# An Investigation into Educational Decision-Making in a Centralized Education System: Governance Principles and the Case of National Education Councils (Şûras)

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## Abstract

This study aims to investigate how national education councils are organized in Turkey, shed light on their voting procedures, and examine their perceived challenges, based on data from eight participants of the 18th National Education Council. A qualitative research design was adopted and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. By scrutinizing a particular decision-making convention in a centralized system, the study offers significant evidence on education decision-making and contributes to the existing body of literature on education decision-making in accordance with governance principles.

**Keywords** Education decision-making; Decision-making body; Educational planning; Centralized education system

## Introduction

Human factors, population composition, knowledge and technology, the natural environment, economic systems, changes in cultural-ideological resources, incremental costs, and the need to renew goals or strategies (Gökçe, 2009) contribute to changes in education systems. In an effort to emphasize the felt needs and drivers of educational changes, Pasi Sahlberg (2011) lists the need for equipping students with new knowledge and skills for an unpredictably fast-paced world, and the need to enable all students to acquire them, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. Put

differently, modern states are challenged by an obligation to restructure their educational institutions and readjust their guiding principles, while keeping these institutions under control and continuously planning the various subsystems of education (Dinç, 2008). Managing these restructuring and/or reculturing processes by following a certain set of steps and strategies is of paramount importance in terms of bridging the potential gap between intended outcomes and achieved outcomes, and this is where educational planning must enter the discussion.

In essence, educational planning is decision-making, because reaching intended outcomes (student, personnel, and structural) at an optimal level calls for setting priorities and making choices based on a state of "urgency" (Kotter, 2012). Thus, planning involves several cycles of thinking about, sorting, and selecting priorities, which, in addition to the criterion of urgency, requires evidence-based participatory decision-making. Considering the tremendous effects of decision-making on the way things are done at schools (Lunenburg, 2010), there is a strong need for decision-making processes to be effective, so that decisions will have positive impacts upon student outcomes.

While educational planning is defined as the effort to develop a necessary foundation for achieving certain goals (Gümüş & Şişman, 2012), decision-making is perceived as the process of choosing among existing alternatives, with the aim of reaching desired outcomes (Eisenfuhr, Weber, & Langer, 2011). As such, the decision-making process is the concrete means for the realization of educational plan(s), and, in Turkey, this concrete means has mainly been put into practice by the educational councils (Şûras) that have regularly been convened since 1921 by the Ministry of National Education (MEB)[1] (Uzun & Uslu-Üstten, 2010).

There are around 17.5 million students and one million teachers in Turkey (Türkiye Istatistik Kurumu [TUIK], 2014) and a highly centralized governance model is the main apparatus that manages and/or controls almost all decisions relevant to education, despite the agreed-upon idea that most of the decisions should follow a fine-grained approach based on the different needs of regions, cities, schools, and even individuals. While it must be difficult for a central body to make appropriate and timely decisions given the diverse needs of so many individuals, the existence of Şûras as a forum where multiple stakeholders come together to decide the future of education in Turkey is a positive factor. Nonetheless, there have been serious concerns regarding the general operationalization of these Şûras. Ambiguities surrounding who is invited; the criteria for the selection of participants; the representation level of students, teachers, and parents; and the imbalances observed with the participation of certain trade unions (Eğitim Reformu Girişimi, 2014) expand and intensify these concerns.

Prior research has thoroughly investigated national educational councils in Turkey through various lenses, such as an analysis of the central structure of the MEB (Niyazi, 1999), the history of Şûras (Deniz, 2001), an analysis of the first council (Deniz, 2008), teaching Turkish language (Uzun & Uslu-Üstten 2010), and vocational schools (Uluğ, 1999). However, these studies have failed to examine and elucidate how the decision-making processes truly works. This study is an effort to illuminate the issues associated with Şûras, with a particular focus on the general

operational mechanisms of these conventions, i.e., how ultimate decisions are made, and how the opinions of stakeholders are reflected in the final decisions. The study brings forth practical implications for the context of Turkey by identifying areas of improvement in decision-making, with the intent of increasing the effectiveness of these Şûras. Through its analysis of education decision-making bodies, it also makes a theoretical contribution to the existing literature, at a global level, on decision-making in educational systems, in accordance with the principles of involvement, transparency, and representativeness. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the criteria for the selection of participants?
2. What is the perceived necessity of these Şûras?
3. What processes are followed until final decisions are reached, and how do they comply with democratic governance principles?

