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The micropolitics of school principals' decision making in Nigeria: Principals' perspective

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The Micropolitics of School Principals' Decision Making in Nigeria: Principals' Perspective

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Abstract

This study depicted a micropolitical analysis of school principals' decision making as regards the influence of formal and informal groups on school administrative processes from the point of view of principals. It was based on descriptive survey study of all 24 public secondary schools within Ile-Ife community, Osun State, Nigeria, out of which a sample of 10 schools was purposively selected. The instrument for data collection was an open-ended questionnaire titled "The micropolitics of school principals' decision making in Nigeria: Principals' perspective". The results showed that decisions' themes focused on improving quality of teachers and physical facilities in schools. The formal groups responsible for these decisions were principals, teachers, government officials, and parents. The informal groups were watchmen or night guards, non-governmental organizations, mass media agencies, students, and landlords. The study concluded that a complex micropolitical interaction existed in the decision-making processes of school principals due to formal and informal groups' participation, a consequent of School-Based Management Committee (SBMC) system.

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La Micropolítica de la Toma de Decisiones de los Directores Escolares en Nigeria: La Perspectiva del Director

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Resumen

Este estudio dibuja un análisis micropolítico de la toma de deciones de los directores escolares en relación a la influencia de grupos formales e informales en los procesos administrativos escolares desde el punto de vista de los directores. Se basa en el estudio de una encuesta descriptiva de las 24 escuelas públicas de secundaria de la comunidad de Ile-Ife, Estado Osun, Nigeria, de las cuales una muestra de 10 escuelas fue seleccionada intencionadamente. El instrumento utilizado para la obtención de datos fue un cuestionario abierto titulado "La micropolítica de la toma de decicones de los directores escolares en Nigeria: la perspectiva del director". Los resultados mostraron que los temas decisorios se centraban en mejorar la calidad del profesorado y las instalaciones de las escuelas. Los grupos formales responsables de estas decisiones lo forman los directores, profesores, oficiales del gobierno y los padres. Entre los grupos informales se incluyen vigilantes, organizaciones no gubernamentales, agencias de comunicación, estudiantes y propietarios de las tierras. El estudio concluye que existe una compleja interacción micropolítica en los procesos de toma de decisiones de los directores escolares debido a la participación de grupos formales e informales, el consiguiente sistema de School-Based Management Committee (SBMC).

Palabras clave: micropolítica, decisión, participación, influencia, directores

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Decisions on approaches to improving academic performance of students at school level need to be made by principals and other concerned stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, among others. This becomes necessary as a result of persistent poor academic performance of Nigerian secondary school students in public examinations. For instance, the Federal Ministry of Education, Nigeria set up a panel to probe into the reasons for mass failure in public examinations conducted in the year 2009 at the 104 Federal Government Colleges of Nigeria. Bello-Osagie and Olugbamila (2009) reported on this panel that "the principals were said to be uncommitted and poor managers of teachers who paid lip service to their responsibilities" (p. B2). In October 2010, an education summit was organized by the same Ministry. The summit deliberated on issues pertaining to implementation and practices of education policies. Assessing the secondary school system, the Minister of Education asserted that the recurrent poor performance of students in public examinations is an indication of systemic failure in the country (Ndeokwelu, 2010). The President of Nigeria also corroborated that the current "system of education [has] failed to address the challenges besetting the sector [secondary school] and had not equipped Nigerians with the necessary skills …" (Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN), 2010, p. 1). Recently, in September 2011, the Minister of Education in the country met with heads of units within the ministry and disclosed "that the major challenge of the sector [secondary school] was poor performance of students in external examinations." (FRNa, 2011, p. 5). To further extend this deliberation, a stakeholders' workshop on states' education sector plans was organized in October 2011. According to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry, "the meeting was called in order to tackle the dwindling standard of education and abysmal performance of senior secondary school students in examinations, which was an indication of deficiencies in the education system." (FRNb, 2011, p. 4). These reports suggest that urgent and pragmatic decisions need to be taken in order to reduce the rate of poor academic performance.

