Principals’ and Teachers’ Perception of School Autonomy: A Case Study in Thai Education

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Abstract

The introduction of local School Autonomy in Section 36 under the National Education Act of B.E. 2542 (1999) authorized all public schools to develop their own system of administration and management; granted greater flexibility and academic freedom to public schools; and allowed schools to be supervised by their own councils. This paper focuses on how principals and teachers perceived these policy moves in terms of resources and instructional management and operations. Principals and teachers were selected from two schools, different in context: one high performing and one low performing school. The data collected is based on in-depth interviews of two principals and two teachers. The interview questions investigated principals and teachers understanding of school autonomy, as well as their readiness and satisfaction of their new autonomy. This paper employs a content analysis approach to these findings. Results identified sharp contrasts in the areas of role perception: principals enjoyed more influence, but teachers reported no benefit in decision-making authority. Participants’ responses clearly expressed a need not only for conceptual understanding, but also for more practical support from the government. This paper suggests that school leaders wishing to enhance the level of autonomy among educational stakeholders should focus more on the results while carrying out their leadership duties and responsibilities, and employee education officers to ensure that teachers understand their level of autonomy, perceive a sense of personal incentive, and feel a level of practical support, especially among those teachers with less experience in the school district.

Keywords: School autonomy, Autonomous schools, Decentralization

Introduction

Autonomous educational system management has been a subject of discussion during the past few years as it is believed to promote discipline among students. Many research studies identify that students will be able to learn effectively at schools having autonomy to manage their curricula, evaluation methods and human resource management (Agasisti, Catalano, & Sibiano, 2013; OECD, 2011a; OECD, 2011b). A study by Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development significantly shows that school accountability can foster student’s learning effectiveness. Evidence from countries ranked high in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) list and those with jump-start educational development all adopt or in the process of putting in practice the concept of school autonomy (OECD, 2011a; OECD, 2011b).

The concept of school autonomy has been originated from the concept of decentralization since 1962 with supports from World Bank and United Nations (Gunnarsson, Orazem, Sánchez, & Verdisco, 2009; Keddie, 2015). However it took 15 years before the concept would be put into practice, leading to more flexibilities and self-governed schools. Since 1997, school autonomy has become a policy in the US, UK and Australia (Bruns, Filmer, & Patrinos, 2011; Keddie, 2015).
The concept of school autonomy gains worldwide attention. Many countries are on the process of adopting school autonomy into practice as analyzes show the impact of school autonomy on effectiveness of learning process and administration. Lacking efficient administration at school could hamper learning capacity among students (Arcia, MacDonald, & Patrinos, 2014; OECD, 2011a). In Thailand, the school autonomy concept has been implemented for over 10 years in accordance to the constitution and the Education Act 1999, and the amended version in 2002.

The four elements of school autonomy include academic, budget and human resource management and general administration. However research on the subject is still limited. Only the World Bank study on the topic: School autonomy and accountability in Thailand: a systems approach for assessing policy intent and implementation in 2014, is available. Hence further study on the issue should be available. This paper focuses on how principals and teachers perceived these policy moves in terms of resources and instructional management and operations.

School autonomy

The concept of school autonomy has been originated from the concept of decentralization regarded as a pillar of strategic development plan. The World Bank and United Nations has supported the implementation of the concept since 1962 (Gunnarsson, Orazem, Sánchez, & Verdisco, 2009; Keddie, 2015). However it took 15 years before the concept would be widely put into practice (Bruns, Filmer, & Patrinos, 2011; Keddie, 2015).

School autonomy needs solid school-based management (SBM) to effectively support related administration particularly among schools in Latin America, South Asia and Africa (Brunes et al., 2011) and to support learning efficiency among students. Decentralization in educational administration system has been widely carried out in a bid to develop learning effectiveness among students. Financial stimulation has led to educational administration since 1980. Howe the system is administration varies depending on different countries. In 1990, public and social sector, particularly started taking part into the decentralization process. Parents and communities actively participated into school administration. Vocational schools were also interested into local employment (Maslowski, Scheerens, & Luyten, 2007).

