

An investigation of the Peripatetic Greek Primary ESL Teachers' Perceptions on their Deployment

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Abstract: This small scale qualitative study aims to explore the Primary state school ESL teachers' perceptions on their deployment. The study was conducted in a northern Greek city and investigates seven teachers' perceptions on their deployment. The teachers were interviewed and the data were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively. The results reveal the, perceived by the teachers, weaknesses, in the design as well as the implementation of the ESL teaching scheme on the national as well as the local level and they illustrate the leadership and management style in the Greek educational system and its impact on the teachers' professional lives.

Keywords: ESL, peripatetic teachers, educational management, educational leadership

Introduction

This paper presents a small-scale study which aims to investigate the Greek ESL primary teachers' perceptions on their deployment. Despite the fact that since 1992 there has been a systematic attempt for the Greek children to learn English within the state educational system I believe there are certain issues of concern regarding the English teachers' deployment. As most of the English teachers do not cover their required working hours in one school, they have to go to two and sometimes to three schools to supplement them with a significant number of ESL teachers sharing their teaching hours among primary schools and kindergartens in school year 2021-2002. This study aims to investigate these teachers' perceptions on the way the decisions regarding their deployment have been dealt with until now. The study was conducted in a Greek northern city and seven out of twenty teachers who work in more than one school were interviewed for this purpose.

1. Background

1.1 Structure of the Greek educational system

In Greece, there are four levels of education: pre-primary, secondary and tertiary. Compulsory education lasts eleven years (from the age of 4—15), of which the first two years are spent in pre-primary school (Nipiagogeio), the next six years are spent at primary school (Dimotiko) and the last three years at lower secondary school (Gymnasio). The Greek educational system is a bureaucratic system (Robbins, 1998) managed in a linear way. Decision-making is highly centralized; all decisions regarding salaries, bonuses, retirement, insurance, teachers' rights and obligations are made by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in co-operation with the ministries involved. Decisions regarding pedagogical matters are made under the guidance and consultation of the Institute of Educational Policy. All decisions in the form of administrative documents are communicated through the Ministry's specialized departments to the local educational authorities. The main offices of the local educational authorities are centred in the capital city of each prefecture; there is a general director who has authority and responsibility for all the schools of the prefecture and is accountable to the MoE but he/she delegates authority to sub-directors who are responsible for a smaller number of schools (the number depends on the area) and who are accountable to him/her. Sharing the same status as the directors are the teachers' advisors who have authority and responsibility over pedagogical matters such as counseling and in-service teacher education. The advisors are relatively independent and accountable only to the MoE. The authority and responsibility of each school lies mainly in the hands of the headteacher who is usually a senior teacher.

Upward, downward and lateral communication are highly formalized and conducted through official documents; there is a strict chain of command where subordinates report to their supervisors who report to the MoE and vice versa. Both upward and downward communication can also be informally conducted via the teachers' unions.

According to the classification of management types made by White and Philips (1998), strategic management is in the hands of the MoE which applies policy and tactical management is performed by the local educational authorities as they are concerned with translating strategic management decisions into the routine work of the organization. The teachers' role in the organization's management line is an operational one as their job is to deliver the services that the organization exists to provide.

One of the tasks that management in education often has to perform is dealing with change. A recent significant change in the ESL teaching in the ESL setting in the public sector was the introduction of the English language in pre-primary education for two hours per week (Official Hellenic Government Gazette, 2016).

1.2 The Greek ESL educational context

In 1992 English was introduced in the last three grades of primary school as a compulsory subject. The existing curriculum has been modified several times up to 2016 when the last modification occurred (Official Hellenic Government Gazette, 2016). Nowadays, English is being taught as a compulsory subject for two hours per week in Kindergartens, two

hours per week in the first and second grades of primary school and three hours per week from the third to the sixth grade of primary school and two hours per week in lower secondary school.

All primary English teachers are graduates from the two university departments of English Language and Literature in the country or equivalent university departments abroad and have exactly the same qualifications as their colleagues in secondary education.

The required teaching hours for English teachers are 24 hours per week. The problem of mismatch between teachers and teaching hours came up when it was realized that almost no school could offer 24 hours of English, as generally even the largest urban primary schools tend to be small (150 — 300 pupils) in Greece. The MoE therefore decided that teachers should be sent to primary schools — mostly rural — in the same area or to kindergartens to supplement the required working hours. It was also decided that teachers who commute receive remuneration. Recognizing that each area had its own special characteristics, which led to problems requiring an individual approach, the Ministry delegated authority to the local educational authorities to settle the problem of the mismatch between teachers and teaching hours. However, as no primary English advisors had actually been appointed, it was even suggested that primary teachers' advisors should collaborate with the English advisors.