## Decision-making in education

Decision-making is an essential element of educational policy. Basing their premise on today's complex organizations, which are differentiated in structure and functions, Susan Miller, David Hickson, and David Wilson (2006) stress the importance of decision-making for the effective, functional, and strategic operation of a school. Such a high-stakes, complex process necessitates integrating thinking, calculating probabilities, considering people who are likely to be affected by the decisions, and involving people with myriad interests (Kıranlı & İlğan, 2007). In other words, there is a need for a participatory decision-making process that can help schools transform themselves in a timely and appropriate manner; this should be agreed upon and uncontested. What remains controversial is the composition of the decision-making bodies and the processes employed up to the final phase of decision-making. As stated by Helen Kang, Mandy Cheng, and Sidney Gray (2007), the composition of decision-making councils (e.g., the characteristics of participants) should bolster group performance through fostering rich discussions. Involving various educational stakeholders in these discussions should contribute to the management of school systems based on sound governance principles. Evidently, for decision-making systems in education to be organized within a democratic environment (Ergen, 2013), students, teachers, parents, locals, nonprofit organizations, as well as all other regional and local actors (French, 2009) should be part of the decision-making. Obviously, taking part in decision-making should go beyond physical presence and ensure genuine participation, in which every individual feels empowered without any type of intimidation, and all participants are unequivocally encouraged to contribute fairly.

## Şûras as decision-making bodies in the Turkish education system

Muzaffer Deniz (2001) has documented that the idea of the national education Şûras was established during the first *Maarif Kongresi* (Education Congress), which was convened in July 16, 1921, with the purpose of creating a vision for the Turkish education system under the presidency of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Ankara. While subsequent congresses were held in 1923, 1924, and 1925 with similar purposes under the name of *Heyet-i İlmiye* (Science Committee), the first institutionalized na-

tional education Şûra that started to work on a regular basis as a continuation of the *Heyet-i İlmiyes* was convened in 1939. There have been 19 national education Şûras to date, convened in intervals ranging from one to eight years (the longest interval was between 1962–1970). The final Şûra was convened between December 2 and December 4 in 2014 in Antalya with the following agenda (MEB, 2017):

1.  instructional programs and weekly class schedules
2.  developing quality of teachers
3.  developing quality of education administrators
4.  school safety

Sources from the MEB indicate that around 600 people from a wide spectrum, including academics, school administrators, teachers, students, and technocrats from the MEB, participated, and that 179 recommendations found their way into the final document (MEB, 2017).

Education Şûras have undertaken critical responsibilities, such as developing the education system, increasing the quality of education, systematically analyzing education- and teaching-related issues, and making decisions in the form of recommendations (Eğitim Reformu Girişimi, 2014). Though they have embraced the task of making "decisions in the form of recommendations" (MEB, 2014, para.3) the observation that most decisions made during the 18th Şûra were put into practice in the name of "4+4+4" educational reform initiative (the education reform that aimed mainly at increasing compulsory education in Turkey by reorganizing it as 4 years of elementary, 4 years of middle, and 4 years of high school as opposed to its previous 5-year-elementary + 3-year-middle school form) confirms the influential and functional roles of Şûras in reforming/restructuring the education system.

The success or failure of any given school or education system is dependent on the intellectual skills of individuals in that system and the effective utilization of those skills for the benefit of the whole system (Olorunsola & Olayemi, 2011). From that perspective, national education Şûras could be perceived as councils where the intellectual capacities of educational stakeholders are utilized to revive educational services and processes. Under the circumstances, where the role of the Şûras as a decision-making body has become more evident, there is a compelling need for a deep analysis of how participatory decision-making processes are employed during these conventions.

Despite various critical education-related roles attributed to and undertaken by the national education Şûras to set a desirable vision and working mission for education, there has been a perceptually thick fog covering the real procedures employed during the decision-making process. Several questions remain unanswered regarding the realities of Şûras:

*   How are the participants selected?
*   What does the composition of the provincial and regional committees, which are gathered prior to the large Şûra convention, look like and how do the committees decide their agendas?
*   What are all the phases of decision-making in small-scale committees during the Şûra?
*   How is the agenda discussed?
*   How are final decisions reached?

The lack of documented research to address these and other questions makes this research essential. Addressing these questions will help determine if the decision-making process is participatory and transparent, if it values the voices of all participants, or if it simply legitimizes the interests of powerful voices.

