratic operation and organization of school units, 60,9% have never attended any relevant training programs.

Table 2. Demographic and professional characteristics of the sample

Variables		Frequency (N=358)	Percentage %
Gender	male	88	24,6
	female	270	75,4
Age	23-30	138	38.5
	31-40	88	24,6
	41- 50	62	17,3
	51-60	70	19,6
Additional studies	degree	164	45,8
	2nd degree	12	3,4
	master degree	170	47,5
	PhD degree	12	3,4
Total years of service in education	1-5	108	30,2
	6-10	92	25,7
	11-15	50	14,0
	16-20	36	10,1
	21 and over	72	20,1
Training in democratic operation & organization of school units	at an academic level (undergraduate, postgraduate, training course)	108	30,2
	training from the Ministry of Education or its competent agents	32	8,9
	I have never attended any relevant training	218	60,9

Regarding the organization and operation of the school leadership (see Table 3) the overall average value is 3,60 (somewhat agree). The individual mean values of the statements range from 2,88 (Neither agree nor disagree) "You are satisfied with the participation and role of students in the school's decision-making

process" to 4,37 (Strongly agree) "The school leadership improves its quality, when it operates in a democratic way".

Table 3. Distribution of mean values and standard deviations of school leadrship operation

Statements	Mean*	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum
1. The principal allocates responsibilities to the members of the school community (teachers, students, parents).	3,93	0,057	1	5
2 The principal treats all staff members equally, as partners.	3,94	0,056	1	5
3. Your school is open to parents and the wider social environment.	4,05	0,054	1	5
4. Students influence and make themselves heard in school events.	2,90	0,075	1	5
5. You are satisfied with your participation and role in the school's decision-making process.	3,47	0,061	1	5
6. You are satisfied with students' participation and role in the school's decision-making process.	2,88	0,060	1	5
7. Every teacher can influence the decisions concerning school life to a significant extent.	3,72	0,057	1	5
8. Every student's opinion and participation are important to school life.	3,82	0,062	1	5
9. The school leadership is democratic.	3,79	0,063	1	5
10. Pupils' participation in the evaluation of the school contributes positively to the quality of its work.	3,68	0,062	1	5
11. Parents' participation in the evaluation of the school contributes positively to the quality of its work.	3,18	0,044	1	5
12. The influence and participation of students and parents in the management and decision-making of the school contribute positively to the quality of its work.	3,36	0,054	1	5
13. School leadership improves its quality, when it operates in a democratic way.	4,37	0,048	1	5
14. The Greek public school is able to function in a democratic way.	3,32	0,061	1	5
Total	3,60	0,058	1	5

Note (1= Strongly disagree, 2= somewhat disagree, 3= Neither disagree nor agree, 4= somewhat agree, 5= strongly agree)

Correlation of School leadership with gender

The non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H correlation test and the Mann-Whitney U test were performed with a statistical significance level of $\alpha=0,05$ (5%) to check the correlation of the school leadership with the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Regarding the correlation of the statements of the organization and operation of the school leadership with the gender, the Mann-Whitney U test showed that there is a statistically significant correlation with one of the 14 statements (see Table 4): "You are satisfied with your participation and role in the school's decision-making process" (statement 5). The Mann-Whitney test (U (88, 270) =2220,400, p=0,008<0,05) shows that men agree more (mean rank=108,25) than women (mean rank=85,38) on this statement.

Table 4. Correlation of school leadership with gender

Number	Statement	Gender	N	Rank average	Mann-Whitney U	p-value
5	You are satisfied with your participation and role in the school's decision-making process	Male	88	108,25	2220,400	0,008
		Female	270	85,38		

Correlation of school leadership with years of service

Regarding the correlation of school leadership with years of service, the Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there is a statistically significant correlation with one of the 14 statements: "The principal treats all staff members equally, as partners" (Statement 2) ($X2$ (4) =11,186, p=0,035<0,05). The Mann-Whitney U test (see Table 5) shows that significant statistical differences with years of service are found in the categories: a) "6-10" and "21 and over" (U (92, 72)=553,000, p=0.006< 0.05) and b) "16-20" and "21 and over" (U(36, 72)=216,000, p=0,034<0,05). Those with "21 and over" years of service agree more (mean rank=48,20) than those with "6-10" (mean rank=35,46) and more (mean rank=32,53) than those who have "16-20" (mean rank=21,48) on this statement.

Table 5. Correlation of school administration with years of service

Number	Statement	Years of service	N	Rank average	Mann-Whitney U	p-value
2	The principal treats all staff members equally, as partners.	6-10	92	35,46	553,000	0,006
		21 and over	72	48,20		
		16-20	36	21,48	216,000	0,034
		21 and over	72	32,53		

Correlation of school leadership with training in democratic organization and school operation

Regarding the correlation of school leadership with training in democratic organization and school operation, the Kruskal-Wallis test showed that there is a statistically significant correlation with two of the 14 statements: a) You are satisfied with your participation and role in the school's decision-making process (statement 5) ($X2$(2) =6,207, p=0,045<0.05). The Mann-Whitney U test (Table 6) (U (32, 218) =556,000, p=0.018<0.05) shows that those who have been trained under the auspices of the Ministry of Education or competent bodies agree more (mean rank=83.68) in relation to those who have not attended any training (mean rank=61.11) on this statement.

b) "You are satisfied with students' participation and role in the school's decision-making process" (statement 6) (X^2(2) =8,870, p=0,021<0.05). The Mann-Whitney U test (Table 6) (U (108, 218) =2298.500, p=0.018<0.05) shows that those who are academically educated agree more (mean rank=94.96) than those who do not have attended any training (mean rank=77.08) on this statement.

