

Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Senior Teachers' Perceptions during Times of Change in Bahrain

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Received: 27 Nov. 2012, Revised 13 Dec. 2012; Accepted 18 Dec. 2012

Abstract: Since 2005, the Kingdom of Bahrain has been undergoing radical educational reforms touching upon systems, educational quality assurance, school improvements, teacher preparation and training, teaching and learning, and vocational education. The present paper focuses on the perceptions of senior teachers (STs)—termed heads of departments in other countries—from the first two schools involved in reforming the secondary educational system in Bahrain in 2005. This paper covers an area in which empirical evidence is lacking and reflects the STs' perceptions and views concerning times of change in Bahrain. STs are vital change agents in any educational reform and are expected to play a crucial role because of the knowledge and experience they possess. This study aims to answer the following research questions: What is the level of understanding of STs concerning how government reforms were introduced to their schools? What are the implications of such knowledge regarding their roles during reforms? A qualitative case study was adopted, and data were collected through field analysis, informal and formal interviews, and a focus group where participants were purposively identified. The consistency in the STs' responses forms the basis for the need to re-evaluate their role during change periods. The findings suggest that perceiving the STs' roles as rational and predictable proved to be incorrect in that the evidence showed variance between what was supposed to occur and what happened in reality. Adherence to Ministry of Education orders was seriously affected by STs' professional judgements and priorities. The evidence suggests that externally imposed change is problematic, and uncertainty is unavoidable.

Keywords: middle management; change management; senior teachers; Bahrain educational reform

INTRODUCTION

Senior teachers (STs) are vital change agents in any educational reform. In more liberal systems, these agents are expected to be original, entrepreneurs, and partners in executing national frameworks. In contrast, in authoritarian systems, they are overseen as partners and perceived to be part of the top-down chain of command. It is more of a "this is what you need" policy than a "what do you need" policy. However, according to Albaker (2008), in Bahrain, the rationality of the centralised system left STs questioning their status during times of reform in terms of their current roles and involvement in the planning of reforms while, at the same time, complaining about their limited understanding of the projects involved in the reforms.

This study is part of larger research project was undertaken in 2008 by Albaker (2008) to examine how the schools implemented the Unified Track System (UTS) managed the accompanying changes from the preparation to the implementation. It focuses on the perceptions of middle management, in terms of STs, concerning how reforms were introduced in the first two schools involved in reforming the secondary educational system in Bahrain. As such, this paper covers an area for which empirical evidence is lacking and reflects middle managements' perceptions and voice related to times of change.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a small Middle Eastern country located in the heart of the Gulf Region. The country has a total of 36 secondary and secondary-intermediate government schools. Because of the segregated educational system, 20 of these schools are girls' schools and 16 are boys' schools. They are fully gender-segregated in terms of both pupils and staff, as well, where boys' schools have both male pupils and staff, and the opposite is true in the girls' schools. The reasons for this segregation of sexes are both religious and cultural.

The present study focuses on the UTS because this was the latest major reform introduced in the secondary school system in 2005 to attempt to overcome the older system's deficiencies. The UTS focuses on attempts to develop secondary education in Bahrain to match the emerging needs of society and the market. After the Ministry of Education (MoE) evaluated the old secondary system, certain issues were raised regarding the quality and suitability of graduates' educations. For example, students tended to avoid the literary track either because of a lack of university entrance opportunities or because of employment opportunities after graduation.

According to the MoE (2005), the changes introduced by the UTS involved the following aspects: improving the structure of academic counselling and professional advice, implementing curriculum changes, introducing learning resource centres to promote self-learning opportunities and enhance the research skills of students, supporting project development and giftedness centres, and implementing a community service track.

The new initiative (UTS) was planned and introduced to schools by the MoE. A higher committee, which was appointed by the minister of education, and five specialised committees worked on the UTS until it emerged in its final form. The new system merged the three main secondary tracks (scientific, literacy, and commercial) into one track in an attempt to reduce the unnecessary segmentation of subjects. Students, thus, were now obligated to take both core courses and elective courses. The core courses formed 98 hours (60%) of the total 156 hours, whereas the elective courses formed 58 hours (40%) (Ministry of Education, 2005). The core courses provided students with general common knowledge and helped them make future academic or work choices, whereas the elective courses were chosen by students according to their preferences and interests. By implementing this initiative, it was expected that students would be better able to consider in greater depth and with greater accuracy what they thought was more appropriate for their future.