## Conceptual framework

Despite abundant research on school leadership in general, research on decision-making in centralized education systems, such as in Turkey, is scarce. There has been no identified conceptual framework developed for education systems where various stakeholders, including provincial directorate offices, principals, teachers, parents, and students are, in most cases, passive recipients of changes. The current study utilizes David Brazer and Robin Keller's (2006) "multistakeholder decision-making" (p. 11), even though it is a framework developed for district-level rather than state level decision-making. This conceptual framework is mainly employed to guide the language of data analysis because the framework includes superintendents, school boards, and districts in decision-making, and these are levels/layers of decision-making that are non-existent and, thus, irrelevant in the Turkish education system.

Brazer and Keller's (2006) framework mainly rests upon the inclusion of multiple stakeholders or "trusted advisors" with the rationale that "no one human being has the mental capacity to achieve optimality" (p. 3). For them, with the participation of stakeholders, the robustness of decisions is maximized through rich discussions by participants with different interests, goals, and experiences, which may end in redirecting or diverging the initial intents of any change and how it will be implemented. The model also posits that all these stakeholders may have varying degrees of influence due to the level of *power* (position, relationships, resources), *legitimacy* (the right to be involved in a particular decision due to one's formal position in the organization), and *urgency* (time pressure stakeholders perceive with regard to making a decision), and those with higher levels of these three categories will be more likely to impact the decisions. In other words, those with higher levels of perceived power due to the level of their position, stronger webs of relationships due to the longevity of their position, and greater resources will tend to have a stronger influence on decision-making. Therefore, it is these members who must be persuaded during the decision-making.

One of the interesting aspects of the framework by Brazer and Keller (2006) is that the leader could follow different approaches during the decision-making based on his or her perceptions of the followers. Thus, the same leader could: a) explain the rationale behind the decisions (Type 1); b) seek input from followers, make the decision, and explain the rationale for the decision (Type 2); c) work as a peer with a group of followers to arrive at a consensus decision (Type 3); or d) delegate a decision to followers, holding them accountable to meet predetermined goals and standards (Type 4).

## Materials and methods

The current study's focus is to collect, describe, and interpret participants' lived experiences during their participation in national education Şûras. In line with this

focus and the stated research questions, it adopts a qualitative research method with the goal of presenting an in-depth analysis of the experiences and opinions of academic participants in the national education Şûras. It is a phenomenological study that "allows for the exploration of a specific experience" (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015, p. 93) "in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13).

Eight academics, who had taken part in the national education Şûras, were selected as participants by following a criterion sampling technique; the established criterion for inclusion in the participant pool was participation in any of the national education Şûras. The final Şûra (the 19th) was convened on December 6, 2014. The data collected in this study represent the experiences and opinions of ten participants of the 18th Şûra that was convened in 2010. These participants were identified through the assistance of local academics. These participants were contacted and asked if they would volunteer to be part of the study. Two academics refused to participate in the study. While one of these academics expressed his/her reluctance based on his/her busy schedule, the other academic expressed belief in the irrelevance of the research questions by indicating that all the processes are very clear, and the flaws observed with participatory decision-making are not intentional but occur out of unintentional negligence. Given that, the collected data is based on the opinions of eight academics, as detailed on Table 1.

**Table 1. Participant demographics**

| Code | Gender | Title | Experience (years) |
|------|--------|-------|--------------------|
| Y1 | Female | Assist. Prof. Dr. | 6 |
| A1 | Female | Research assistant | 5.5 |
| Y2 | Male | Assist. Prof. Dr. | 16 |
| A2 | Male | Research assistant | 6 |
| Ö1 | Male | Teaching assistant | 14 |
| D1 | Male | Assoc. Prof. Dr. | 27 |
| Ö2 | Male | Teaching assistant | 20 |
| Y3 | Female | Assist. Prof. Dr. | 15 |

### Data collection instrument

Data from participants were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of seven open-ended questions that were developed through an in-depth analysis of related literature on participation, transparency, and representativeness principles. The protocol includes questions pertinent to participants' participation in the Şûra, their opinions on the level of transparency in the decision-making process, and the effectiveness of the decisions made. Some sample questions are:

- Could you please tell us about your experience in the 18th National Education Şûra?
- What do you think about national education Şûras?
- How would you evaluate the selection of participants in terms of principles of transparency and governance?

