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A case study of Northern Cyprus: The voice of senior academic administrators on education

Ulus Irkad , Bengi Sonyel  and Hamit Caner 

Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Education, Eastern Mediterranean University, Famagusta, North Cyprus
bengi.sonyel@emu.edu.tr

The purpose of the study reported on here was to introduce the perceptions of senior academic administrators in the Northern Cyprus Ministry of Education on the structure of the current education system as a whole. In order to carry out this case study, the views of 14 senior academic administrators were obtained through semi-structured interviews. There is no doubt that in qualitative research semi-structured interviewing is a flexible and powerful tool to capture the voices and the ways in which people make meaning of their experiences (Kvale, 2007). As Yin (2009:18) states: “An empirical inquiry about contemporary phenomena (e.g., ‘case’), set within its own real-world context – especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” Therefore, by reflecting on the current education system in Northern Cyprus as a case, we tried to show the real context of the education system itself. The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analysed through content analysis. According to the findings of this research study, the current education system must be reconstructed considering the curriculum, strategies in teaching and learning approaches, developing of collaborative and student-centred classrooms, applying active learning strategies and voicing the voices of the senior academic administrators during the decision-making process.

Keywords: active learning; education system; ministry of education senior academic administrators (MESAA); perception; voice

Introduction

The literature on the roles and responsibilities of school academic administrators and their relative importance in improving the education system has evoked considerable debate. However, most of the studies in the education field only focus on the views of school academic administrators and not those of senior academic administrators working in the ministry of education (MESAA) who can also play a significant role in the transformation and enhancement of the education system. MESAA members are competent, experienced scholars whose long-term experience in the education system enable them to identify critical problems and fundamental solutions for such problems. According to Pont, Nusche and Moorman (2008:16)

[p]olicy makers need to adapt school leadership policy to new environments by addressing the major challenges which have arisen over the past decades. There is a growing concern that the role of school principal designed for the industrial age has not changed enough to deal with the complex challenges schools are facing in the 21st century. Countries are seeking to develop new conditions for school leadership better suited to respond to current and future educational environments. As expectations of what school leaders should achieve have changed, so must the definition and distribution of tasks, as well as the levels of training, support and incentives.

Owing to this, it can be said that far too little attention has been paid to the leverage and opportunities that MESAA could bring to the educational field and their voice and perception has been neglected in the bureaucratic and constitutional system. With this research, the main purpose was to reflect the MESAA's voices in the decision-making process and at the same time their perceptions regarding the (then) current education system in Northern Cyprus.

Today's expeditious world is becoming progressively characterised by its educational and intellectual advancements. Depending on historical backgrounds, technological enhancement and political-economic situations, each country has a different strategy with regard to their schooling system. The first thing that needs to be emphasised here is that the education field needs innovation and improvement in time. Traditional learning methods, while still being favoured by many instructors and educational institutions, are not a suitable for the present day. Furthermore, current research indicates that “[f]aculties of education struggle to design qualification programmes and to develop academic content knowledge for the broad-field curriculum, which is characterised by melding or hybridisation of two or more related subjects, because they lacked philosophical and conceptual knowledge, theoretical principles and the knowledge of pedagogical approaches” (Booi & Khuzwayo, 2019:2). Such verity is not hidden to many MESAA members in Northern Cyprus. Like in many other countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), Finland, France, Italy, the United States of America (USA), and China, the main goal in Northern Cyprus is reform and improvement of the current educational system to be achieved by the senior academic administrators. According to Franks (2015:325), “[e]ducation is the area directed with a focus of schooling, but with implications that stretch beyond school's boundaries.” Therefore, education provided should not only be applicable to the classroom but also outside the school and in students' everyday lives where they can gain hands-on experience. According to Sjøberg (2010:487), “[t]he nature of knowledge should, according to Piaget, be studied empirically where it is actually constructed and developed. This can be done either through the historical development of knowledge, as it is found in well-established sciences (in particular, physics and mathematics), or may be studied in the growth and development of an individual. We may, therefore, say that

Piaget's study of the development of children was in effect only to get empirical access to his epistemological research question: the growth of knowledge and the development of logical thinking." Constructivist theory is based on the type of knowledge which is actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the outside; learning is seen as something done by the learner, not something that is imposed on him; learners come to the learning situation with existing schemas about many phenomena and some of these ideas are ad hoc and unstable while others are more deeply rooted and well developed.

