Decentralizing Education in Greece: In search for a new role for the school leaders

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Introduction

Greek educational system is arguably being decentralized. Recent legislation shows that the intention on behalf of the governments is to allocate more responsibilities and increase relative autonomy at the school level, following trends observed in many other European countries. Traditionally however Greek headteachers do not have substantial managerial responsibilities. Rather, they are part of the bureaucracy of the system, with administrative and bureaucratic responsibilities. Are Greek school leaders ready to accept a new role? We are going to try to answer the above question in this paper. More specifically, after presenting a brief theoretical approach and the methodology used in our research we will concentrate on the analysis of the legislative/institutional framework regarding headteachers' duties in Greece as well as on the results of the survey research we conducted. Our main argument is that Greek headteachers have not started challenging their administrative – bureaucratic role. The traditional centralization of the system along with the lack of administrative and secretarial staff are arguably the most important factors contributing to the limited leadership perspectives demonstrated by Greek headteachers.

Management and Leadership in Greek Schools

Numerous scholars and researchers have addressed the issue of **centralization** in Greek education. (Markou, 1991, Andreou & Papakonstantinou, 1994, Kazamias & Kassotakis, eds. 1995, OECD 1995, 2001, Koutouzis 1999). There is an agreement among al the above that Greek educational system is a highly centralized system. Extensive centralization, however, is not the only characteristic of a system also characterized by intense bureaucratization, strict hierarchical structures, extensive legislation (polynomy) and "formalism". It could be argued that the "bureaucratic" model of educational management is applied in Greek schools (Bush 1995, Iordanidis, 2002). As a result, complicated formal processes, determined by laws, presidential decrees, ministerial decisions of circulars etc., are widely followed (Koutouzis 2001). Despite the rhetoric and recent legislative measures towards a degree of decentralization (OECD, 2001), schools do not yet decide on most of the issues concerning budget, staff, curricula, educational materials and teaching methods in their schools.

It is not surprising therefore, that the managerial role of the headteachers is very limited, as it is basically expected from them to apply the decisions taken centrally at the Ministry of Education. Headteachers in Greece, according to the above studies, are not expected to perform the main managerial processes (planning, organizing directing, controlling/evaluating). Arguably though, there is a degree of "relative autonomy" (Andreou & Papakonstantinou, 1997, Mavrogiorgos, 1999, OECD, 2001) that allows headteachers to introduce and apply "internal educational policy" in their schools, thus adopting a more active managerial role (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992). As shown in the next part of this paper one of the hypotheses of the research was that headteachers in Greece "conform" to this role focusing mainly on administrative/bureaucratic duties. In other words we hypothesized that they do not challenge their current role by using the –limited- autonomy that exists within the specific system in order to establish an "internal educational policy". Moreover, we expected primary teachers to be more active and devote more time in managerial activities as they do not face the issue of exams at the end of every school year. There seems to be more room for managerial initiatives in primary schools, which decreases as we move up to the secondary schools.

Methodology of research

a) In order to analyze the legislative/institutional framework which describes the role and duties of all managerial staff we collected and studied the legislation in force as well as all relevant official documents in reference to headteachers' general duties and responsibilities as well as their interrelation with the rest of the managerial staff, students, local community and stakeholders. Secondly, we divided the duties and role of headteachers as these are described in the legislative/institutional framework into three broad categories: 1) managerial duties, 2) bureaucratic duties, and 3) pedagogical duties. The first category, namely managerial duties was in turn divided into four subcategories based on the four core phases of management a) planning b) organization, c) leading and d) control -evaluation.

The research technique of **content analysis** was used in order to achieve a thorough and deeper understanding of the institutional and legislative context in reference to the duties of headteachers. The concept "duties" was selected as a **core record** unit and then verbs, phrases and/or relevant concepts (analysis units) found in the law describing the role and duties of headteachers were traced. An indicative example referring to a managerial duty is the phrase *"the head teacher organizes the number of students and classes according to the relevant law in force"*. During the recording process we have pinpointed combinations of duties. Those duties phrased either through verbs or concepts were divided in the aforementioned categories supplementing this way our initial list.