- How do you view the selection of topics in the agenda within the context of urgency in the education system?
- How do you view the finalization of decisions?
- Can you please share with us your opinions on the voting process?

Two participants were interviewed as part of the pilot process in order to test the clarity of the questions; based on this piloting, the protocol was revised.

### Data analysis

Data were collected through a content analysis technique defined as "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2002, p. 453). In line with data analysis procedures identified by John Creswell (2013), all recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. To ensure and increase the trustworthiness of the research, copies were distributed to both researchers, who coded the data set independently through reading the whole data, specifying repeated patterns, and also marking significant direct quotes that could be used in the analysis with the purpose of increasing the validity. After the themes and subthemes were created from the coded data set, the two researchers met for an analysis and discussion of the themes and subthemes, leading to a consensus of the final version of the data analysis (debriefing). Other efforts to increase the trustworthiness of the research were using direct quotes from the participants, sharing a summary of interviews through notes taken after each interview to get participants' confirmation of the data (member checking), and a thick description of the whole process of the research.

### Ethical considerations

MEB Central Directorate was informed about the study first, and the goals and steps were communicated to the relevant personnel. In other words, prior to the study, the MEB was informed and briefed about the study. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, participants were told all their information would be kept confidential. They were also reassured that the study aims to improve the decision-making process by developing an objective account of what happens, rather than by merely reporting on the flaws. The purposes of the study were discussed with each participant. Information about the participants has been kept confidential.

### Role of the researcher

I was working as an academic in a university during the course of the data collection and analysis phases of this study. I have a keen interest in education reforms, and in Turkey the Şûras are known to be decision-making bodies, and their verdicts are occasionally used as the basis of educational reforms. I consider myself an insider when it comes to knowing the cultural mindset in education decision-making in Turkey due to my knowledge and experience as an instructor in various education levels in the country. However, I consider myself an outsider, as I have never been personally invited to one of these Şûras. In the light of this perspective, I position myself in the "space between" insider and outsider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Milligan, 2016) or as

"a researcher in the middle" (Breen, 2007, p.163), who is familiar enough with the context to be called an insider but attempts to distance himself from potential bias by being as objective as possible during data collection and data analysis. I tried to solely rely on participants' experiences and the data collected by objectively presenting the results through direct quotes and incorporating objective data into the conclusions and implications of the study. The employment of another researcher during both the data collection and analysis also helped any mitigate potential bias I may have toward the issue at hand. As a researcher, I am most keenly interested in bringing out the best insights and suggestions to policymakers in Turkey with the goal of helping develop an optimal education decision-making process in such a centralized system.

## Results

General themes that emerged from the data, supported by direct quotes, are presented below.

### Transparency, representativeness, and participation

Participants' opinions reveal that national education Şûras took a very transparent approach, with a high level of openness to society and the press. Additionally, the facts that each and every potential decision was opened to votes, all participants' voices were heard, and the final decision was publicly announced provide significant evidence regarding a transparent decision-making process. The participation of people from different walks of life, such as academics, teachers, branch directors, students, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, trade unions, and the ministry, demonstrates the representative nature of Şûras and indicates the ministry's commitment to listening to various stakeholders. Participants' statements are indicative of this process:

> in 18th National Education Şûra, lists of participants and decisions were announced in a booklet. In terms of participation, as the purpose was to bring together people with differing opinions, I saw a special care taken to invite people from MEB, universities, and trade unions. This has increased variation and contributed to [the] collection of opinions from people from different ideologies. (Y1)

> there were many people from different areas such as NGOs, from all levels and areas. Whether these people were the right people as representatives of their areas is open to discussion. Transparency … I believe it was transparent, after all names of all participants and their tasks were announced. Participation: some groups must have been called to meet their needs and there were people from these groups. During the commission, each person was given the right to speak their opinions, and everybody spoke. They did not sit in their corner and watch. (A1)

Two participants, on the other hand, voiced their concerns about transparency: "I do not think it was transparent. Şûras were governed on certain traditions until [the] 17th one. In the final one, suspicious events took place" (Y3). "I cannot speak objectively on how participants are selected, this is my institution, I do not want to com-

ment much because there are different things going on anyway. I am not sure if it was transparent because [of] who are selected and how? Local branch of [the] ministry decides on who will participate and I cannot say more, it would not be right" (Ö1).