The main sites of study were the Alkaramah Secondary Boys' School (BS) and the Almajd Secondary Girls' School (GS). The former was established in 1940 and is one of the oldest schools in Bahrain. It has a total of seven STs, which are equivalent to heads of departments in other countries. The GS was established in 1980 and has a total of eight STs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As House and Watson (1995) emphasise, "managing change successfully[...] ultimately depends upon understood and shared values and objectives, for the managers and the managed" (p. 19). Sergiovanni (2000) argues for morally based leadership because it relies on the power of relating subordinates to the values and ideas of the school. Furthermore, Fullan (2000) emphasises the importance of both top-down and bottom-up strategies during periods of change if change is to happen, and different layers of the targeted population should be involved in the process at certain stages. However, Hussey (2000) relates recipient participation to both the type of change and its urgency. This means that although recipient participation is helpful, its necessity should be determined according to the situation. Tensions arise when determining the role of middle management during times of change. For instance, it is difficult to categorise STs as the managers or the managed, the bottom or top, or determine whether they should be involved in the early stages of change or in the later stages. Because they are accountable to different sources, their roles change

rapidly during times of reform as a result of the dynamics involved in leading and being led at the same time (Vongalis-Macrow, 2009).

The STs are acknowledged internally as a force of change; however, not enough attention is paid to this group by policymakers. Busher and Harris (1999) emphasise the nature of the STs leadership roles during times of reform as leading while learning. Indeed, the culture of some departments may lead the reform in a particular school. Factors such as the type of the subject taught and professional development activities offered contribute to the level of change acceptance. According to Farrell, Hentschke, and Mathias (2009) and Busher and Harris (1999), in the age of globalisation and information, different circumstances dictate the STs' levels of influence and roles in their departments during times of change.

Gronn (2000) argues that it is erroneous to associate leadership with an organisation's headship. Rather, leadership is determined by the flow of influence in an organisation, where the organisational structure and agents' actions are bridged by forms of distributed leadership. In Bahrain, STs are theoretically recognised in the structure with the expectation that their first priority and duty is to influence teaching and learning. However, this is not the case most of the time because they are consumed by day-to-day administrative tasks and by chaos during times of change.

STUDY DESIGN

This qualitative study aims to explain change management in an educational context by relying on STs' assumptions and perceptions concerning change. The investigation details their interpretation of change in their own lives and in their own words. Qualitative research is "a particular tradition in social science that fundamentally depends on watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms" (Kirk & Miller, 1986, p. 9). Furthermore, this research methodology tends to collect empirical evidence "that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 3).

One of the advantages of this type of research is that it offers in-depth data about the studied object (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Silverman, 2005). Usually, the investigator in qualitative research is trying to establish a pattern or theory from the participants' views. In building up their theory or understanding of a phenomenon, the methods the researcher uses to collect data mostly depend on the participants' actions and reactions. Bryman (1999, p. 59) argues that in qualitative research, "theory is an outcome of the research not a precursor." Therefore, in most cases of qualitative research, investigators prefer not to confine themselves to a theoretical framework that might not fit the real social settings. Imposing such a theoretical framework might weaken and damage their findings. This study focuses on answering the following research questions: What is the level of understanding of STs concerning how government reforms were introduced to their schools? What are the implications of such knowledge regarding their roles during reforms? A qualitative case study was adopted to achieve the study objectives. A case study is one of the methods often used to answer qualitative-driven questions. Its importance derives from the "emphasis upon the uniqueness of events or actions, arising from their being shaped by the meanings of those who are the participants in the situation" (Pring, 2000, p. 40). It also has great potential for providing in-depth, rich data about the case being studied beyond numerical analysis (Merriam, 1998). A case study, according to Bogdan and Biklen (1982, p. 58), is "a detailed examination of one setting, or one single subject, or one single depository of documents, or one particular event." Bassey (2003) elaborates more on how sufficient data collected from the study can help the researcher in different ways, for example, "to explore significant features of the case, or create plausible interpretations of the case" (2003, p. 109). Furthermore, Stake (2005) emphasises the complexity of the case being studied by stating that it is not something that can be looked at or analysed detached from its context. Therefore, the understanding of the case context enhances the analysis of the whole case.