The concept of decentralization has also been adopted into the educational system in Thailand. Section 39 of the Education Act 1999 and the amended version 2002 authorizes the implementation four elements of decentralization comprising academic, financial and general administration and human resource management at the local level. However school autonomy in Thailand has not yet been effectively put into practice. Government authorities still oversee educational institutions, unlike other countries.

Several studies emphasize the advantage of school autonomy in boosting learning capacity among students (Agasisti, Catalano, & Sibiano, 2013; OECD, 2011a; OECD, 2011b). The OECD has been studying the relation of autonomous school to learning achievement by studying on PISA assessment (Wöbmann, Lüdemann, Schütz, & West, 2007) since 2000. Its follow-up study among autonomous schools in Czech Republic and the Netherlands (World bank, 2011) also showed PISA assessment year 2012 of schools in the two countries were above average compared to conventional schools (OECD, 2014). Many studies also found enabling teachers and executives to independently manage their curricula, budget, human resource and overall administration will lead to significant development at schools. However the impact may vary. School autonomy concept works well in developed countries, unlike autonomous schools in developing countries (Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, 2013; King & Ozler,1998).
This research paper will study the elements of school autonomy within the framework of the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) (OECD, 2011). The indicators include 1) Planning and management of school budget 2) Personnel management 3) Role of the school council on school governance 4) School and student assessment and 5) School Accountability following figure 1.

![Figure 1: The Elements of School Autonomy (OECD, 2011)](image)

**Research Method**

Information gathering and analysis of this research paper will be based on qualitative research method. The sample of the study consisted of principals and teachers selected from two different schools, one evaluated as having high O-NET performance unlike the other. Based on the concept of multisite case study, the two sampled schools are selected from their Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) assessment. One is a large-scale school in a central province while the other is a small-scale school in the northern part of the country.

The data collected is based on in-depth interviews of two principals and two teachers. The interview questions investigated principals and teachers understanding of school autonomy, as well as their readiness and satisfaction of their new autonomy.

One-on-one interview and additional telephone interview were conducted in-depth during the process. A list of questions for school directors comprises 1) what is the concept of school autonomy? And what are the key areas of school autonomy can be scientifically assessed in the perception of school director? 2) how to put in practice and move forward the school autonomy concept within the limited Thai context? And 3) are you satisfied with the school administration so far? Is there any autonomous aspect that you would like to do in a bid to improve school autonomy in the long run? A similar list of questions was also used with the selected teachers interviewed for the study.

This paper also employs a content analysis approach to these findings. Data were analyzed to assess how school principals and teachers perceived such policy movement in terms of human resource, structural and operational management.
Results

Results of the two sessions of in-depth interview among each of the research samples including two principals and two teachers, can be categorized and explained in details as follow:

**Low performance sample:** Overall information, NT assessment = 33.46 O-NET = 45.41 Internal audit = 2.55 External audit = 85.26 Number of drop out student = 0

This sampled school has a school principal with seven years of teaching experience and a total of 15 years experience as principals at three different schools. The school principal graduated Bachelor’s Degree in social studies and Master’s Degree in administration. Meanwhile teacher no. 1 has been teaching at the school for two years after passing examination to work as teacher under the civil servant system. The teacher no. 1 graduated from a faculty of education in one of the top state universities. The sampled study has not yet thought of relocation as the province is his/her hometown.

**High performance sample:** Overall information, Number of students leaving school in the 1\textsuperscript{st} year = 10 \%, Number of students leaving school in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} year = less than 1\%

This sampled school has a school principal with 13 years of teaching experience and a total of 20 years of experience as deputy principals and principals at three different schools. The school principal graduated Bachelor’s Degree in industrial arts and Master’s Degree in Thai studies. Meanwhile teacher no. 2 has 10 years of teaching experience, starting temporary employment contract. The teacher no. 2 has been employed as a civil servant for three years. The sampled study insists in continue teaching at this high-profile school because this is his goal.

Data analysis seeks to answer three aspects of this research study including 1) perception 2) working process under the school autonomy concept and other limitations 3) satisfactory factor according to the following details.