In sum, the aim of the content analysis was to examine the role of the Headteachers according to the legislation. The main hypothesis here – following the arguments of the bibliography - was that legislation promotes clearly a bureaucratic/administrative role.

b) The basic research tool used for this research project is the questionnaire which comprises 20 pages and is dealing with a variety of issues. However, for the purposes of this paper we will refer to two main items of the questionnaire. The first is a list of activities which headteachers were asked to evaluate it in a Likert scale according to their importance for the effective management of their school. There were 41 activities related to the 3 categories identified above (managerial, administrative/bureaucratic, pedagogical). The second item refers to the time allocated by the headteachers in the above activities. They were asked to indicate the time they spend dealing with these activities on a 4point Likert scale.   The hypothesis here was that headteachers, regardless of the type of their school, regard their duties as part of a bureaucratic mechanism and, thus, their role as an administrative/bureaucratic one. Therefore, we assumed that they consider administrative and bureaucratic activities more important than managerial ones and they spend much more time dealing with the former as compared to the latter.

Sampling

Questionnaires were sent to a representative sample of the total of school units in both primary and secondary education. Research sampling (stratified random sampling) covers approximately 5% of the total number of schools in Greece (725 schools).

More specifically, the issues of educational level (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary) and urbanization (rural, semi-urban, urban) were taken in to consideration in order to have a valid and reliable sample. Moreover, differentiations that arise between schools in reference to the staff number or type of school) (experimental, musical, athletic, etc.) in secondary education were also taken in to consideration in the sampling process.

The sample of the research therefore included 725 headteachers (N=725) **272** Heads of Nursery Schools, **271** Primary school *Dimotica*, **94** lower secondary schools *Gymnasia*, **63** high secondary schools *Lykeia* and **25** technical and vocational Schools *(TEE).*

In this paper we will not include results from Nursery Schools

Results

a) Content Analysis

From the analysis of the relevant educational framework on headteachers' duties, 53 managerial responsibilities, 51 bureaucratic duties and 11 pedagogical responsibilities were identified. In other words, 46% of headteachers' overall duties are "managerial", 44, 4% refer to bureaucratic duties, whereas only a considerably low percentage of 9,6% are directly or indirectly linked to pedagogical issues. It is clear from above figures that the legislative framework is clearly

oriented towards **both managerial and bureaucratic** duties, while references to pedagogical responsibilities are clearly less, therefore underestimating this dimension and its importance in headteachers' professional profile. In other words the profile according to the framework is a rather balanced one, between managerial and administrative-bureaucratic duties. In reference to the four phases of the managerial process, 26.4% of headteachers' responsibilities are related to the planning process, 28.3% in organization, 33.9% in leadership and a relatively low percentage of 11.4% of headteachers' duties are related to evaluation / control. It should be noted therefore that the legislative framework emphasizes responsibilities which can be placed in "leadership", while through its scarce references on "planning" and "organization" it clearly underestimates the importance of these dimensions.

b) Analysis of the questionnaire

Demographic data

224 questionnaires were returned representing 49.6% of the sample. More specifically 107 respondents were Heads of Primary Schools, 60 Heads of Lower Secondary, 49 Heads of High Secondary and 8 Heads of technical and vocational Schools.

170 headteachers were male and 54 female, confirming other research evidence concerning the under-representation of women in relevant positions in the Greek educational system (Kontogiannopoulou – Polydorides, Zambeta, 1997, Athanasoula – Reppa & Koutouzis, 2003).