Different methods of data collection were used to obtain as much related data as possible, including field analysis, informal and formal interviews, and a focus group. The fieldwork aimed to improve the

researcher's understanding of the context. It involved observing the day-to-day life of the school, how it functioned, and how changes affected it. A daily journal was used to document each day's experiences. These journals contained a detailed description of each situation, including dates, times, names, conversations, events, and settings. Additionally, documents may play a critical role in clarifying embedded practices and can sometimes reveal information that can explain certain behaviours. Therefore, documents such as letters, memoranda, agendas, administrative documents, progress reports, policy documents, regulations, and official statistics contents were analysed. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that different viewpoints and opinions were covered in addressing the research questions. Three formal semi-structured individual interviews in the GS and two in the BS were conducted. Each interview involved either one or two sessions, varying from 45 to 60 min. Additionally, one focus group was conducted in the BS. The focus of those interviews was seeking STs' perceptions on the process of change before, during, and after the UTS introduction. Participants' rights, anonymity, and confidentiality were assured, and their consent was obtained. All interviews were conducted in Arabic.

The data collected were transcribed and organised into computerised sheets to ease retrieval of the data when required and to build a reliable, organised database. Transcriptions were read and revisited to enhance the researcher's understanding of the situation. A manageable coding scheme was developed. The data were coded into colours and symbols to refine the initial transcription. Moreover, patterns within the data collected—found by matching the similar and contrasting the different—were investigated. After finding the patterns, they were converted into themes and labelled. These themes, combined with initial themes from the literature, were merged and developed. The previous steps were repeated until a final category system was developed. These categories were tested by presenting them to some of the participants involved in the study, and their comments were revised. It is worth mentioning that the analyses of the textual data generated from field notes, document analysis, individual interview transcripts, and focus group transcripts started with a within-case analysis followed by a cross-case analysis. Regarding the transcripts, quotes used in the study were translated and then passed to a colleague who transcribed them. Both versions of the translations were discussed and agreed on to create the final version we thought most reflected what participants intended to say in their own language. In the following section, themes generated from the findings are discussed for each school.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In line with the purpose of the study, the findings and discussion are reported, according to each site findings, under the following subheadings: insufficient time to communicate the UTS vision, STs caught in the middle, and the complex reality: translating policy into practice.

Senior Teachers' Stories in the Alkaramah Boys' School

In this study, STs were considered middle managers. Their perceptions as mediators of change were sought. Most STs in the school responded to the UTS as "strategic compliers," as Gleeson and Shain (1999, p. 482) describe. The STs bended and accepted parts of the UTS and tried to adjust their behaviour while also retaining their commitment to their teachers and students. Findings from the BS are provided in the following paragraphs.

Insufficient Time to Communicate the UTS Vision.

The middle managers interviewed spoke of "being lost" at the beginning. They related their feelings to poor communication of the UTS vision and the short and rapid introduction period. The absence of a vision left space for speculation about the main purpose of implementing the UTS. Blandford (2006) argues that STs need to be part of the planning, implementation, and adoption of any initiative to assure effective change. As one ST stated:

For me personally, I did not have a clear vision of UTS at the beginning. There was a general complaint about the quality of commercial and literature department graduates. But I think it is one of many reasons (Interview, ST, M 1).

Moreover, as a result of this lack of a clear vision for the objectives and aims of the UTS, STs found themselves forced to begin without the ability to satisfy their basic need of mastering what they were going to communicate to their teachers about the UTS. However, daily involvement in the UTS and having to solve problems improved their confidence and capacity to help.

Respondent 1: We felt lost at the beginning, with only a vague vision about the whole thing. After all, if you do not have it, you cannot pass it on (smiling). Things started to become clearer day after day. But I think one meeting with the Ministry official to communicate the vision to us was certainly not enough” (Focus group, ST, M 1).

At this point, STs described their efforts to provide a clear vision to their teachers and answer their questions as discretionary. Every ST tried their best to deliver; however, how the UTS reached every teacher was highly related to how the STs understood it, which, consequently, affected teachers’ perceptions of the UTS. STs relied on the head teacher’s knowledge of the UTS. In this case, hierarchal information transformation resulted in - instead of avoiding -ambiguity.

Formally, UTS was discussed by the school board. Teachers had been informed via their senior teachers. At that point, it was a discretionary effort, whereas every head teacher transferred the UTS image as he understood it. Nothing formal like booklets or brochures was distributed until the second semester (Interview, ST, M 3).