The aspect of perception can be learned from a list of these questions: 1) how would you like to be authorized to self-govern the school? 2) what are the key qualifications of principal at autonomous school? And 3) what are the key areas of school autonomy can be scientifically assessed?

Result of the question no.1 identified a precise perception towards school autonomy in details.

Principal no.1

“Our school is autonomous in terms of academic and student assessment, human resource management and resource mobilization. However the level of school autonomy, particularly in terms of academic work and human resource, should be improved.”

“Most of my students are just moderate. Their families are well-off. They hardly further their education. My colleagues and I therefore have to adjust our teaching method so that our students will be able to adapt learning skills to earn for a living. State policies cannot guarantee that their lives after school will be better. Such policies have not yet been proven successfully practiced even and that could affect my students. The latest policy that allows students to dismiss the class at 2pm directly affects our teaching preparation. We have to think about non-teaching activities that could deliver good result so that the remaining hours will not be wasted. The other thing is that additional teacher assigned to work at the school doesn’t having qualifications that specifically meet our need. Almost every school face this issue.”
Principal no.2

“Our school is autonomous. However, the level of autonomy should be boosted, particularly in the area of resource mobilization. Young generation of teachers would like to have school autonomy, while the traditional teachers still would like to follow state policies. School textbook is the area of concern. We cannot purchase any text book that doesn’t have authorized stamp from the Ministry of Education mainly as it could violate the purchasing regulation. Such policy really limit students’ free to knowledge access. Personnel management is the other area that needs school autonomy for improvement. Unlike small schools, large-scale schools hardly have an issue of teacher having qualifications that are irrelevant to the needs. However these schools usually face a problem of delayed arrival of teachers to replace the retired ones. School autonomy will enable the school to seek a new teacher to replace the retired one within a month.”

It is worth noting that the teachers cannot answer the question what aspects of school autonomy he would like to adjust. The researcher needs to refine a list of questions based on the five aspects of school autonomy. An adjusted question is how the teacher feels his/her work is limited.

Teacher no.1

“My work is limited because the principal is micromanaged, especially teaching assistant. Quite detail-oriented, the principal will attend the class to watch the teaching method every week.”

However when asking in details about teaching preparation, the principal does not intervene in the teaching method, but only would like to ensure that it meets the key performance indicators. Thanks to the 15-year free education policy, budget allocation is adequate to seek textbooks in the teaching list. Other extra books useful for studying, particularly English textbooks will also be provided. However, students may have to pay extra fee. Testing paper issued by the authority in the area will be used for assessing and evaluating students in Grade 7-9 following six key performance indicators. Teachers will get to issue a testing paper for students at Grade 10-12. However O-NET, GAT and PAT tutorial classes are still available. But it is impossible for students to pass these national tests because the tests are more complicated than key performance indications.

Teacher no. 2

“I don’t feel like my teaching is controlled. I have independence in preparing teaching details by myself. However, resource mobilization will significantly support my teaching. Much budget allocation to school will be enable management to conveniently class atmosphere and purchase effective teaching equipment such as smart board and projector.

For a question regarding personnel: What is your view toward self-selection process of teachers at different schools?, teachers agreed in principle that this self-selection process should be carried out. Salary base for school teachers should also be self-managed.

Teacher no. 1
“It should be good if the school gets to teach and test directly. There may be a fierce competition for famous schools. Much money will have to be spent on examination and can be time-consuming. If testing sessions happen at the same time, we could lose opportunities.”

For a question regarding community and parent participation into teaching preparation received positive response from teachers. However, the teachers view that local parents could teach only supplementary subjects. Major subjects should still be under teachers’ responsibility to ensure that the standard meets the key performance indicators. On the other hand, parents’ support on school administration would bring positive outputs in many aspects. The thing is the final decision doesn’t come from the principal alone.

The second question: What are the key qualifications of autonomy school principal? is about perception. Result shows that school principals have a similar view that leadership skills is a must. Other policy-making skills include ability to translate state policies into practice and having capacity to adopt policies that are useful for school management. In addition, they have to be proactive and give colleagues opportunities to participate into the process of autonomous school management.