The *centre-periphery model* of change (White and Philips, 1998) was used in this case as decision-making is in the hands of a small number of controlling authorities and teachers who are at the periphery of the decision-making process, simply implement the decisions that are handed down to them.

2. Context of the study

The study took place in a medium-sized city in northeast Greece. There are 21 primary schools (15 urban and 6 rural) and 31 kindergartens (25 urban and 6 rural) in the area that have English in their timetables. Authority and responsibility for these schools has the director of the local educational authorities.

The 21 urban schools operate with 20 teachers, 15 of whom commute to more than one school. Within this context, I am investigating the teachers' perceptions of the decisions regarding their deployment as well as whether and if yes to what extent these decisions influence their lives.

2.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this small-scale research study was to gain understanding of the Greek ESL primary teachers' perceptions regarding their deployment after the 1992 ESL innovation. This was realized through the following research questions:

- What are English primary teachers' perceptions of their deployment?
- Are of English primary teachers' professional lives influenced by their deployment?

2.2 Sample

Seven teachers were interviewed in a semi-structured format and the interviews were content-analyzed. All were women whose teaching experience varied from seven to twenty years. All, except for teacher D who is a substitute teacher, hold permanent posts at their schools. Five (teachers A, B, C, D and E) have worked at *private* institutes whereas all except for teacher D have worked as substitute teachers at secondary schools in the past. Finally, teachers B and C supplement their working hours in other rural primary schools whereas teacher A supplements her teaching hours in an urban primary school and teachers D, E and F supplement their working hours in two urban kindergartens.

2.3 Methodology

My decision to use interpretive methodology sprang from the ontological belief that 'people's knowledge, understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions are meaningful properties of their reality' (Mason, 1996: 38) and I designed my research questions aiming to explore this reality. The most legitimate way to generate data in accordance with these ontological properties was to interact with participants through discussion and gain access to their own accounts. I therefore decided to use interviews.

The possibility that the participants might have to talk about their supervisors made the topic rather sensitive. As a result I considered that a certain degree of flexibility, allowing the interviewer to assess the specific dynamics of each interaction, was vital. Therefore, I decided to use semi-structured interviews which offered me the opportunity to cover the range of topics and issues I had in my agenda. They also enabled me to make on-the-spot assessments and follow up on specific responses in the narrative or sequence provided by the participants.

I conducted the interviews after explaining to the participants how to utilize the results and after receiving their informed consent; moreover, I made every possible effort to protect the participants' anonymity. Each participant received a transcript of the interview so as to be able to comment on it in any way she wished. The study was piloted once.

2.4 Limitations of the study

There are three possible limitations in this study. First, the number of participants is not large and hence the results cannot be generalized to other primary English teachers in Greece. Secondly, a common drawback of using interviews is the existence of 'asymmetries of power' (Cohen and Manion, 2000: 279) between the interviewer and the

interviewees in the sense that the interviewer typically defines the situation and he/she is the one who utilizes the results in the end. This could possibly influence the participants' responses in terms of honesty and authenticity and, thus reduce the instrument's validity. I tried to minimize the effects of this drawback by offering the participants the opportunity to comment on the transcripts as well as on my first interpretation of the data before it was publicized. Finally, time constraints did not permit me to confirm my results by using another method.

3. Presentation of results

The data analysis resulted to the following categories.