In addition, STs sensed that the shortage of essential information about the UTS not only affected them, but it also affected parents. They described the efforts of the MoE in educating parents as “unpretentious” and “media-oriented.” It was not sufficient and did not emphasise what mattered.

Even now, if you ask me, parents have incomplete understanding of UTS, which I think was a publicity error at the school and the Ministry level (Interview, ST, M 3).

Another key concern STs expressed was related to the planning of the UTS. All STs interviewed appraised the project as it is described in papers and believed in its potential to improve secondary schooling in Bahrain. However, the plans were too ambitious, and on several occasions, STs reported their frustration with the failure of the MoE to deliver on their initial promises. Their argument was that planning for implementation was as important as the policy planning itself.

Respondent 2: I think UTS implementation needed to be planned more carefully. For example, we have been promised a re-evaluation of the curriculum to fit the new system. However, what happened was complete chaos (Focus group, ST, M 1).

A major complaint from STs was the short introduction period. STs participated in one meeting with a MoE official, which included teachers and parents, for 2 hr. A number of questions about this meeting arose from the point of view of STs as to how to accommodate the needs of such a diverse audience in one meeting and whether one meeting was enough. The tone of the meeting was explanatory and defensive. Despite these issues, STs understood how the system worked and relied on the senior management of the school to update them and provide answers to their questions.

Respondent 2: The meeting with the Ministry official was to tell us about UTS and not to explain or discuss it.

Respondent 1 (continued): The introduction about the project was general, and we have been promised that we will get details later on in our meetings with the school management. This shows the limited time we had before implementation (Focus group, ST, M 1).

Although the MoE tried its best to avoid uncertainty by approaching change rationally, which seemed to make sense on paper, still chaos during implementation was inevitable. STs felt disengaged in terms of mastering the UTS before implementation. Surprisingly, no reconstruction of culture was reported by any of the STs: they seemed to accept the situation and attempted to work with what they had. This raises questions about their desire to be involved in policymaking and whether they perceive themselves, realistically, as simply another link in the chain of command. The inability of STs to notice significant changes in their roles in the new system could offer an explanation for their laid-back attitude in their willingness to be involved in policymaking.

Caught in the Middle

STs during change periods feel squeezed from above and from below (Gleeson & Shain, 1999). Indeed, a common phrase used by STs when interviewed was “caught/trapped in the middle.” One ST described his position as “we are trapped in the middle. I feel we are at the edge of a wall separating two worlds, separating teachers from senior management” (Interview, ST, M 3).

All STs interviewed demonstrated a positive attitude toward the MoE, senior management, and teachers. All orders received from the MoE revolved around improving school effectiveness, and all responses from teachers, whether positive or negative, revolved around improving the performance of students. However, understanding both sides did not make the STs lives easier.

Respondent 1: We suffered a lot between meeting the Ministry requirements and teachers complaining about a long curriculum and short teaching time. Both are right, but striking a balance is not easy at all (Focus Group, ST, M 1).

Their attempt to strike a balance characterises their behaviour of being task-oriented when it comes to MoE orders and people-oriented in understanding the needs of teachers (Owens, 2003). In some cases, the STs forced teachers to implement the changes regardless of the complaints, whereas in other cases, they manipulated the orders and responded positively to the voices of their teachers. STs described their teachers during change as being positive, hard workers who love their jobs and are willing to change.

Respondent 1: In my department, I have teachers who love their jobs and spend a lot of their free time preparing for lessons using e-learning technologies. No one has asked them to do this.

Respondent 2 (continued): I think implementing two projects at the same time helped us in the school. Around 90% of our teachers willingly use new technology in their daily teaching. This consumes time and effort, as you know. I see many of my teachers are willing to work and are enthusiastic, as well (Focus group, ST, M 1).

Nevertheless, a level of dependency and resistance from the teachers was reported. Teachers looked up to their STs to provide solutions to their problems during crisis. They perceived their STs as leading professionals with the answers for emerging problems, which is common according to Brown & Rutherford, 1998. It is an embedded belief and practice in the culture of the BS to attribute problem solving to a higher position. In some cases, STs were not pleased by this assumption. As one ST said:

Nobody has helped us as much as the school management. They dealt with our problems and connected us with the Ministry. About my department, teachers were asking me questions and depended on me more than I depended on them in spreading UTS ideology (Interview, ST, M 1).