Table 6. Correlation of school leadership with training in democratic organization and school operation

Number	Statement	Training in democratic organization and school operation	N	Rank average	Mann-Whitney U	p-value
5	You are satisfied with your participation and role in the school's decision-making process.	training from the Ministry of Education or its competent agents	32	83,68	556,000	0,018
		I have never attended any relevant training	218	61,11		
6	You are satisfied with students' participation and role in the school's decision-making process.	at an academic level (undergraduate, postgraduate, training course	108	94,96	2298,500	0,018
		I have never attended any relevant training	218	77,08		

III. Discussion

In the present research study, the perceptions of the Greek primary education teachers on the democratic organization and operation of the school leadership were investigated. According to the research findings, the participants do not state in a clear and unequivocal way (Neither agree nor disagree) (mean=2,88-3,47) whether they are satisfied with the participation and the role of students and teachers in the process of decision-making; the ability of students to influence school events; the ability to contribute with the participation of parents and students in decision-making; and the evaluation by parents of the school to enhance the quality of the work provided. However, parental participation should not be underestimated as, according to the World Bank (as cited in Mitchell, 2017) encourages demand for a higher quality of education and ensures that schools reflect local priorities, needs and values.

Furthermore, they do not state in a clear and unequivocal way whether the Greek school is able to function in a democratic way. However, they quite agree (mean=3,68-4,37) that the school leader distributes responsibilities to the members of the school community (teachers, students, parents), and cooperates equally with the staff members.

However, according to relative literature review, deliberative dialogue and collective decision-making are important components of democratic school leadership, whereas teachers' comments in relative forums could reflect their concern "for the fair distribution of responsibilities and benefits, effective resource management, and the maintenance of the school's image" (Mitchell, 2017, p.53). In light of this, Starratt (2001) claims that leadership is primarily about cultivating an environment that fosters participation, dialogue, virtues of honesty, freedom and flexibility.

In addition, they somewhat agree that the school is open to parents and the wider social environment; they are satisfied with the participation and role in the school's decision-making process; the participation of each student and evaluation by each student is important for the school life; the administration of the school is

democratic; and the operation of the administration of the school when it operates in a democratic way, contributes positively to the quality of its work. In this vein, a relative study conducted by Karanikola, Panagiotopoulos and Zogopoulos (2019) show that there are various interactions and interdependencies with the internal and external environment, but in some cases, they seem to be quite difficult, demanding and challenging. In addition, children's participation should be seriously considered in the decision- making process, as part of their progressive autonomy, the recognition of their agency as learners-partners, and their contribution to the "school transformation into an inclusive educational democratic community or fellowship" (Esteban, 2022, p. 50).

As a whole, the findings demonstrate that the interviewed teachers of the sample agree (3,60) on the democratic organization and functioning of the school and on accountability as factors that positively affect the quality of the educational work provided. These findings are in alignment with those of Russamsi et al. (2020), according to which school leadership can improve teachers' professionalism and performance. Similarly, according to Nadir (2018) democratic leadership has a substantial impact on improving teacher performance, whereas studies on the relationships between teachers and school principals show that the support received by teachers through their active participation in decision-making processes are important factors of a democratic school (Hoog et al., 2007; Woods, 2005).

Regarding the correlation of respondents' perceptions of the democratic organization and operation of the school with the demographic characteristics, in terms of gender, it is demonstrated that men are more satisfied (mean rank=108,25) with their participation and role in the process of decision-making compared to women (mean rank=85,38).

Besides, those with more years of service (21 and over) consider to a greater extent (mean rank=32,53 or 48,20) that the manager cooperates equally with the staff members compared to those with fewer years of service (mean rank=21, 48 or 35,46). In addition, those who have attended training in issues of democratic organization and functioning of the school are more satisfied (mean rank=83,68) with their participation and role in the decision-making process of the school and with the participation and role of students in the decision-making process (mean rank=94,96) in relation to those who have not attended any relevant training.

However, we should also reflect on some issues related to training and education: investigating teachers' needs, developing appropriate training structures and materials, selecting skilled training agents, applying training interventions, focusing on active techniques and adult education principles (Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2023; Panagiotopoulos, Pertesi, & Karanikola, 2018; Wyant, Manzoni, & McDonald, 2018).

IV.   Conclusion

Teachers' perceptions on the democratic functioning and organization of the school may vary according to educational experience, personal beliefs and the culture of each country. However, there are some common understandings and values that are widely recognized as important when it comes to the democratic functioning of the school. They understand that they have the right and the duty to participate in decision-making regarding the operation of the school. This participation may also include participation in school assemblies or education councils.

They support transparency in the operation of the school and open communication with parents and the community. They recognize the importance of education not only in the domain of knowledge, but also in the domain of critical thinking, the development of social skills and the preparation of students for active participation in democratic society. However, they express reluctance in procedures for parents' participation in decision-making and evaluation.

Potentially, teachers may experience challenges related to parent assessment, such as the time and energy it requires, as well as any differing views with parents about their children's education. They may worry that parental involvement may lead to interference in their decisions or create pressure to raise student scores.

Concluding, this specific study, by following a descriptive approach, focuses mostly on the participants' perceptions. However, these findings cannot be generalized for the whole population. Thus, some more relevant studies, both qualitative and quantitative, could be conducted towards this direction.

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