Principal no. 1
“School principal needs to hold on to the joint principle that everyone at schools can follow. The principal needs to consider positive policy for students, match the policy with the existing work, mobilize resources, allow teachers to think and participate into academic and financial management. Having a network of local enterprises to help on the school management will be useful. A good principal at autonomy school will always be innovative, learning to adapt and use at the school without having to wait for state policy, or financial support or key performance indicator. A good principal will be brave and fearless to put into practice anything that will be good and worthwhile for student development. Sometimes it takes 4-5 years prior to receiving acceptance from the educational authorities in the area.”

Principal no. 2
“School principal needs to have leadership skill, be a role model, decisive, dare think outside the box, put into practice state policy, be proactive. Action will be defined based on his/her output. Section 28, 15 and 22 regarding resource mobilization should be taken into account.”

The third question to assess perception: What are the key aspects to assess autonomous status at school? Result shows the school principal will take into consideration of four elements 1) objectives and conditions of objective management 2) freedom to innovation and academic management 3) integrated personnel management and 4) general management to support student activities as well as monitoring and evaluation process to strengthen overall management at school.

Working process of school autonomy will comprise questions under limitations in the country. How will you do to move forward the work. Data analysis shows participation between school principal and teachers, knowledge sharing, participatory process of decision-making and confidence in teamwork will lead to success of school autonomy.
Principal no.1

“You need to hold on to the principle that the whole school can follow. My goal is to ensure that my students will be equipped with working skills. We can match the policy with the existing job market, never let our teaching colleagues stop working on what they’ve been doing. The main policy will never be changed. The good principal will have to be thorough with legal studies since it will enable schools to work well under budget limitations. Effective resource management will enable schools to effective administrate how to outsource teaching staff, prioritize budget spending and others.”

Principal no.2

“I give my teachers freedom to class management without having to be much concerned about O-NET test. Our school has an experience of O-NET tutorial. However the result doesn’t help our teachers and students that much. We follow national policy and standard, but we need to seek way to ensure that appropriate method will be available to meet the need and capacities of our students. So our students will learn better in class and have better grade. Our teachers will discuss and seek way to help the students.”

Teacher no. 1

“We have meetings so often it becomes school culture. Teachers get to presents issues and work together to solve the problem. For example, a student cannot study at all. He doesn’t like studying, and always skips the classes. He is very violent. School principal and teachers meet to seek way to help him. School principal comes up with innovative method, showing teachers a video from overseas that tells how to deal with these kids. Finally, the school principal contacts an entrepreneur and encourages the student to apply for a job as a rafting captain because he will get to use his strength. Math teacher teaches him to learn how to calculate his earning. The student will learn Thai from essay writing about rafting. English teacher teaches him how to guide foreign tourists. These teaching methods meet his need. And now he is back to study and never misses the class. He also earns extra income from his job during summer. His English is in fact very good, because he gets to practice with foreigners all the time. Thanks to school autonomy, he learns these skills from real-life experience, not from O-NET tutorial class.”

Teacher no. 2

“I am quite confident in my school principal who is very good at resource mobilization and transparent. I’ve got freedom to manage my teaching at class and feel comfortable to teach at school that enables teachers to free put into practice teaching skills in a different way.”

Satisfactory comprises a major question: to what extent the school principal would like to see adjustment of school autonomy? and what kind of help needed to improve school autonomy? Result show that the principal enjoyed more influence, but teachers are not benefited from the decision-making. Responses from the participants clearly expressed a need for not only understanding toward the school autonomy concept, but also more practical support from the government.
Principal no.1
“School autonomy is a good thing and will be useful for overall school management. Students will be directly benefited from the concept. School autonomy will help improve educational personnel. If we strictly follow every step of the policy, we will not be able to think by ourselves. Educational system will never be improved. Many teachers still do not clearly understand this point.”

Principal no.2
“School autonomy is a concept that should be put into practice. Evidence shows there’re not any high-ranked teacher at private schools, but all teachers could work together to improve the teaching standard at school to meet the students’ need and receive public acceptance. However, the public schools cannot do this despite having many well-educated, high-ranked teachers.”