In all cases where resistance from teachers was reported, the reasons were associated with external, rather than internal, factors. A lack of resources, the rapid introduction, and the unclear vision were frequently repeated when STs spoke about the reasons for resistance.

One of the difficulties I have faced was with the teachers' acceptance of the idea itself, simply because they were not aware of the nature of the project, and even now, they have many questions about it (Interview, ST, M 1).

However, positive perceptions were reported when asked about the performance of senior management during change. Senior management demonstrated an acceptable level of understanding of the UTS and kept STs informed about all information they possessed about it. The same assumption teachers had about their STs was repeated between STs and senior management; this assumption was generated by access to information.

The people most educated about UTS were the senior management. They attended more meetings about it than us. The head teacher kept us informed about everything. He contacted me directly from time to time about the needs of the department (Interview, ST, M 3).

In terms of providing support and professional growth to match the UTS implementation, STs were satisfied with the level of support offered by their senior management, whereas a lack of training was considered to be the MoE's responsibility. It seems that senior management was able to make a genuine impression that they were doing all they could. Paying attention to the needs of teachers and understanding their feelings yielded loyalty and eased the pressure on STs. The challenge for STs was not meeting the requirements of the senior management; rather, it was meeting the demands of the MoE.

Respondent 2: The school management helped us right from the start. They facilitated smooth implementation as much as they could. In addition, they delegated responsibilities where possible and tried to educate parents about the project.

Respondent 1 (continued): Academic and Counselling Office (ACO) members significantly helped us, and the school management was keen to understand our needs and cooperate with us when needed (Focus group, ST, M 1).

Translating Policy into Practice: The Complex Reality

Although policies are made at upper managerial levels, STs have a significant role in deciding what matters and in prioritising actions. They make their decisions relying on their administrative and academic experience (Brown & Rutherford, 1998). Furthermore, even if their compliance is politically oriented (i.e., they have to obey orders), their actions are professionally oriented and concerned with the development of teachers and students. All STs spoke about their shock at the expansion of the UTS without waiting for the piloting stage to be completed. It was expected and pronounced that the UTS would initially be piloted in two schools. However, the second year witnessed the implementation of the UTS in more schools, regardless of the promises made. STs reported their dissatisfaction about generalising the UTS so soon. They claimed that obstacles that had arisen during the first year of implementation still had not been overcome and questioned the advisability of risking the UTS in other schools, bearing in mind that the two schools chosen to pioneer the project were two of the best and, therefore, the remaining schools would be less competent and less capable of successful achievement.

As I see it, UTS was supposed to be piloted first. This is why they started implementing it in two schools, I think, and this is what was announced. But I was surprised to see it implemented the year after in more schools. I think it would have been better if they had waited at least long enough to study the outcomes for the cohort from this school and then generalise it (Interview, ST, M 1).

In addition, STs shared their teachers' concerns about the mixed-ability classes emerging from the UTS implementation. One of the main cornerstones of the UTS is dealing with all new students in the first year as

equals. Nevertheless, a significant gap was evident in the classroom. STs assumed themselves to be morally responsible for solving their teachers' problems, and every ST dealt with this issue differently, according to the staff and resources available (Emerson & Goddard, 1993).

Respondent 2: Our problem with UTS is that it has been implemented on the basis that all students, regardless of their abilities and tendencies, share the first year. The problem is that the system reduces teaching hours and teachers have to deal with huge individual differences in the classroom.

Respondent 1: Yes, it was a serious challenge: mixed-ability classes. Therefore, we suggested to the school management to redistribute students into two classes based on their abilities. I consider it as a pioneering effort in our school and it proved it works. This was the only applicable solution we reached in line with our capacity.

Respondent 2: For us, we were not as blessed as my colleague's department. They had an advantage that no other department got. We have a lower teacher:courses ratio. We tried to overcome this problem by demanding every teacher change his teaching style. Unfortunately, not every teacher was capable of doing so. Other schools are suffering even more than we are (Focus group, ST, M 1).

Whether the differences between students were just in the minds of the teachers—because all students come from the same secondary schooling system—or were a reality, it seems that the culture of the school and those working in it dominates practice. Unless culture is unlocked and negotiated, it is difficult to guarantee real change (Blandford, 2006).