Furthermore, learners have their own individual ideas about the world, but there are also many similarities and common patterns in their ideas. Some of these ideas are socially and culturally accepted and shared and are often part of the language, supported by metaphors, etc. They also often function well as tools to understand many phenomena as Goodman and Goodman (2014) proposed. According to constructivism, knowledge is represented in the brain as conceptual structures and it is possible to model and describe these in some detail. In the teaching and learning process, teachers have to take the learner's existing ideas seriously if they want to change or challenge this knowledge. In one sense, it is personal and individual as the learners construct their knowledge through their interaction with the physical world, collaboratively in social settings and in a cultural and linguistic environment. In student-centred education teachers act only as mentors and advisors, while students are independent, self-learning and active. Over the past decade, most research in education enhancement has emphasised the importance of the use of student-centred models in the classrooms. According to Waite-Stupiansky (1997:6),

[s]tudents in a constructivist-dominated classroom are treated like experts who investigate, discover, and construct their own meaning. This sounds appealing because the end of all contemporary education seems to be the accrual of skills and competencies that will be relevant to their future work. In such active learning environments and through the process of self-discovery of information, it is argued that the motivation to learn is intrinsic to the child and not in need of teacher's external influences on that motivation.

As mentioned above, constructivist theory is the nature of student-centred education. Likewise, a constructivist student-centred approach develops individual contacts, gives an opportunity for students to share their opinions, increases their creativity and compensate for their personal needs with their teacher's guidance. According to Krahenbuhl (2016:97–105), "[w]hen utilizing constructivist pedagogy and compelling our students to construct their own meaning, teachers should use caution because constructivist learning theory points us to

deficiencies students have that directly impact their learning. Students lack the experience and knowledge to apply disciplinary skills effectively, they have limited space in their mind to grapple with issues, and furthermore, their constructed meaning may or may not correspond with reality. Much of their success may depend on the degree of guidance they receive." Therefore, in student-centred classrooms it is not enough for the students to only be motivated to construct their own knowledge but the teacher's scaffolding of students' learning also plays a significant role.

By reflecting on the perceptions of 14 senior academic administrators of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Northern Cyprus, issues concerning the general structure of the current education system such as whether it is based on traditional types of teaching and learning or student-centred, the role of the administrators in the decision-making process (to what extent their voices can be heard) are presented in the findings and discussion. In the next section a review of the literature on the current education systems of other countries, constructivism, students-centred education, and decision-making are discussed.

Literature Review

The right kind of education is not concerned with any ideology nor it is a means of conditioning the individual in some special manner. In its true sense, education is helping the individual to develop and become mature and free. That is what we should be interested in – not in shaping students according to some idealistic pattern. The highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with life as a whole. As Aspin and Chapman (2000:7) also emphasise, lifelong education stands for a programme to reconceptualize education totally according to the principle that education is a lifelong process. For a complete overhaul of our way of thinking about education, for a new philosophy of education and ... for a programme of action. Likewise Aspin and Chapman, Cropley, Dave and Lengrand stated that the word education would eventually become synonymous with lifelong education in people's minds... (today's) world ... requires a lifelong education which is a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience (Aspin & Chapman, 2000). Therefore, it can be said that experience lies at the heart of lifelong education and construction of knowledge. When reflecting on the current education systems in various countries, we see that their systems are based on constructivism and student-centred approaches. The education system in the UK is divided into four main parts, primary education, secondary education, further education and higher education. Children in the UK have to legally attend primary and secondary education which covers the period from about 5 years to 16

years old. The UK education system is also split into “key stages.” Key Stage 1: 5 to 7 years old, Key Stage 2: 7 to 11 years old, Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years old and Key Stage 4: 14 to 16 years old.