Table 2 Overview of the categories

1. Policy making
1.1 Design and planning 'Obviously the whole thing starts from the Ministry. They could have organized it in a different way ...' (Teacher E)
1.2 Implementation 'Here we never start with the right perspectives. We always examine things on the way and we ... see ... we see the mistakes and, I hope, we can fix them.' (Teacher F)
2. Resources
2.1 Financial Resources 'There are financial interests on the e part of the governments, which haven't tried until now to give the money required so that the existing inadequacies may be corrected.' (Teacher F)
2.2 Human Resources '.. well at a local level the primary teachers' directors are responsible ... they program things and they try with the least personnel to cover the most schools.' (Teacher D)
3. Professional support
3.1 Lack of instruction I had to teach two different classes at the same time. It was difficult for the children and for myself. How can you learn like that? ... It's a mess ... It's a mockery ...' (Teacher C)
3.2 Lack of materials and support at the second school — the one where you supplement your teaching hours - you don't find what you need ... easily. Tape recorders, books, library, laptops, projector, internet. You can't have easy access to them because there are other people who use them when you are there.' (Teacher A)
3.3 Remuneration 'The remuneration is the least. I don't even know how much is it. I'd rather not get any money and stay at one school ...' (Teacher B)
4. Communication
4.1 Lateral communication ... but as for the timetabling and the teaching hours they [the local authorities] don't listen to the teachers. They ... just decide.' (Teacher C)
4.2 Bottom-up communication ' well, I think that access is not that easy, especially when there is only one English advisor for the region of [name]. I don't think she could know all the problems of every single area. Things could be improved if there were more advisors. One for each area.' (Teacher E)
5. Impact
5.1 Fatigue 'Going from one place to another makes me tired...' (Teacher B)
5.2 Stress 'As a teacher, I think that it is unacceptable. It is not good ... pedagogically I mean, to look at your watch all the time ... your tongue comes out until you arrive ...' (Teacher B)
5.3 Loss of productivity/creativity 'My performance goes down a lot. And it goes down for sure. My job is not the same ...' (Teacher B)
5.4 Perception of professional status 'In primary education the specialists are the "flowerpots" that decorate the school. They don't think they are necessary ... just to fill the hours ... our subject is considered to be of secondary importance ... what can I say ... the last in the row. Of least importance.' (Teacher B)
6. Involvement in decision making 'Well, it would be good to be asked where we want to go but it would be a mix up. Because everyone would prefer to go to a nearby school ..' (Teacher C)

4. Discussion

Participants believe that the central authorities 'should have organized' the innovation 'in a different way' (Teacher E). They hold them responsible for 'not starting with the right perspectives' (Teacher F) starting from the planning stage since 'the designing and planning is the most important thing' (Teacher B).

The perceived weaknesses concern the role of **strategic management**. Theorists seem to disagree, though, regarding the point at which strategy's role can be predictive. On the one hand, there are the views that strategic management's role is that of diagnosis and future prediction (Everard and Morris, 1990; White et al., 1991; White and Philips, 1998). On the other hand, there is a more contemporary approach to the former view (Fullan, 1999; Hooper and Potter, 2000) which argues that it is difficult to apply long-term planning at present as the world itself is constantly changing and strategy needs to be more flexible. Nevertheless, whatever the difference of approach to strategy, there is an agreement among theorists that a 'theory of action' (Fullan, 1999: 64), a systematic approach appears to be an antecedent for successful innovations.

White and Philips (1998) argue that policy-makers often ignore the complexity of a change process (Fullan, 2001) and are impatient to see their ideas put into practice and this can result in insufficient examination and discussion of their ideas. Such 'amateur' (Teacher D) approaches can lead to partly inadequate **implementations**. Fullan (1991) agrees that quality may often be compromised, especially in ambitious, politically driven projects simply because 'the time line between the initiation decision and start-up is typically too short to attend matters of quality' (ibid.: 72).

Participants also criticize decisions regarding **resources** (*financial human and physical*). A number of participants hold the government responsible for not giving 'the money required' (Teacher F) to support the innovation while others criticize the local authorities because they 'don't ask for money' especially 'for substitute teachers' (Teacher B). The reality lies in between these two extremes. The directors of local authorities estimate their needs for teachers and request the money from the MoE which distributes the money according to each year's budgeting. However, utilizing limited finance to employ people can prove very hazardous in the long term as the employees can then be over-utilized. The very popular management motto 'maximizing resources to meet objectives' (White and Philips, 1998: C6) should be translated appropriately when it comes to human resources.

When we consider human resources the emphasis should be on 'human' as human beings are 'thinking resources' who 'will decide jointly with their superiors and colleagues on how their time, knowledge and skill will be used' (Everard and Morris, 1999: 66). In this particular context, maximizing certainly does not mean 'try with the least personnel to cover the most schools' (Teacher D). It possibly means using them to the maximum to enable them see themselves evolve within the organization. Otherwise, they may end up working 'against themselves' or 'against the organization' (Nicholls, 1983: 68).

Yet, individuals' growth and development within an organization, especially in times of change, cannot be achieved without **professional support**, the lack of which is strongly indicated by the participants. There are two dimensions to their notion of support: *the lack of adequate provision of materials and equipment* and *the lack of sufficient instruction to cope* with difficult teaching situations which resulted from certain management decisions. White and Philips (1998) as well as Nicholls (1983) emphasize the above dimensions when they argue that adequate provision of 'physical resources' as well as sufficient 'training and instruction' (White and Philips: C17) enable teachers to face successfully the 'uncertainties and doubts created by change' (Nicholls, 1983: 71).