Senior Teachers' Stories in the Almajd Girls' School

Spillane (2006) argued that emphasising the role of heroic leadership is problematic because it implies that school leadership equates to the head teacher, thus neglecting other leaders and their roles in the school. Indeed, the current status and form of power possessed by the ST in the GS marginalises their role in the process of change. Their responses to the UTS varied between being strategic compliers (looking after their people and implementing the rules at the same time) and unwilling compliers (more sceptical and disenchanted with the ethos of the UTS) (Gleeson & Shain, 1999, p. 479-482). Findings from the GS are reported in the following paragraphs.

Insufficient Time to Communicate the UTS Vision.

In line with the argument of Sammons, Thomas, and Mortimore (1997), departmental culture has a powerful impact on school effectiveness, and STs expressed during the interviews that they viewed themselves as “the link” between the senior management and teachers. However, akin to their colleagues in the BS, the STs felt they were rushed into the UTS implementation. The short introduction period and the quick implementation left them in the same position as their teachers, where they lacked information and appropriate resources.

Many teachers were asking, “What will happen now? What is our situation? What will change for teachers?” Many questions—more than the available answers—and I guess this is normal since it is the beginning. However, I feel that the implementation took place very quickly. Even the most optimistic will agree to that (Interview, ST, F 3).

Busher, Harris, and Wise (2000) and Fullan (2007) identify the lack of access that subject leaders have to information as one of the barriers that affect the initiation stage of change. Indeed, as a result of feeling disempowered by lacking the answers to the questions raised by their teachers, and at the same time not getting these answers from the MoE or the senior management, the STs started to question the planning and the readiness of the MoE and the school for implementing the UTS. One ST interpreted the quick introduction as a sign of disregard for their opinions. She revealed in one of her statements that she had been asked to advise teachers in her department to be more lenient when correcting students' papers.

I do not think the project was carefully studied, and the reason is the quick implementation. We thought they were ready to wait and see the results. But the way it was implemented sent the message that the project should be made to succeed by all means possible. We have been asked to look after students' grades and be more tolerant while correcting their papers, which we did (Interview, ST, F 2).

Another ST interpreted the impulsive implementation as something normal. She argued that this is how every reform is implemented in Bahraini schools. Her point of view, based on her 13 years of experience of teaching and leading, contradicts the concept of Morrison (1998) and Fullan (2007) that change should be perceived as a process rather than an event.

I think the UTS project came to stay. It will be implemented and generalised whatever the results. I think it is the Ministry's policy that for every new project implemented, everyone should clap and cheer for it. It is a culture of no way back (Interview, ST, F 1).

The dilemma created by the type of culture this ST discussed has two dimensions: it implies a drop in her morale because she is convinced that her voice will never be heard, and, furthermore, it will cause resistance to development. As a result, the STs in the school had already come to another conclusion: the UTS would be distorted and end up being the same as the previous system with a different name.

In our department, we are certain that the project will be reshaped slowly to return to the old system. Projects are usually introduced in one shape and end up implemented in another one (Interview, ST, F 2).

Another key issue that concerned the STs was the implementation strategy. All ST staff interviewed, even those holding more information than others, had no clear idea of what would happen next. They speculated, and in some cases firmly asserted, that the UTS would remain. However, what to do next was ambiguous, and they were not sure where they were heading. Brown & Rutherford (1998) believe a lack of direction can hinder the efforts of the departments and the school to improve. From the point of view of the STs in the GS, the MoE is to blame for a lack of improvement.

As for the implementation strategy, we knew nothing about it. We only collected the fixed plans from the Ministry through the registration department, and then we worked out our semester plans according to it (Interview, ST, F 1).

Caught in the Middle

As Brown & Rutherford (1998) describe, the STs are the driving force behind any school. The complexity of their tasks lies in the necessity to accommodate higher orders and the needs of those at the lower levels. Busher et al. (2000) describe the job of the ST as being responsible for the operational work of others. One ST depicted this reality during the interview:

What really bothers me is that I have to deal with two realities. Teachers are the most valuable factor for the success or failure of UTS. Yet, they are overloaded, with no time on their hands. You have to be compassionate with them. After all, you are neither 100% administrator nor 100% teacher. I have to put up with dealing with the complainers. That type of teacher always sees the drawbacks and neglects all advantages. But as I told you, they are exhausted, and I do not know whether this behaviour has become a component of our culture (Interview, ST, F 3).