Generally, Key Stages 1 and 2 fall in primary school while children from 11 years move to secondary school and finish Key Stages 3 and 4. Although students are assessed at the end of each stage, teachers also emphasise hands-on experience. The most important assessment occurs at age 16 when students sit for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). Once students have successfully completed their GCSEs, they have the choice to continue with further education and then potential higher education, or finish school and enter the world of work. In Finland, education is one of the cornerstones of the Finnish welfare society. They pride themselves on an educational system that offers equal education opportunities for all. Education from pre-primary to higher education is free of charge in Finland. Finnish teachers are highly educated and strongly committed to their work. The Finnish education system consists of early childhood education and care, which is provided for children before the compulsory education begins; pre-primary education, which is provided for children in the year preceding the beginning of compulsory education; comprehensive school, which is compulsory; upper secondary education, which is either general upper secondary education or vocational education and training; and higher education provided by universities and universities of applied sciences. Furthermore, adult education is available at all levels (secondary and higher education). Education in Italy is compulsory for children from 6 to 16 years of age and is divided into five stages: kindergarten (*scuola dell'infanzia*), primary school (*scuola primaria* or *scuola elementare*), lower secondary school (*scuola secondaria di primo grado* or *scuola media inferiore*), upper secondary school (*scuola secondaria di secondo grado* or *scuola media superiore*) and university (*università*). Education in Italy is free and available to children of all nationalities who are residents in Italy. Italy has both a private and public education system. As in Finland and the UK, Italy has a large international network of public or state-affiliated universities and schools offering degrees in higher education. Italian state-run universities constitute the main percentage of tertiary education in Italy and are managed under supervision of the Italian Ministry of Education. Within the structure of the three countries mentioned above, higher education is the most important. At all levels, key issues such as lifelong learning, learning by doing and student-centred education are emphasised in order to meet the educational demands of the 21st century.

Another significant issue that needs to be discussed is the leadership qualities of the

stakeholders in schools. “In order to counter the possibility of fragmentation of effort and energy as the ‘managers’ focus upon fulfilling their accountabilities and responsibilities, it seems that successful headteachers are those who encourage the development of communities of learning, supporting a strong mutually supportive, collective service ethic” (Day, 2004:426).

Considering leadership, either in the school or in the classroom, care and compassion are essential features of becoming and remaining connected to students and colleagues. Teachers and students alike work better when they are cared for. It is difficult to envisage a passionate leader without such professional integrity and whose first priority is not connectedness with pupils, colleagues and self. Without this, motivation, trust and enthusiasm cannot be nurtured. Leading well over time is a struggle and it takes passion to continue to encourage one self and others to continue to lead and learn in changing and challenging times. Furthermore, teachers are in teaching considering their pedagogical and content knowledge which are central to their effectiveness. According to various research studies, student learning varies at classroom level as a consequence of class size, student-grouping practices, the instructional practices of teachers, and the nature and extent of monitoring of student progress. At school level, the school mission and goals, culture, teachers’ participation in decision-making, and relationships with parents and the wider community are potentially powerful determinants of student learning.

Unlike those discussed above, the current education system in Northern Cyprus is a centralised and teacher-centred education system. Managers as stakeholders in the current system do not have the spirit of building up collective learning communities. Leadership qualities such as care, compassion, and connectedness are lacking with these stakeholders who are trapped within the vicious circle of the current education system itself. In comparison with the education systems of the three countries mentioned above, education in Northern Cyprus is seriously lacking. In order to overcome these limitations, the education system needs to be reconstructed based on the constructivist approach of student-centred education and leadership qualities where students, teachers, and colleagues collaborate in order to build collective learning communities.

Methodology

In order to get a better idea of the current education system in Northern Cyprus, the following were the four main research questions of the study:

- 1) What are MESAA members’ perceptions on the current education system?
- 2) How can the current education system be enhanced

and improved?

- 3) What are MESAA members' role in decision-making?
- 4) What kind of leadership qualities should MESAA members possess in the decision-making process?

This research was a case study as we tried to explore MESAA members' perceptions of the current education system and at the same time to determine their role in the decision-making process. All case study research starts from the same compelling feature: the desire to derive a close or in-depth understanding of a single or small number of cases set in their real-world contexts (Bromley, 1986:1) and is qualitative research. Silverman (2020:3) says that “[q]ualitative research is the type of research that finds out about people’s experiences. It helps us understand what is important for people.” As a data collection tool, we used semi-structured interviews and regarded each interviewee as a separate case from which response were extracted. The interviews of approximately 1 hour each were recorded. Before the interviews, the participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interviews at any time as their participation was voluntary. The participants also signed consent forms prior to the start of the interviews. Suitable times and dates were arranged according to the participants’ schedules and one-on-one semi-structured interviews were held. Fourteen senior instructors (all MESAA members in the Ministry of Education) were regarded as the sample. The data were collected over a period of 3 months. According to the research questions, the collected responses from the participants were all categorized into four parts. We used content analysis for analysing the collected data. Furthermore, we categorised the responses from the interviews according to the research questions, then constructed common themes from the responses. Finally, according to the overall themes deduced from the categories, we developed an overall conclusion regarding MESAA members’ frame of mind and views on the current education system. In reality, the education system is not well structured, have many gaps and there is a lack of communication among decision makers – especially during the decision-making process.