Participants attribute the lack of sufficient instruction to the **lack of communication** between the teachers and the English advisor who is perceived as 'consultant' and 'mediator' (Teacher F) as well as between the English advisor and the primary advisor. The study indicates the responsibility of local management to create conditions in which the innovation is more likely to be implemented but it should not be overlooked that teachers, too, have a measure of responsibility. 'Communication is a two-way process' (Nicholls, 1983: 71) and teachers need to talk to their advisors as well as listen to them.

Indeed, the establishment of a 'supportive communication' system (White and Philips, 1998: K20) which works effectively both vertically (up-down and bottom-up communication) as well as horizontally (lateral communication) is stressed in literature as one of the most important elements of successful innovation. In the case of the Greek ELT teachers' deployment an effective communications system would have helped the people involved to obtain a clear picture of the situation on the one hand and on the other to discuss fundamental issues and uncertainties. Furthermore, teachers would have been able to receive advice on how to deal with problems relative to their job and finally, English advisors and primary advisors could have shared their expertise and knowledge to make things work. Indeed, the establishment and reinforcement of knowledge sharing practices among the members of an organization is, according to Fullan (2001), one of the elements of successful professional development during times of change as they contribute to an improvement in quality of personal relationships, promoting trust and team spirit (Ridley, in Fullan, 1999).

All the above-perceived inadequacies at different levels of innovation management have a **negative impact** on teachers at different levels, as the study reveals. Physical and psychosomatic problems such as extreme fatigue and stress lead to loss of the participants' productivity and creativity. In addition, their perceived professional status within the organization seems to be very low; they feel 'the last in the row ... of least importance' (Teacher B). Unfortunately, what can be said here is that the participants are extremely demotivated and have started suffering from symptoms of 'burnout' such as loss of enthusiasm, and a dominant feeling of frustration because of work-related and societal stressors, a feeling of insignificance which leads to loss of commitment and is accompanied by various psychosomatic

symptoms which can finally lead to a sense of depletion and loss of caring about the job unless it is dealt with (Faber in Fullan, 1993).

Even though there is no indication that the participants have reached the final stage, they still appear to be demotivated. Nevertheless, what is surprising is that they seem to reject the only thing offered to them, which is considered a 'motivating' factor for employees: **remuneration**. It appears that participants show little or no interest in remuneration compared with other issues like support, facilitation and coaching. Results, though, seem to come in accordance with White and Philips' (1998) argument that as far as teachers are concerned money seems to be ranked lower than the challenge of successfully meeting the challenge of the job itself; and this is because professionals seek 'autonomy, recognition as well as educational opportunities' (ibid.: 122).

Another motivating factor about which, according to theorists, participants are supposed to have a positive attitude is **participation in decision-making** which is considered to be one of the motivating factors in literature as it improves their 'satisfaction, productivity and stimulates organizational innovation' (Nicholls 1983, 43). Quite surprisingly, though, participants were not willing to respond positively to the advisor's occasional attempts to involve them in decision-making out of worry of jeopardizing their personal relationships.

My feeling is that what underpins such an attitude is the teachers' involvement in the bureaucratic culture of the organization which makes it extremely difficult for them to modify the way they function within the system. If we accept Brown's definition of organizational culture as: *a pattern of beliefs, values and learned ways of coping with experience that have been developed through the course of organizational history and which tend to be manifested in its material arrangements* (Brown, 1995: 8).

Then it is not difficult to realize that there is a mindset built within a system of centralized authority where hierarchical control dominates. Therefore teachers are not used to developing strategies and mechanisms of managing interpersonal relationships in the professional community as far as job matters are concerned. In fact, a closer look at the results indicates an acknowledgement and acceptance of a coercive leading style under which 'things are being done with cold rationale' (Teacher A), where employees 'don't have another choice' (Teacher C) but to obey 'devotedly' (Teacher A). Such attitudes of tolerance towards mechanistic structures are reported by White and Philips (1998) to be found in organizations operating in national settings and are attributed to the cultural elements of the organization which are internalized by the members.

5. Implications

Fullan quotes Pascale who argues that 'productive educational change roams between overcontrol and chaos' (Fullan, 1993: 19). The case of the Greek ELT innovation is an obvious example which lies on the extreme edge of 'overcontrol' within the centre periphery model of change and which was implemented in a bureaucratic setting characterized by:

- centralized authority;
- formalized rules and regulations;
- narrow span of control; and
- decision-making which follows the chain of command (adapted from Robbins, 1998).

Data reveal the following main characteristics of the management style:

- focus on processes;
- transmission of information;
- superficial compliance to rules;
- lack of collaboration; and
- lack of support;

which have eventually led to

- teachers' frustration and low morale.