For her, it was difficult to blame teachers for being pessimistic because she understands what they go through. However, she was also convinced that teachers should not be negative. This dilemma of dealing with two different demands was apparent in all interviews with the STs from the GS. In contrast to the STs from the BS, they demonstrated more negativity toward the UTS and its demands and aligned strongly with their teachers, especially those departments affected negatively by the UTS.

At the beginning, we were promised a new curriculum. But after the implementation, nothing happened. Then the Ministry promised again to change it after five years. This is the reason why teachers in my department are not concerned about UTS. They do not feel affected at all. In some cases, they started resisting, and I had to deal with it by keeping encouraging them (Interview, ST, F 1).

The sense of being squeezed among the STs was augmented by the lack of both support and the appropriate tools to do their jobs and reduce the resistance of teachers. Gleeson & Shain (1999) argue that frustration among STs can produce an attitude of unwilling compliance characterised by resistance and frustration. Symptoms of this attitude were evident in the responses from the STs, who used phrases like “there is nothing much we can do” and “what I’m doing is not enough.”

The school senior management paid special attention to the UTS implementation. On the one hand, they believed in the teachers’ capacity to succeed. On the other hand, as heads of departments, we have been pressured to make sure everything is on the right track, even though there is nothing much we can do (Interview, ST, F 2).

Teachers need to be stimulated to have faith in UTS. Right now, the dominant idea amongst teachers is to keep questioning the capacity of UTS and additions to the system. They still have many questions about the project that need to be answered. I try my best as head of department, but sometimes I feel it is not enough (Interview, ST, F 1).

STs are considered in the literature to be important change agents. Busher et al. (2000) argue for the role of the ST during change times to go beyond initiating and implementing. They emphasise the role of STs in institutionalising change and making sure it is embedded in the system and culture of their departments. However, in the GS, the STs received their directions from the senior management in the school. One ST criticised how their role had been neglected in initiating and implementing the UTS and how this negligence was a major factor in directing the actions of the STs.

I feel that the Ministry and the school did not utilise from the ST effectively in the school. Therefore, since the ST see not much difference in their role or behaviour, you will find many of them taking the teachers’ side and resisting change (Interview, ST, F 3).

The STs in the GS were overwhelmed by the UTS implementation. They lacked help and support and had to deal with teachers who were frustrated by undelivered promises. The MoE might have lost an important ally during the time of change by not paying more attention to the role of STs in the school. The STs felt they had been treated similarly to teachers, yet they were being asked to do much more in supporting the UTS.

Translating Policy into Practice: The Complex Reality

The narratives of the STs in the GS concerning the complexity of the UTS implementation were consistent with their counterparts in the BS. Concerns about the applicability of the newly introduced reform were raised. What distinguishes the responses of these STs from those of the others was that they showed equal concern regarding academic and administrative issues. As Brown & Rutherford (1998) argue, the STs are driven by their academic obligation to improve performance of students and teachers. However, in the GS, the STs paid more attention to the demands made by the MoE than did their colleagues in the BS. For instance, they did not allow their teachers to separate students in the classroom according to their abilities, although they admitted that there was a problem concerning individual differences.

Teachers are suffering from the ever-increasing individual differences in the classroom. The bright students are being disadvantaged now and feel bored most of the time (Interview, ST, F 2).

Another reality the STs had to deal with was the resistance of their teachers to accepting the UTS. As Gleeson & Shain (1999) argue, they have limited room for manoeuvre because they have to understand the teachers' reasons for resisting change. At the same time, they have to act according to the demands of the senior management. This idea was reflected in the discussions with the STs.

The project might be carefully studied and planned for by the Ministry. But in reality, the teachers did not have enough time to study it or give their opinion about it. Therefore, resistance is a normal outcome from my point of view (Interview, ST, F 3).

Therefore, linking this point to the earlier point of not using STs effectively during times of change, it is evident that their knowledge about the context can be highly valuable if the roots of teachers' resistances are to be understood.

Another deviation in the UTS implementation was asking the STs to be more lenient when correcting students' papers, as one middle manager reported. This action had two effects: first, teachers lost confidence in the new system; and second, it misled students, who might then have made wrong choices based on their performance. Improving student choice was one of the main arguments provided by the MoE for adopting the UTS. However, subsequent implementation distorted the idea of choice. Even when students were allowed to make decisions, another problem came to the surface: students started to abandon the difficult subjects and move toward easier choices.