Results and Discussion

The aims with this research was assessing the importance of MESAA members’ perceptions of the

current education system in Northern Cyprus and how the system could be reconstructed and developed. In doing so, we divided the interviews into four parts; each part answering one of the research questions. Each research question also contained several open-ended interview questions in order to gain a better understanding of the structure and functionality of the current system and the ways in which it could be improved.

The themes identified from the semi-structured interview responses to the first research question are summarised in Table 1. It is apparent from this table that memorisation was the main focus of the current education system. Students lacked the ability to learn by doing or constructing knowledge from their experiences. The findings further indicate that the current education system was ineffective due to the fact that senior administrators could not voice their opinions during the decision-making process due to the centralisation of the education system in North Cyprus. Byrne (2011:47–60) believes that education is “constructive in nature.” Therefore, for education to work and to achieve its true goal and nature, it must be separate from political influences and control of a dominant power. Some interviewees mentioned the centralised education system as the main reason for such influences. According to most of the MESAA interviewees, by centralising its education system, Northern Cyprus has, unconsciously, placed education under politicians’ control.

Further analysis of the themes shows that almost all of the interviewees were insisting on and supporting decentralising and institutionalisation of the current education system. Table 1 highlights that interviewees reflected the importance of a practical and functional system in order to change the current education system. Pragmatic approaches should be applied in order to create student-centred rather than teacher-centred classrooms (Krahenbuhl, 2016). Furthermore, the curriculum should be updated by integrating active learning strategies. The standards of education should be raised to that of countries such as the UK, Finland, and Italy, and consequently the roles of the teachers and students in classrooms should be changed. From the interviewees’ responses we also deduced that in the current education system there was a lack of educational planning and organisation.

Table 1 Themes identified from the interviewees' answers to the first research question

Interview question or topic of discussion	Themes taken from the interviewees' answers
MESAA member's personal opinion on the current system	Problems with memorising and spoon-feeding education system Political influence disturbs current education system Political interference preventing MESAA in achieving their goals
Education programmes and the role of academic unions	A practical, functional system is necessary for education The current course curriculum needs to be updated
The education system and its reflections	Competition in education brings many complications The current system doesn't work properly
The reliability of the current education system	The importance of planning by professional academics should be considered
The active learning process	For active learning, fundamental changes in the current system need to be done Political influence prevents changing the current system to an active learning process
Effectiveness of the system	The inefficiency of the current learning process analysis There is a lack of educational planning and organisation
The structure of the current education system	There is limited progress in the current educational system Political influence in the education systems prevents progress and change
The goals in the current education system	Current educational goals do not match the demands of the new generation The significance of inspection of MESAA should be admired by school administrators and teachers There should be a problem-solving capability in the educational system There should be educational planning according to the statistical data

The participants' responses to the second research question are presented in Table 2. Most of those interviews suggested that cooperative learning and student-centred education were the most suitable options in order to advance students' capabilities and help them realise their personal potential. Encouraging students to construct their own knowledge was significant for improving the quality of education. "Constructivism is an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner" (Elliott et al., 2000:256). Additionally, according to all the interviewees, the quality of education depends on promoting individuals' lifelong learning skills. The "lifelong-learning process" suggests that

lifelong learning can add greatly to the peace process for future generations (Arlow, 2001:38–43). Table 2 also reflects that the need to change educational platforms and inspection can increase the quality of education.

Strategic planning and the lack thereof in the educational policy were also emphasised by the interviewees. According to Avcı, Kırbaslar and Acar Şeşen (2019:1), "[n]ew instructional methods, techniques, and strategies, which will encourage individuals to think, discuss, research, question, think critically, and participate actively in the learning process, should be used in classroom settings when applying new instructional curriculums."