A transformation of leadership style in public education in Greece is necessary as the situation seems to have reached a cul de sac; there are implications for the MoE, the local authorities, the advisors as well as for teachers themselves.

First, policy-makers, as Fullan (1993) argues, cannot enforce matters by demanding blind compliance to rules. Teachers are thinking individuals with a moral purpose to improve the lives of their students by enabling them to become 'inner and outer learners who will connect to wider circles of society' (Fullan, 1993: 146). Therefore, policy-makers cannot expect skilful individuals to respond to power coercive strategies for change. They have to involve them in the whole process and gain their commitment. However, people do not become committed easily unless they share a vision, a sense of purpose as well as a sense of ownership — and this is difficult to achieve within a large organization.

This is why effective leadership is so critical. Effective leadership, as Hooper and Potter (2000) point out, embraces people at all levels of the organization in a way that promotes 'organizational coherence' (Fullan, 2001: 107) which requires the coordination of different people with different positions over a period of time (Newman in Fullan, 2001: 110)

However, the motivation to share knowledge and information requires ongoing interaction, which can only be realized through an efficient communications system in all directions. An educational system whose mission statement is to facilitate individuals' process of socialization, should act accordingly at all levels. In such an environment, 'control freaks need not apply' as 'people need elbow room to uncover and sort out best ideas' (Fullan, 2001: 87).

Therefore, the results call for a change in leadership which will focus on people and will create the grounds for a change of organizational culture characterized by coherence achieved through effective channels of communication (Table 2). Within such a system the individuals are more likely to experience a strong 'sense of belonging and alignment to the organization' (Hooper and Potter, 2000: 12).

However, none of the above suggestions can be realized effortlessly, especially in organizations operating in national settings such as the Greek educational system. So, how can Greek public education escape gridlock? All of us who believe that *paideia* is a public commodity and that is the way it should remain, owe it to ourselves to be optimistic. The change of status quo is never easy and requires gradual steps as well as respect for individuals' diverse attitudes and behaviors. Then again, it is vital that educational systems like that of Greece, which cannot base the success of their educational enterprises on their powerful finances, make the most valuable investment — to invest in their human potential by building 'a strong core of people who really care about the place and who have ideas' (Minzberg in Fullan, 2001: 133). Individuals who feel strong, honored and respected have incentives to keep improving. Of course the above involves all members of an organization but they are of special significance for the front-line members; an organization can achieve a lot 'by making heroes of the people who deliver' since it is important for them 'to feel part of a success story' because 'that's what they want to be' (Bichard in Fullan, 2001: 19).

Table 3 Comparison of present situation and required situation in the Greek education system

Present situation	Required situation
• focus on processes	• focus on people
• power coercion	• value sharing
• information transmission	• communication
• lack of collaboration	• organizational coherence
• superficial compliance to rules	• commitment
Result: Employee frustration and low morale	Result: Empowered employees

If we want to move one step forward we shouldn't forget that 21st century is the century of **sustainability**. Nowadays there is a continuous debate regarding how different types of organizations can successfully adapt to change, creating the conditions that can lead to **sustainable development**. According to Mehlikova (2022), this has direct implications to the ways organizations are managed and led since different kinds of management and, especially leadership, seem to be conducive to a sustainable development practices that involve several aspects and stakeholders within the organizations. This means that the cultivation of sustainability requires leaders with certain and qualities and features who adopt practices shaped by specific principles. Educational organizations do not seem to be different from other types of organizations as far as the need for sustainable leadership is concerned since they are progressively face environmental sustainability challenges that require the demonstration of environmentally sound practices and the support of the integration of sustainability into management practices and curriculum. These management practices are shaped by the principles of *continuity, dissemination, justice, creativity, activism, support* and *flexibility* (Hargreaves and Fink, 2005) and it seems that the Greek education system has still a long way to go.

6. Conclusion

This small scale study set out to investigate the perceptions of a group of ELT primary teachers working in a small northern Greek city on their deployment after the ELT innovation. Overall, the interview results at that particular time indicate that there seems to be:

- insufficient design and strategic planning of the innovation;
- issues in the pace of the implementation of the innovation;
- lack of professional support for the teachers;
- communication issues;
- deficiency in utilization of financial and human resources;
- decision- making which follows the chain of command

The teachers' working conditions, as they are described above, influence them in a negative way on professional as well as on personal level. They experience physical and psychosomatic problems, they have become less productive and creative and feel frustrated and undervalued as professionals.

The results call in a requirement to change of the current leadership style to a style that favors sustainable practices because of its consequences on people. However, it seems that this will not be an easy enterprise due to the deep-rooted bureaucratic culture of the Greek educational system, part of which are the teachers themselves.

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