



THE IMPACT OF PRINCIPALS' PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING ON TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ARAB ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN ISRAEL

Amna Younisⁱ

Girne American University (GAU),
Northern Cyprus

Abstract:

Educational leadership has undergone a shift from hierarchical administrative approaches toward collaborative models that recognize teachers as active contributors to school improvement. In this context, participatory decision-making has emerged as a significant leadership practice linked to enhancing teacher empowerment, boosting motivation, and increasing professional engagement. Despite growing international evidence, qualitative research examining the impact of participatory leadership on teacher professional development in Arab primary schools in Israel- an environment where educational processes are shaped by distinct cultural, organizational, and social characteristics- remains limited. This study aimed to examine the impact of participatory decision-making practices by school principals on the professional development of teachers in Arab elementary schools in Israel, and to explore the mechanisms through which leadership practices influence teachers' professional experiences and growth. The study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design based on the phenomenological approach; data were collected through semi-structured interviews with thirty-nine participants-comprising seven principals and thirty-two teachers- from Arab elementary schools in northern Israel. The thematic analysis identified five interconnected themes: leadership styles and teacher engagement levels, empowerment and school affiliation, motivation and structural barriers, commitment and collaborative school culture, and the broad constraints imposed by cultural norms and institutional hierarchy. The results indicate that, although participatory leadership significantly enhances teachers' intrinsic motivation and empowerment, its implementation is often hindered by superficial administrative practices and centralized structural pressures. The study concludes by offering practical recommendations for establishing genuine collaborative structures within educational contexts serving minority groups.

ⁱ Correspondence: email aa.mahamid@gmail.com

Keywords: participative leadership; teacher professional development; teacher empowerment; decision-making; Arab schools in Israel; educational leadership; distributed leadership theory

1. Introduction

Modern educational systems are increasingly calling for a shift away from bureaucratic, hierarchical school management models—characterized by top-down decision-making—in favor of democratic leadership frameworks that foster collaboration in educational matters. Researchers in educational administration argue that school improvement cannot be sustained solely through the individual efforts of school principals (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020); rather, sustainable educational reform hinges on leadership's ability to delegate authority and actively involve faculty members in core administrative and pedagogical decision-making processes (Harris, 2021). Within the context of international educational discourse, this shift toward collaborative practice is viewed as a vital driver of teacher professional development, school effectiveness, and institutional adaptability (Ng, 2022).

Turning to the Arab education sector in Israel, the intersection of participatory leadership and professional growth presents a unique set of social and organizational dynamics. Historically, Arab schools have operated within a highly centralized bureaucratic system managed by the Ministry of Education—a situation compounded by traditional societal norms that reflect hierarchical and collectivist social structures (Hofstede, 2001). This structural framework often positions school principals as figures of unilateral authority, potentially limiting the scope for genuine teacher participation.

While existing literature extensively documents the benefits of shared leadership in decentralized Western contexts, there remains a notable gap regarding how these dynamics manifest in specific educational settings characterized by distinct cultural and structural realities. Most notably, this study examines how school principals engage teachers in multidimensional professional development processes within Arab schools in Israel.

2. Literature Review

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in two primary theoretical models: distributed leadership theory and self-determination theory (SDT). Distributed leadership theory posits that leadership is not an individual trait tied to a formal position but rather a collective practice that extends across various school actors, interactions, and situations (Harris, 2021). By decentralizing authority, distributed leadership expands leadership capacity, thereby fostering a shared sense of accountability and collective learning among educators (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020).

At the same time, "Self-Determination Theory" highlights the psychological mechanisms driving professional development. According to Ryan and Deci (2017),

individuals achieve optimal psychological growth and experience intrinsic motivation when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (a sense of belonging). In an educational context, when school principals genuinely involve teachers in decision-making, they effectively satisfy the teachers' need for autonomy; this psychological empowerment fosters professional self-efficacy (competence) and strengthens their sense of belonging to the school community and alignment with the institution (relatedness)—elements that are fundamental to sustainable adult learning (Knowles *et al.*, 2014; Stanimirović, P et al., 2024).

Empirical research consistently confirms a strong relationship between participatory practices and professional outcomes; Ng (2022) observed that schools adopting collaborative decision-making models demonstrate significantly higher levels of teacher engagement in continuous professional learning. When teachers are invited to contribute to curriculum design, resource allocation, and the formulation of school policies, they shift from being passive implementers of administrative directives to active agents of educational change, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of professional practices within their work context (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Short & Rinehart, 1992).