Table 2 The need for updating the education system

Interview question or topic of discussion	Themes taken from the interviewees' answers
The need for modernising current education system	Need for cooperative learning and student-centred learning Constructivism should be implemented
The quality of education	There is a need for changing the homework system Educational platforms need to be changed Inspection is an essential part of understanding the problems of the current system Personal development and learning should be promoted through lifelong learning
Changes and planning in education	There should be up to date changes Changes are needed in the qualifications of teachers, rules and regulations and current course curricula There should be strategic planning in educational policy
Reconstruction in education system	Focusing on student-centred approaches Reconstruction is essential Higher quality and standards are essential in the education system
Change in education system	Lifelong learning should be the target in education systems Education can be re-shaped and changed whenever there is a need

The interviewees' views on the third research question regarding the decision-making process are presented in Table 3. The results suggest that the majority of MESAA members believed that they were the ones who should have full control during the decision-making process. These views surfaced mainly with respect to the transformation and enhancement of the education process. Interviewees suggested that collaboration between the Ministry of Education and school administration was a very important factor but at the same time, the Ministry of Education should be separated from political influence. Decision-making in the education field needs to be in the hands of those who have much experience in this field and are aware of the strength and weakness of the current system (self-awareness

is the key). However, independence of the schools' administration in local decision-making is crucial in order to build a strong connection between MESAA and the school administration. A key point here was the persistence of MESAA on the significance of three-way communication between them, the Ministry of Education and school administration. They believed that the current system failed to give them a voice and power to solve the problems that they experienced. However, through three-way communication, these problems could be solved professionally. The interviewees also regarded leadership as important. According to the findings, effective leadership skills were necessary to develop connectivity (a bridge) between MESAA members and schools' administration.

Table 3 Roles of MESAA member in decision-making

Interview question or topic of discussion	Themes taken from the interviewees' answers
What are the roles of MESAA members in decision-making?	Self-awareness, sophistication and academic wisdom should be implemented in the decision-making process The particular and specific pedagogic strategy should be continued through time The connection between school administration and MESAA is very important Importance of effective leadership and good legislation in school administration should be realised
The decision-making process	The schools should have rules and regulations and before decision are taken, MESAA should be informed Communication is crucial among the MESAA members Decision-making mechanisms can help MESAA's voices be heard
Cooperation between stakeholders	There are advantages and disadvantages in every system, enhancement through the time is essential to cover shortages Change and reforms will help MESAA to achieve their goals Being confident and determined will help MESAA to succeed

Table 4 depicts the main themes from the participants' responses to the fourth research question. The importance of MESAA members' personal qualities in the decision-making process was the topic of this questions of the interviews.

According to the interviewees, communication and a cooperative attitude towards development of the current system were crucial. As was mentioned before, a gap existed between the education systems of Northern Cyprus and other European countries as

traditional, teacher-centred education was predominant in Northern Cyprus – not student-centred and based on a constructivist approach. A recent study by Aliusta, Özer and Kan (2015) proposes student-centred learning as the most suitable learning approach. When the interviewees were asked about the required abilities of MESAA members in the decision-making process, the

majority indicated that having progressive, constructive thinking and enlightened minds towards changes were mandatory. Such an attitude was not only needed for MESAA members but also for school administration and teachers. Finally, the participants stated that practical educational structures needed to be used in schools.

Table 4 Practical approach for MESAA leadership

Interview question or topic of discussion	Themes taken from the interviewees' answers
Practical approach	The teachers' attitudes and behaviour are very important Quality of education can be improved through functional and practical educational structures The importance of communication and the cooperative approach in creating common ground Hearing MESAA's voice during decision-makings have a positive effect
Significant political status	There is significant political siding among MESAA members MESAA should be open-minded and open to new strategies, they should also employ a constructive thinking approach Communication and goodwill are elements of success

Conclusion

In this article we present the problems in the education system of Northern Cyprus from MESAA members' perspectives. Qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews was conducted to gather information on this matter. The evidence suggests that MESAA members were concerned about their exclusion from the educational decision-making and executive processes. From the findings we conclude that in order for MESAA to be heard, three-way communication between MESAA, the executive board of the Education Ministry, and school administration was mandatory. The findings also suggest that the education system in Northern Cyprus needs to be reconstructed in order to reach the standards of other countries. The education system needs to be restructured on the basis of constructivist and student-centred approaches. During the interviews the participants indicated that strategies such as lifelong learning, active learning, and cooperative learning were to be emphasised in teaching and learning. Furthermore, the participants stressed the importance of effective leadership skills for senior administrators (MESAA) and all stakeholders at schools.

Authors' Contributions

Ulus Irkad and Bengi Sonyel wrote the manuscript. Ulus Irkad and Hamit Caner provided data for the tables, coding, and themes. All authors conducted statistical analyses and reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the doctoral thesis of Ulus Irkad.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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