I noticed that the choices made by students are now being oriented by their grades. For instance, if they get low grades in physics, they do not choose the science major and so on. This is wrong, since choice should be based on the interests of the student and not grades (Interview, ST, F 1).

Teachers do not have enough time to cover the curriculum in time. Moreover, because students are being looked after when their papers are graded, they make their choice for the next year wrongly based on their grades. Therefore, they suffer, and teachers also suffer (Interview, ST, F 2).

Unlike their colleagues in the BS, the STs in the GS were strict in following the orders of the MoE, even when they were conflicted with the interests of their teachers and students. This approach takes nothing away from their commitment to the advancement of their teachers and students, yet it is the system in which they are operating that restricts their actions. However, Moses (1985) argues that it is difficult for heads of departments, or senior management in this case, to keep working in a social vacuum with low morale. Indeed, some of the STs in the school tried to cover their frustration, but during open informal discussions, it was hard to miss the demoralised tone in their speech.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF THE STS DURING TIMES OF CHANGE

Senior teachers reflected limited power in influencing the implementation of the UTS. They attributed this to disengagement from the planning stages and agreed that the introduction of the project was quick and did not allow them to react. When asked what they thought about the planning, they varied in their level of involvement and knowledge about the UTS: The more they knew, the more they showed a positive attitude toward the project. Therefore, STs in both schools reported limited power in terms of formally affecting the policy. Nevertheless, the evidence showed that they directly influenced the implementation of the UTS in an informal sense. They had a positive image of their teachers and held teachers accountable for results while, at the same time, resolving conflicts by encouraging a collegial effort and gaining the confidence of teachers by considering their reality. They understood the stress and needs of teachers and tried to help them. Nevertheless, a lack of ministerial support and limited resources restricted their efforts. This is consistent with Ribbins (1997) argument of that STs have to make their own mistakes in order for them to learn trusting their own professional sense and experience.

A positive attitude towards teachers was reported. Resistance was always attributed to external factors: Most of the time, the MoE was held responsible for not delivering on its promises. According to the complex nature of the implementation, there was general agreement that problems should be overcome in the way best suited to the interests of students and teachers, even if it meant not complying with MoE orders. STs in both schools agreed on the inadequacy of the materials, curriculum, and school structure to accommodate the UTS; they also criticised the training courses offered by the MoE for both management and teachers.

The implicit tension that arises from requesting STs to do a lot while knowing little during reform times increases as the accountability stakes and responsibilities grow. More access to information, earlier inclusion in planning stages, and greater support would reduce the pressure on STs and empower them to play a greater role in bringing about change. This will also contribute to reducing the feeling of being sandwiched between executives and teachers in the education system.

STs possess the power of knowledge about their subjects, which, in turn, is associated with their level of acceptance in their departments. Therefore, it is fair to assume that by winning their support during times of change, a policymaker could increase the chance of influencing the status quo because STs are in direct contact with teachers and possess a better understanding of their realities and needs. Finally, any educational reform/change is meant to improve students' academic achievement and personal development. STs are one step closer to affecting classroom performance than policymakers and senior management, which supports the argument for greater inclusion and empowerment during times of change.

CONCLUSION

The consistency in the responses from the STs forms the basis for the need to re-evaluate their role during change periods. Perceiving the role of STs as rational and predictable during change proved to be incorrect; rather, the evidence showed enormous variance between what was expected and what happened in reality.

Although the two schools adopted different approaches to implementing the UTS, with a more rigid approach in the GS than in the BS, similar challenges to a rational understanding of the change process were evident. For instance, reforms disempowered some departments by removing grading power without proper training on how to handle courses; this resulted in staff members being alienated and pushed towards the side of resistance. Additionally, no considerations about different departmental structures were recognised; all departments were requested to implement the same measures. Therefore, whether the MoE orders were followed was seriously impacted by the STs' professional judgements and priorities.

The evidence suggests that externally imposed change that identifies STs as change agents and restricts them to an administrative role might lead them to reset their priorities, which, in many cases, is framed by a practical understating of their reality. This aspect may also lead them to ignore any unseen benefits, from their perspectives, of the given reforms. In such cases, doing what has always been done is inevitable.

NOTES

The schools' names and dates of establishments have been changed to protect participants' confidentiality.

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