### Relevance of the agenda

The general topics of discussion during Şûras are teacher education, the transition to secondary education, school leadership, and values education, and there is agreement that most of these topics call for urgent action. The placement of these issues on the agenda of the Şûras, based on their importance and urgency, is justified in the following statements:

> there were topics that are seen as urgent in terms of education. For example, [the] teacher education issue. I believe this is an issue that needs to be fixed as soon as possible. Placing this on the agenda of Şûras, getting different opinions on this, and trying to solve this issue that way is significant. Seeing the exam system, [and the] transition to secondary and university is an indicator that these are seen by the policy makers as urgent issues. (Y1)

> I am in the teacher education commission. Teacher education has always been an issue that needs urgent care because [the] quality of teacher education has been criticized…. School culture, leadership, [and] exams are always problematic in this country, I believe they were contemporary and relevant topics. (Y2)

The data show that the agenda is relevant and Şûras are successful in choosing the topics of discussion that require urgent solutions. However, it is evident that there are not effective solutions to these appropriately chosen issues.

### The criteria for the selection of participants

Knowing the criteria through which participants of the Şûras are selected is important to better understand the whole participation process (see Table 2).

Table 2. Participant selection criteria

| Criteria | $n$ |
|---|---|
| Diversity | 6 |
| Representativeness | 3 |
| Ability to express relevant research | 2 |
| Selection by supervisor with unstated reasons | 4 |
| **Total** | **15** |

Diversity comes to the fore as the most cited ($n = 6$) criterion, which, as expressed by the participants, refers to the involvement of individuals with different stakes—people from different institutions who hold different positions and have different expertise. Statements such as, "I believe the criteria were how many people would be invited from which sector, meaning, the idea was to select one person from each in-

stitution" (Y2) and, "I know that selection criteria were based on invitation of only academics, teachers, staff at MEB, students, and parents" (Y1), suggest the existence of pre-determined criteria. Also, participants discerned efforts to involve those who influence and are influenced by the education system directly or indirectly. Some participants refer to representativeness as another criterion: "the bottom line is [that] I was selected to represent my university, I think that they must have thought about that" (A1). "I went there to represent the university as a student, I think that must have been the reason" (A2). One significant finding from these statements is that these criteria were not announced publicly, leading people to assume or infer from the given circumstances. Yet, others see self-expression skills as a criterion: "I believe the ability to express one's self clearly is among the criteria" (Ö1). "[The] ability to express, having credible and significant ideas, having published research on the topics of the Şûras could be some other criteria for [the] selection of participants" (Y1).

Despite these efforts to involve people from diverse background in the Şûras, most participants' statements are based on assumptions and inferences, and their observed confusion when confronted with a question regarding criteria suggests a lack of clear publicly announced criteria for the selection of participants.

### Decision-making processes

Until this point, themes have addressed the processes that take place before the Şûras. The theme of decision-making processes, however, is the core of the study, as it pertains to the fair processes and procedures that are employed to reach final decisions during the conference.

Several participants articulated concerns about abiding by majority vote: "I do not think the whole process was transparent and fair. I observed that despite [a] majority of votes on certain decisions, some decisions were rejected or that though only a few people could vote, some decisions were finalized" (Y1). "[O]verall there were efforts to create a democratic environment in which ideas from everyone were welcome, but this could not be achieved. Directors or those with more power to have a say dominated the decisions" (A1).

The system employed in the approval of votes was another point that was perceived as an inhibiting factor to fairness. "The voting was based on a swift system of questioning: those who approve? Those who reject? It was funny to see that it was declared 'rejected!' even before those who [voted to] reject found time to raise their hands" (Y2).

A more interesting point that raises doubts regarding a genuine participatory approach to decision-making concerns the topics that were discussed in the committees, approved for inclusion in the reports, and then excluded in the final report: "I think there were topics that we discussed in the committee, decided that they should be written down, but were not, and excluded instead. I mean, I get the opinion that the final reports were shaped according to the initiatives and directives by the head of the committees" (A2).

Similarly, different participatory styles were observed depending on whether a meeting was provincial or regional: "All the process was fair in the province work, but I cannot say that it was in the regional meeting" (D1).

Another more radical explanation was provided by Ö2, who refers to political influence on the whole process: "The conclusion of the voting is known beforehand. Since the members who participated are those with qualities to reach results requested by the government in power, the whole process was unfair." This is similarly and more pointedly reflected in the statement by Y2:

> In the general assembly, when we were working on the final version of the report, we were confronted with interventions by some bureaucrats and high-level officials. They wanted to make changes by saying, what if we do not include this in the commission work, tone this point down a little bit, or this could bring reactions.