Statistical Analysis

a) Importance of activities

As indicated above, respondents were asked to evaluate in a Likert scale a list of activities, according to their importance for the effective management of their school. The activities were managerial, pedagogical and administrative/bureaucratic, following the division mentioned above in the paper. Headteachers seem to evaluate higher in terms of importance, activities that are related to the administrative /bureaucratic role. More specifically the five most important activities according to the respondents were:

Table 1 Activities Ranked as "Most Important"

Activity	N	%
Ensuring the existence of sufficient staff throughout the year	**196**	**88.3**
Applying the relevant legislation on an equal basis for all the staff	**189**	**84.8**
Being informed about the legislation in act	**186**	**83.0**

	180	80.7
Ensuring the availability of all educational material throughout the year	180	80.7
Knowing the educational legislation	177	79.0

What is interesting to mention at this point is that headteachers in Greece are not responsible for appointing staff for their schools, nor are they completely responsible for acquiring educational material. The Ministry of education holds the responsibility for these issues. So headteachers have to ask (following the levels of hierarchy) for staff and material according to their needs and wait for the relevant decisions. Therefore, these highly ranked responsibilities are not "managerial" in the sense that headteachers do not have the responsibility (and accountability) for the relevant decisions. All the other "most important" activities are clearly related to the bureaucratic and administrative role.

In the following table activities that were ranked by the respondents as least important are presented.

Table 2 Activities Ranked as "Least Important"

Activity	N	%
Applying the statutory penalties to the staff	72	32.1
Evaluating teachers work	24	10.7
Formulating rules/ regulations for the staff	15	6.7
Publishing results for promotion and graduation of the students	16	7.1
Submit data asked by the Ministry or other departments of the civil service	14	6.3

The respondents seem to distance themselves from control and evaluation, which is clearly a key managerial responsibility. Teachers' evaluation has been a hot issue for more than 20 years in Greece and currently three is no official evaluation.

Following the above analysis we wanted to obtain a clearer picture on some of the issues raised, therefore, a factor analysis was conducted in order to identify groups of activities that follow the same pattern in the responses given. The following bureaucratic/administrative activities seem to formulate such a group:

Factor 1 Bureaucratic- Administrative Activities (Knowing and following the rules)

- Knowing the educational legislation
- Being informed about the legislation in act
- Submit all relevant reports to the Ministry
- Submit all relevant reports to the other authorities of the hierarchy

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- Submit documents to other departments (of the civil service)

Table 3

Ranking of activities	N	%
Very important	91	40.63
Relatively important	121	54.02
Less important	12	5.36
Least important	0	0.0
TOTAL	224	100

Cronbach Alpha = 0,757

A first point that can be made is that Heateachers clearly regard the administrative/bureaucratic responsibilities more important that all the others, despite the relevant balance between these and the managerial responsibilities, observed in the content analysis of the legislative framework.

As we have already mentioned the respondents were head teachers of Primary, Lower Secondary and High Secondary Schools, and technical and Vocational Schools.

It is therefore interesting to observe the following cross-tabulation which shows the ranking of importance of the above activities, according to the type of school.

Table 4 Importance of Administrative/Bureaucratic Activities by type of School

Ranking of activities	Primary		L.Secondary		H. Secondary		Technical – vocational		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very important	54	50.00	21	34.43	11	26.83	5	35.71	**91**	**40.63**
Relatively important	50	46.30	34	55.74	29	70.73	8	57.14	**121**	**54.02**
Less important	4	3.70	6	9.84	1	2.44	1	7.14	**12**	**5.36**
Least important	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	**0**	**0.00**
Total	**108**	**100**	**61**	**100**	**41**	**100**	**14**	**100**	**224**	**100**

X^2 = 11.859, df=6, p=0.065

From table 3 we can observe that there is a statistical significance between the Primary and the High Secondary school Heads. More specifically Primary School head teachers seem to regard the bureaucratic activities more important (!) than High Secondary ones. This is really interesting. Primary schools have more "space" to differentiate from the bureaucratic rules as they do not face the prospect of the exams at the end of each year, or the pressure of the parents for good results etc. Nevertheless, primary head teachers do not seem to use that space in other words they seem comfortable in their bureaucratic role.

Another group that could be identified following the factor analysis was the managerial activities related to the relative autonomy and the consequent formulation of the "internal educational policy" described above in this paper. More specifically the following activities were included:

Factor 2: Managerial Activities – (Opening the school to the society and introducing internal educational policy).