Critical perspectives highlight that the implementation of distributed leadership is rarely devoid of power struggles. Lumby (2013), for instance, warns that formal leaders often engage in what is known as 'pseudo-participation,' employing collaborative rhetoric to co-opt teachers and assign them heavy administrative burdens under the guise of 'empowerment.' Within cultural contexts characterized by high power distance, transitioning to genuine participatory structures requires a radical restructuring of deeply ingrained organizational behaviors and leadership mindsets (Schein, 2010).

3. Material and Methods

To precisely capture the rich, lived experiences of teachers within their specific institutional contexts, this study adopted an interpretive qualitative research model grounded in the phenomenological approach. This qualitative phenomenological method enables researchers to explore the essence of a phenomenon through the subjective perspectives of individuals who have directly experienced it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The study was conducted within the Arab education sector in Israel's Northern District, employing a purposive sampling strategy to select participants capable of providing in-depth, informed insights into school leadership and professional development. The final sample consisted of thirty-nine (39) participants: seven (7) elementary school principals and thirty-two (32) teachers with varying levels of educational experience, representing diverse subject specializations and school sizes.

Data were collected using comprehensive, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed accounts of decision-making experiences, perceptions of leadership behaviors, and tangible impacts on career trajectories. All interviews were audio-

recorded with the participants' explicit consent, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English to ensure consistency in the analysis.

Qualitative data were processed and analyzed systematically using the thematic analysis method, supported by NVivo software. The coding process followed the rigorous six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising: initial data familiarization, generation of open codes, searching for broader themes, reviewing and refining themes in light of the entire dataset, and finally, defining and naming the final conceptual themes.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts yielded five interconnected key themes that embody the complex reality of pioneering participatory leadership in Arab elementary schools.

Theme 1: Leadership Styles and the Spectrum of Teacher Involvement

Accounts from both school principals and teachers indicate that teacher participation is not uniform, ranging instead from purely tokenistic delegation to genuine structural partnership. While all interviewed principals expressed a commitment in principle to participatory management, teacher accounts revealed that actual participation often depends on the individual principal's leadership style. Authoritarian structures frequently masked administrative delegation as shared decision-making—underscoring the limitations identified by Lumby (2013)—as teachers were consulted only on minor operational matters rather than on fundamental strategic policies.

Theme 2: Empowerment and School Belonging

Participants who engaged in a process of genuine involvement reported a profound transformation in their professional identities; active participation in educational planning and the alignment of the school's vision directly fostered a sense of professional empowerment and psychological ownership—consistent with the dimensions identified by Short and Rinehart (1992), and teachers noted that administrative appreciation for their professional contributions tangibly strengthened their sense of belonging to the school and their alignment with its institutional goals, thereby validating the concept of "relatedness" found in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Theme 3: Motivation and Structural Barriers

The results confirmed a clear causal pathway linking collaborative leadership to increased intrinsic motivation for professional growth. However, teachers identified significant structural barriers hindering their ability to fully engage in decision-making processes and continuous learning. Consistent with professional development models highlighted by Knowles *et al.* (2014), the most prominent of these barriers was a systemic

"time deficit"—stemming from heavy teaching loads, excessive administrative burdens, and the absence of institutional time allocated for reflection and collaborative review.

Theme 4: Commitment and Collaborative School Culture

Schools characterized by high levels of genuine engagement demonstrated a strong, collaborative organizational culture. Under these conditions, teacher engagement fostered the spontaneous development of professional learning communities—communities defined by mutual trust, peer mentoring, and shared educational goals (Harris, 2021). This collaborative environment—deeply rooted in shared organizational learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991)—directly strengthened teachers' affective commitment to the teaching profession and their long-term loyalty to the school institution.

Theme 5: Cultural Norms and Institutional Hierarchy

The data highlighted that both leadership practices and teachers' responses are deeply rooted in broader societal dynamics; participants frequently discussed how traditional cultural values—including cultural respect for hierarchical authority and a tendency to avoid conflict—sometimes led to passive compliance among the teaching staff, a phenomenon entirely consistent with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions.