Teacher no.1
“Principals at most schools still don’t clearly understand the benefit of school autonomy and how much more they can do to improve teaching skills. Agencies involved in policy making should train them to understand this school autonomy concept that will help improve educational standard as a whole.

Teacher no.2
“I agree with the concept of school autonomy, but don’t think it will drastically change anything. Public school will also be public school. Public school will never be private school.”

These answers from the participants are still unclear. The research therefore adjusts the tone of the question to ensure that the answers will be more in-depth. The question is What is your will towards school autonomy if in the future, teacher salary will be based on individual capacity, not the national rate?

The answer from Teacher no. 1 is more solid. “Teaching preparation is governed by authorities in each area. I’ve decided to become a teacher mainly because of security, monthly payment and good social welfare” Further details are given. If school principal poorly manages the school, the school autonomy will enable parents and teachers to give reasons to force the school principal to resign from the position. The participant’s response is much better. He “agrees with this method that will encourage the school principal to be more responsible.”

Teacher no. 2 “agree if salary increase will be based on performance. However, it is still questionable what kind of tool needed for assessing the performance. Without appropriate mechanism, administration could be problematic. The existing evaluation still works well.”

This research paper also found that differences of school size will have an impact on school autonomy concern. Small-scaled schools in remote area are more concerned about its future status than the large-scaled school in town.

School principal no. 1 “A concerning factor towards school autonomy is that school income will be more of concern. Students from not-so-rich families
may not be selected to study at schools. There may be an issue of divided status. I don’t know what will happen to the majority number of teachers who work in this career mainly because of stability. It is possible that school autonomy could lead to teacher brain drain in the remote area.”

School principal no. 2 “Large-scaled school doesn’t have to be much worried about autonomy. But preparation is needed to explain to parents. They need to understand that school nowadays are costly and that parents also need to invest in education. Authorities also need to work on policy and standard, which is good for everyone to work towards the same goal. Knowledge sharing can also be undertaken.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

According to the research findings, in the areas of role perception, perception is still drastically different between principals and teachers. School principals clearly understand the concept of school autonomy.

On the other hand, teachers still lack clear understanding toward the concept and often misunderstand the specific details about freedom to book selection for knowledge management and key qualifications of school principals working at autonomous schools.

Meanwhile, participants who are school principals clearly understand key qualifications needed among principals at autonomy schools. Leadership is the key skill, and so is capacity to translate state policy into practice. Instead of trying to change the system, principals learn to work with the system.

Last but not least, the perception. Four elements that the school principals should be taken into account following the Education Ministry’s key performance index is 1) budget management including details of financial status a, how budget will be spent and other conditions relating to budget spending; 2) academic including independence to textbook selection, innovation and creativity; 3) personnel management including ability to recruit and manage its own staff recruitment and human resource management; and 4) general matters such as promotion of student activities, monitoring and evaluation that will strengthen school standard in every aspect.

Practical working process of school autonomy found participation among school principals and teachers, knowledge sharing and in decision-making process will lead to success of school autonomy.

In terms of satisfaction, result showed that principals enjoyed more authorities. But teachers are not benefited from sole decision-making by their principal. Clear understanding on school autonomy will enable school teachers to realize about the importance and result that will help improve teaching method and overall school manage.

This research paper also found that differences of school size will have an impact on school autonomy concern. Small-scaled schools in remote area are more concerned about its future status than the large-scaled school in town. Responses from school principals and teachers clearly expressed a need for not only conceptual understanding, but also more practical support from the government.

This paper suggests that school leaders wishing to enhance the level of autonomy among educational stakeholders should focus more on the results while carrying out their leadership duties and responsibilities, and employee education officers to ensure that teachers understand their level of autonomy, perceive a sense of personal incentive, and feel a level of practical support, especially among those teachers with less experience in the school district. Finally, the research found schools still lacks critical policy-driven process at the educational
institution level. Evidence showed school principals were well aware of the importance and the concept of school autonomy. Therefore further study on the key aspects and qualifications of the school principals working at autonomous schools is essential for driving forward and putting in practice the concept of school autonomy.

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