### Are Şûras really necessary?

This question was aimed at learning how participants feel about the necessity of the Şûras through reflection on their experiences and observations. The consensus is that Şûras are essential in order to determine areas and directions for educational changes. There is, however, a general agreement that the way they are implemented should be changed and there is a need for reorganization.

A statement by Y2 sums up the general consensus regarding the necessity of Şûras: "Generally, Şûras serve to show a direction for national education policies. They contribute to [the] education system in terms of proposing ideas or drawing a path."

Y1 pointed to the power of these Şûras in legitimizing top-down decisions:

> Şûras are actually necessary due to their purposes. After all, you would want to learn what the problems are by listening to those who experience the problems and propose solutions with assistance from experts. This [was] an absolutely good conference. Nevertheless, the implementation should be well-structured. Otherwise, it would not go beyond approval of top-down decisions. Also, these decisions, or whatever you call them, are not known as "decisions in the form of recommendations." This should also be questioned. Who will finally decide which ones will be implemented?

The lack of genuine participatory approach is another concern regarding implementation, and these kinds of concerns put the necessity of these Şûras in jeopardy: "These Şûras must be held, but not in the way they are implemented now. Yes, they should be from bottom-up and this is good, but if the final decisions are top-down and the whole process is just a show, it is better not to have them at all. It is waste of time and effort" (A1).

## Discussion

Discussions regarding the sustainability of a large education system with a powerful central administration body are beyond the scope of this article. Since such a centralized system is the current reality of the Turkish education system (and some other countries), examining how a central body makes educational decisions is an essential purpose of this article. In such a system, in order for reforms to be conducive to the needs of regions, cities, districts, schools, and individual students at schools, Şûras should follow the principles of multiple-stakeholder participatory decision-making.

MEB Şûras received legal status in 1933 and became a perennial institution of the National Education Central Administration (Dinç, 2008). The need for Şûras—the first of which was convened between July 17 and 29, 1939, with the goals of assessing current problems and needs and developing solutions by bringing together teachers, experts, and administrators—is not in question. Nonetheless, considering that in designing educational reforms, more interest must be devoted to questions of "how" and "why' rather than question of "what" (Toprak & Summak, 2014). How these Şûras convene, how the agenda and participants are determined, how high- and low-level committees reach decisions, and how the procedures work during the course of the decision-making are questions that must be examined closely to ensure that reforms, whether they are structural or cultural, are launched with genuine and bold inputs from the various stakeholders in all fairness.

In general terms, efforts to create a platform where various stakeholders are encouraged to participate and express their opinions freely in subcommittees are evident. In addition, Şûras are found to be open to the press and public. Despite nebulous criteria for the selection of participants, and their ability to represent a specific institution effectively was indicated as a perceived criterion of selection. In this sense, it is encouraging that this study corroborates the diversity of participants as a *sine qua non* principle of Şûras since 1939 (Deniz, 2001).

The evidence in this study also confirms Anna Saiti and Maria Eliophotou-Menon's (2009) evidence from Greece regarding the minister of education's ultimate power in the design of education reforms. However, it differs from their context in two ways: a) the public façade of Şûras in this study tactfully creates a perfect illusion of collaborative decision-making, and b) despite its centralized character, MEB promotes diversity in participatory decision-making.

Issues that are evidenced in this study regarding the organization and operationalization of the educational council call into question whether decision-making can ever be optimized in a centralized system, regardless of such participatory approaches. However, the issue of decentralized decision-making in a developing country should be approached with caution, given that increased autonomy, particularly over academic content, may hurt the achievements of students from low-income level backgrounds (Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, 2013). Therefore, this study highlights the need for system improvement rather than system overhaul.

A more detailed examination of these Şûras in terms of their adherence to governance principles reveals interesting findings. Inquiry into the ways that elements of power, legitimacy, and urgency (Brazer & Keller, 2006) are brought into play during the course of decision-making reveals that while stakeholders were invited to participate in the decision-making, particularly during the general assembly where decision outcomes from provincial and regional meetings were finalized, various people in positions of power dominated the scene through their visibility (this could be seen as positive depending on the context and purpose), and were given a more powerful voice as the heads of committees. As stated by the participants, these bureaucrats seemed to have occasionally used their power and authority to influence final outcomes.