Decision making is one of the key processes of school principal's administrative behavior. The principal is the leader, manager, and administrator in any school, who is often responsible for almost every decision in school level in his or her quest for ensuring policy implementation. Such decision-making process is often a political phenomenon. The reason for decision-making being a micro-political

phenomenon could be attributed to explicit and implicit values, interests, preferences, and assumptions of not only the principal alone, but also, other members of the school as a whole. For instance, Blase and Blase (2002) pointed out that "[d]ecision-making processes were dominated by value preferences and strategic exchanges between and among school participants" (p. 10). Ball (1987) had earlier pointed out that "[d]ecision-making is not an abstract rational process, which can be plotted on an organizational chart; it is a political process, it is the stuff of micropolitical activity" (p. 26).

The micropolitical perspective to decision making differs from a rational model or process, but rather a political approach with diverse interests groups competing together to achieve organizational and personal goals. As a result, research on micropolitics or organizational politics appears significant in order to depict the formal and informal groups that influence such a decision-making process in the school system. Kreisberg (1992) commented that "the history of consensual decision-making in organizations is littered with power struggles [and] dissensus" (p. 124). Blase (1991) noted that "[t]he micropolitical perspective presents practicing administrators and scholars alike with fresh and provocative ways to think about human behavior in schools" (p. 2). Also, Ehrich and Cranston (2004) commented that "the study of micropolitics has potential for illuminating important aspects of school organizational life" (p. 21). Bjôrk and Blase (2009) concluded from their review of literature that "micropolitical processes are a normal part of organizational life" (p. 199). In other words, school organizational politics seems to pervade every school system. Hence, Nigerian schools cannot be exempted especially in the light of Bjôrk and Blase's conclusive statement. More so, Ball (1987) noted that "[t]he process which links these two basic facets of organizational life- conflict and domination- is micro-politics" (p. 278).

Review of Literature

The groundwork to the study of micropolitics in organization has been established by scholars such as Burns (1961), Cyert and March (1963), Pettigrew (1973), Strauss (1962), just to mention a few. It was argued that the context of organizational decision making was a political activity whereby members used political strategies to achieve their organizational and personal goals. This position provided theoretical inspiration to

Bacharach and Lawler (1980), Bacharach and Mitchell (1987), Ball (1987), Iannoccone (1975), among others, that schools can be examined as political entities involving different groups and individuals coming together to achieve a common goal. For instance, Blase and Blase (2002) stated that

> [a]n organization's political processes, for example, a school's formal and informal (e.g., organizational stakeholders and their power sources, interests, ideologies, and interchanges) as well as its political culture (e.g., patterns of interests, ideologies, decision making, power distribution) dramatically influence most school outcomes, including teaching and learning. The degree to which political processes and political culture account for a given outcome (e.g., decision, policy, program, practice, event) varies, of course, from one school to another and, over time, within the same school. (Blase & Blase, 2002, p. 10).

In a school system, the principal occupies a critical and vital position. The school principal is the leader, administrator, and manager-on-the spot, in charge of decision making in the course of policy implementation. Boyd (1991) for instance, posited that policy implementation at the school level becomes fundamental because "those actually implementing policy in schools turned out to be the final policy makers, as evidence mounted that they could reshape or resist the intentions of policies adopted at higher levels" (Boyd, 1991, p. viii). The school principal as a critical policy actor in school works collaboratively with other relevant school stakeholders in policy implementation process. In other words, it can be stated that the process of reshaping or resisting of education policies in the course of policy implementation at the school depicts elements or dynamics of micropolitics operating within the school. The final decision which may emanate from policy implementation process reflects the position of the school as may be determined by the principal and other relevant school stakeholders. Blase and Anderson (1995) argued that formal leaders have a strong influence on the micropolitical interactions that develop in any school. Therefore, there is need to manage micropolitical interaction in order to ensure positive change in school system (Bennett, 1999).