- Promoting innovative activities
- Promoting the participation of the school to local community activities
- Promoting pupils' communication with peers from other schools
- Promoting organization of seminars related to health education, environmental education, drug abuse etc.
- Promoting the linkage between the school and the local job market
- Organizing cultural visits and other relevant activities
- Organizing educational seminars for the parents

Table 5

Ranking of activities	N	%
Very important	72	32.4
Relatively important	129	58.1
Less important	20	9.0
Least important	1	0.5
TOTAL	**222**	**100**

Cronbach Alpha = 0.849

What is clearly observable from the above tables is that the activities related to the establishment of internal education policy are regarded less important by the respondents, compared to the bureaucratic ones, confirming one of the initial hypotheses of the research. As shown in table 5, there are statistically significant differences among headteachers of different schools.

Table 6 Importance of Managerial Activities by type of School

Ranking of activities	Primary		L.Secondary		H. Secondary		Technical – vocational		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very important	41	38.68	15	24.59	8	19.51	8	57.14	**72**	**32.43**
Relatively important	61	57.55	38	62.30	24	58.54	6	42.86	**129**	**58.11**
Less important	4	3.77	8	13.11	9	21.95	0	0.00	**21**	**9.46**
Total	**106**	**100**	**61**	**95**	**41**	**100**	**14**	**100**	**222**	**100**

X^2 = 20.52, df=6, p=0.002

Heads of High Secondary Schools are clearly less oriented towards managerial roles. They do not seem to be strongly interested to opening the school to the local and wider society, in contrast with their colleagues of Technical and vocational institutions. So our hypothesis, that there is more concern for managerial activities in Primary Schools was not confirmed as this happens more in technical and vocational institutions

b) Time devoted to activities

Respondents were asked to indicate in a 4point scale, the time they devote to the various activities presented to them. The main purpose was identify the most time consuming activities for the head teachers and to examine whether the "important activities" identified in the previous question, analyzed above, demand more time in comparison with the least important ones.

The five activities that seem to demand most time on behalf of the headteachers are:

Table 7: Activities that demand most time

Activity	N	%
Dealing with everyday "operational issues"	**98**	**43.8**
Management of the existing financial resources	**70**	**31.3**
Keeping the school's records	**67**	**29.9**
Immediate problem solving (operational/personal)	**65**	**29.0**
Acquisition and keeping of technological educational material	**54**	**24,1**

The above table confirms the argument that the administrative workload is such that requires time (and effort) on behalf of the headteachers, at the expense of the time allocated to managerial duties. It is worth noticing that in most Greek schools there is no administrative – secretarial staff.

Table 8: Activities that demand least time

Activity	N	%
Applying the statutory penalties to the staff	146	65.2
Applying the statutory penalties to the students	78	34.8
Evaluating teachers work	63	28.1
Act in order to promote the communication of my students with students from other schools	57	25.4
Formulating rules/ regulations for the staff	54	24.1

Once again it is clear that control and evaluation are not priorities for the Greek Headteachers, confirming our argument about the reluctance of Greek Head teachers to get involved in an important managerial activity.

Conclusion

Despite the efforts of the last 15 years Greek educational system remains highly centralized, highly bureaucratized, with limited space for school autonomy and substantial management. Greek headteachers who have served for years under these conditions seem to regard their role mainly as administrators of the system rather than managers or leaders. However, they are not to be blamed for that. The legislative framework may be a relatively balanced one. Everyday administrative needs in conjunction with the absence of administrative support do not leave space and time for changing that concept. Nonetheless, a considerable part of the headteachers is seeking to find ways to gain more responsibility, more authority and more opportunities for leadership roles within their schools. So in answering one of our initial questions we could argue that part of Greek headteachers are ready to challenge their traditional roles. One can hope that these headteachers who try to add a different dimension to their traditional role can act as transformational leaders not only for their schools but for the system in general.

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