It is gratifying, however, to see the involvement of multiple stakeholders in an effort to maximize optimal decisions, as urged by Brazer and Keller (2006). However, the frequency at which stakeholders' input leads to changes in decisions is questionable, since power and position seem to have influenced the final decisions. Similarly, participants' recounts of the conference reveal that a high level of consensus-building is far from a reality. As such, since the process of decisions is perceived to be rooted in seeking input from others, making decisions and explaining the rationale without consensus, the general administration of decision-making in the Şûra investigated in this study could be seen as Type 2, which pertains to a willingness to seek input from followers and explain the rationale for any decision (Brazer & Keller, 2006).

This study confirms an inherent obscurity in the selection criteria for Şûras (Eğitim Reformu Girişimi, 2014). Yet, despite the opinions of some participants regarding the lack of objective and publicly announced criteria for participant selection, the references to the diversity, representativeness, and opportunities for participants to express themselves indicate the existence of a set of implicit criteria that can only be revealed through forced inference. In other words, there are tacit criteria that can lead to further speculation, confusion, and complication.

Thus, the problem seems to be associated with a lack of a clear description of the criteria in actual use. Gökhan Dağhan, Esin Kalaycı, and Said Seferoğlu (2011) emphasize a different aspect of the problem by highlighting that the opinions of teachers, students who are directly influenced by the decisions, and parents who could be indirectly influenced, are sought at a low level. This study differs from their finding, because, despite vague and often unstated criteria, it reveals that efforts are made to diversify the participants in the decision-making process by allowing individuals with expertise in a relevant domain and with certified levels of ability to express their opinions. Such efforts are of paramount significance in terms of their potential contribution to high-quality and well-directed educational decisions. These efforts should not mask the need for a more transparent process in which all criteria are negotiated and communicated publicly, which would clear up all traces of doubts that are suspected in the form of secret intervening variables. Otherwise, the lack of clearly defined criteria could lead to reasoning, speculations, and assumptions that might adversely influence the legitimacy of decisions.

"Decisions in the form of recommendations" (2014, MEB, para. 3) raises another interesting point, since decisions taken during Şûras may not necessarily be implemented. Some participants affirmed that most of these decisions are put into practice, referring to the decisions of the 18th National Education Şûra, which were mostly implemented under the 4+4+4 educational reform initiative (Güven, 2012). However, it should be noted that participants' perceptions were solely influenced by the outcomes of the 18th National Education Şûra, since it cannot be generalized that all the decisions made by Şûras are, in fact, implemented. In this regard, "decisions in the form of recommendations" signifies that these decisions are registered proposals, and they have the status of decisions that "can be implemented when needed." It can be argued reasonably that all decisions cannot be put into practice; however, it can be argued even more reasonably that this gives the ultimate decision-makers the agency to follow a "pick and implement" trajectory, which, in turn, can raise doubts as to

whether policymakers are using the Şûras as a tool for legitimizing the decisions they aspire to implement and will eventually choose to make from a pool of "proposals."

From this perspective, the outcomes of these Şûras, which ostensibly convene to improve the education system through increasing its overall quality (Eğitim Reformu Girişimi, 2014), should be investigated. Why are some of the decisions not implemented? Is it because some decisions are found to be less well-grounded or appropriate? If so, are all the efforts made and all the resources expended during the meetings of provincial representatives, the meetings at central office, and the meetings at the general assembly wasted? Are these decisions appropriate but difficult to implement due to financial constraints? If so, why are these issues not discussed during the decision-making process? Or is there another *mini Şûra* that screens, classifies, and filters the decisions following the larger Şûras? If so, does this mini Şûra serve the purpose of selecting the decisions to be implemented? If that is the case, what are the processes, procedures, and priorities? All of these questions suggest the scope and directions for further research.

The fact that several of the decisions of the 10th National Education Şûra reflected on its own structure and behaviour signifies that "feasibility" (Can, 1999) was not seen as a point of consideration. A Şûra is seen as a body of both planning and guidance (Dinç, 2008); nevertheless, the justification of "decisions as proposals" with reference to the "guidance" function of the Şûras should be questioned, since such a platform, crowded with people with expertise and practical experience proceeding through various phases of decision-making, is expected to develop "implementable and feasible" decisions for a Turkish education system that shows low levels of achievement in both national and international assessments. Keeping these decisions as "proposals" hinders the search for solutions and defers the development, implementation, and follow-up of sustainable education reform policies. For instance, the 19th National Education Şûra was convened to discuss curriculum, weekly class schedules, the quality of teachers and school administrators, and school safety (MEB, 2017). These topics (particularly increasing the quality of teachers and school administrators) necessitate urgent action, and participants of this study confirmed that the agenda was well-determined. Yet, keeping the decisions made on these urgent issues as "proposals" (with more or less potential for implementation) surely raises concerns as to whether all energy, time, and resources are wasted.