Additionally, the centralized administrative restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Education were perceived as limiting school principals' autonomy, which in turn constrained their ability to delegate substantive decision-making authority to teachers. In this context, one participant highlighted the hierarchy of institutional levels, stating: "The organizational structure is hierarchical: the Ministry of Education, followed by the principal, the deputy, and coordinators, down to the teachers." Another participant emphasized the strict limitations placed on the curriculum, explaining: *"The Ministry is responsible for developing the curriculum, while the school is granted a margin of flexibility of no more than 20%."*

4. Discussion

The empirical findings of this study affirm and extend the core principles of both "Distributed Leadership Theory" and "Self-Determination Theory" within a unique cultural context; the clear link revealed between actual participation in decision-making and teacher empowerment strongly reinforces the Ryan and Deci (2017) model, demonstrating that fostering teacher autonomy is a vital prerequisite for stimulating intrinsic motivation and supporting continuous professional development. When teachers operate in an environment that satisfies these fundamental psychological needs, their capacity for continuous, lifelong learning expands significantly (Knowles *et al.*, 2014).

Nevertheless, the findings reveal a stark contrast between collaborative educational principles and the rigid administrative reality within Arab primary schools in Israel. The phenomenon of tokenistic or superficial participation—highlighted by the

participants—reflects critical perspectives raised by Lumby (2013) regarding the distribution of power; it suggests that collaborative discourse may sometimes be employed to entrench existing institutional control rather than to achieve genuine empowerment. Such superficial delegation fails to meet the requirements for creating the collaborative spaces necessary for authentic professional development (Ng, 2022; Nezhad et al., 2010).

The results indicate that leadership practices cannot be analyzed in isolation from their societal context; characteristics such as "high power distance" and collectivist values—which distinguish the traditional Arab sector (Hofstede, 2001)—pose unique institutional challenges to the implementation of the distributed leadership model. As Schein (2010) noted, deeply rooted organizational culture and underlying assumptions significantly influence how new administrative initiatives are received; when teachers have internalized hierarchical norms, they may resist assuming leadership responsibilities, viewing decision-making as the exclusive prerogative of the school principal.

Accordingly, the transition toward a genuine collaborative school culture requires not only structural adjustments by school administrations but also a fundamental shift in the professional identities and cultural expectations of educators (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020).

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that participatory decision-making practices among school principals have a tangible impact on teachers' professional development, serving as a key driver of professional empowerment, intrinsic motivation, and school-wide collaboration. Leadership's ability to foster genuinely collaborative environments, however, faces systemic constraints imposed by traditional cultural dynamics and centralized institutional frameworks.

To maximize the benefits of distributed leadership in Arab primary schools and overcome these systemic barriers, educational policy must deliberately shift away from purely bureaucratic control structures. School districts should effectively invest in specialized leadership training programs that equip principals with the specific administrative competencies needed to build authentic and inclusive professional learning communities (Harris, 2021). Beyond school-level initiatives, educational authorities must implement targeted structural reforms that provide teachers with the dedicated time and institutional resources necessary for active participation in collaborative governance and continuous professional development.

Creative Commons License Statement

This research work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>. To view the complete legal code, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.en>. Under the terms of this

license, members of the community may copy, distribute, and transmit the article, provided that proper, prominent, and unambiguous attribution is given to the authors, and the material is not used for commercial purposes or modified in any way. Reuse is only allowed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77 to 101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th ed.). Sage. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-sage-handbook-of-qualitative-research/book242504>
- Harris, A. (2021). Distributed leadership theory: Development, design and dialogue. In A. Harris (Ed.), *Distributed leadership matters* (2nd ed., pp. 35–52). Corwin. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02621711211190961>
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Sage. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967\(02\)00184-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967(02)00184-5)
- Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2014). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (8th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003387671>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/highereducation/books/situated-learning/6915ABD21C8E4619F750A4D4ACA616CD>
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1 to 2), 5 to 22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>
- Lumby, J. (2013). Distributed leadership: The uses and abuses of power. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(5), 581–597. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213489250>
- Nezhad, Rostamzadeh & Sofian, The Influence of(beta)Technology Intensity and Evaluating TCC Using AHP Model in Iran Tractir Manufacturing Cimpany (ITMCO), *International Review of Business Research Paper*, vol 6, pp:286-298, 2010.

- Ng, P. T. (2022). The impact of participative leadership on teacher engagement and professional learning. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 42(3), 459–475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2020.1775791>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Self_Determination_Theory.html?id=th5rDwAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y
- Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Organizational_Culture_and_Leadership.html?id=DIghlT34jCUC&redir_esc=y
- Short, P. M., & Rinehart, J. S. (1992). School participant empowerment scale: Assessment of level of empowerment within the school environment. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 52(4), 951–960. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164492052004018>
- Stanimirović, P., Stupina, A. A., Ghorbani, S., & Jabbari, K. H. (2024). Investigating the cost stickiness behavior of organizations after the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*, 8(7), 3864. <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v8i7.3864>