One of the most significant findings was related to the final phases of decision-making, both in the committee and the large assembly. As indicated by most participants, some decisions were rejected in the committees but approved in the reports; the heads of some committees reportedly directed committee members to make and approve certain decisions; some decisions made in the committees were not brought to the general assembly; some decisions that could not be compromised were brought to the general assembly; some mistakes were made in the general assembly during the voting phase; when votes were equal or when a decision was rejected with a minor difference, the processors took the initiative, made their own decisions, and the decision was transformed into approval. Similarly, the reported influence tactics and interventions by some high-ranking officials have the potential to bring the legitimacy, transparency, and participation level of decisions into disrepute.

Though national education Şûras are justifiably perceived as essential conventions in terms of their missions of bringing multiple stakeholders together, increasing quality in education, and increasing student achievement, issues regarding the general procedures should be further examined and action plans should be devised so that decisions made are not perceived as mandates from the top. The whole process could be encapsulated with: "Invite them, make them feel a part of the plan, and increase the legitimacy of our predetermined plans by also approving some of their decisions that will not be implemented." More concretely, the problems related to selection of participants, heads of provincial and regional committees, and the micro details of decision-making and reporting, as highlighted in the current study, should be mitigated. When Şûras are transformed into conventions that develop feasible education projects (which could address urgent challenges for the education system through genuine input from various stakeholders), they could definitely serve as strong leverage in defining the vision of the Turkish education system in the short, medium, and long terms, while specifying and implementing its strategic priorities and goals.

## Implications

Though this study focuses on the Turkish education system, it has potential implications for education decision-making in both centralized and decentralized education systems because, one way or another, decision-making is an essential element of educational change and improvement. First, it should be noted that the criteria for the selection of participants should be crystal clear in order to prevent confusion, speculation, and cynicism, and also to increase levels of commitment. Though the selection of people with expertise can bring benefits, people who are closest to the impact of decisions should be part of the process; decisions should be nourished through both expertise and experience. Provincial and regional meetings offer a significant grassroots approach to decision-making. Such structures are beneficial, but should be coupled with a positive decision-making environment in which committee heads are moderators rather than chairpersons directing people toward pre-specified agendas. Structure should be reflected in behaviour, as individuals are made aware of different tactics no matter how implicit they are. Trust, genuine interest in all ideas, fairness, and real collaborative decision-making are essentials. Negotiated decisions that are not put into final reports or rejected decisions projected into the final reports have the potential to corrupt the whole the process and kill the trust. Participation should not be seen merely in the structures but also in the actual behaviours for high levels of ownership. In a central decision-making process, except for high-ranking officials who will be dealing with the logistics of decisions, those who did not participate in provincial and regional meetings should not attend the general assembly where final decisions are made. Bringing decisions "parachuted from space" to the general assembly disempower the participants and create the impression that they are not part of the actual decision-making. When final decisions are opened to a voting system, there must be a better electronic voting system so people do not feel under the pressure of peers. Voting should be secret, particularly in large assemblies where people are asked to vote or reject decisions. Also, the visibility of high-

ranking officials, including the minister, should be lessened and their power to direct initiatives should be eliminated in some cases. Students should definitely be a part of this process, but they should not be there for "showcasing." Students who can actively participate without feeling pressure from others should be selected, and they should be encouraged to contribute. National Education Şûras seem to be unique, if not the only, venues that successfully bring educational stakeholders from different disciplines and with different interests together with the sole aim of improving education in Turkey that has a central organization. While it would be too ambitious to expect such conventions to develop appropriate strategies for such a large education system that has many complex, multifaceted, and deeply rooted problems, their presence and regular convention every 4 years since 1921 is promising in that they are indications of willingness for collaborative decision-making. However, the current organization structure and procedures employed entail urgent close attention and improvement so they are not forums of discussions in which those with more power make final decisions but rather effective sites that represent transparent, equitable, and shared governance.

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## Note

1. MEB is the original abbreviation in Turkish for the Ministry of National Education (MONE).

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