Such elements of school micropolitics as regards decision making of principals may be linked to interests and/ or power of both formal and informal groups involved in order to attain their purported goals. Formal

groups in this study context were people needed to participate in such decisions statutorily, while informal groups were not needed to participate statutorily. The formal groups have the power, while the informal groups have interests, which both groups used to influence school principals' decision making. This perspective to school organizational politics was drawn from pioneer work of Iannaconne's (1975) as what takes place in and around the school. The '*in*' in this study context are referred to as formal groups, while the '*around*' are informal groups. These formal and informal groups are streamlined based on the nature of such decisions which necessitates involvement or participation of group members. Lindell (1999) stated that micropolitics involved networks of individuals within and surroundings of schools such as teachers, principals, central office staff, school board members, parents and students. She argued "that the study of micropolitics is absolutely a question of survival for school leaders" (p. 171). Also, West (1999) examined formal and informal groups within schools and the strategies that groups take to maintain such relationship. She suggested that difference between formal and informal groups is simplistic and such relationship is the essence of micropolitics.

The participation or interaction of both formal and informal groups in principals' decision making at school is usually an ongoing and dynamic process. This participation also resonates with Blase's (1991) definition of micropolitics as "the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organization." (p. 11). The formal and informal groups interrelate and influence decision making of principals. Participation in the study context meant consultation before taking such decisions. Hence, this study examined the influence of formal and informal groups on school principals' decision making. Such influence is based on direct and indirect participation in decision-making process in order to attain their goals and protect their interests.

Invariably, the formal and informal groups that interrelate in order to produce viable school decisions and the strategies school principals adopted so as to enhance the influence of formal groups on such decisions were the concerns for this research. This micropolitical influence becomes a political knowledge and skill that school principals should embrace in order to make effective decisions. Blase (1991) commented that "[t]he micropolitical perspective on organization provides a valuable and potent approach to understanding the woof and warp of the fabric of day-to-day life in schools"

(p. 1). In other words, this micropolitical analysis presents an important feature of decision making in school administrative process.

Observations and experience have shown that school principals in Nigeria see themselves as different from teachers and therefore belong to a separate organization called All Nigeria Confederation of Principals of Secondary Schools (ANCOPSS). Before attaining principalship, they were teachers who belonged to Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT). After appointment into principalship, they belong to ANCOPSS and not NUT, which reflects what Schein (2010) called the interplay of generic subcultures in every organization. Conclusively, public secondary schools in Nigeria seem to reflect the observation of Bacharach and Mundell (1993) that "the structure of schools necessitates their domination by strong principals" (p. 426).

Blase (2005) summarized the literature and concluded that individuals in the position of authority such as school principals

> preclude issues from coming to a decision (e.g., via policies, rules, control of agendas). They also attempt to socialize others to accept the status quo. Such actions and processes, as well as actions by individuals and groups who lack formal decision-making status… (Blase, 2005, p. 266).

A study example of Blase's conclusion was Johnson's (1983) work. She identified variations in principal accommodation to reduction in formal authority based on informal factors. This implies that school principals may be involving other school stakeholders in the decision-making process in order to have their inputs in such decision. These stakeholders may not have legitimate power over such decisions either individually or collectively. Therefore, their involvement in such decision-making process in the school level entails a micropolitical dimension.

Salo (2008) posited that "[t]he use of micropolitical lenses in studying the inner life of schools have also brought the non-rational aspects of behavior to the fore, namely in connection with the decision-making processes" (p. 497). This observation appears to be the concern of the current research. Previous research, such as that of Chen (2009), investigated the micropolitics of the staff meeting in a Taiwanese primary school. Staff meetings can serve as a forum for decision making in the school. Chen employed the ethnography case-study approach, through participant

observation and in-depth interviews methods. The present research utilized descriptive survey through standardized open-ended questionnaire method. Chen (2009) found that the staff meeting is under the political control of administrators (particularly the principal) who often transmit information through pseudo-participation to legitimate and maintain the nature of hierarchy.

Malen (1995) also conducted a review of literature on micropolitics and concluded that "the politics of schools has received more attention than the politics in schools" (p. 148). She therefore recommended that

> [m]ore robust designs that probe actor relations, the conditions that produce, perpetuate, or precipitate shifts in patterns of politics and the consequence of these styles of play for the distribution valued outcomes would bolster our ability to interpret the politics in schools. (Malen, 1995, p. 160).

Also, a similar review of literature by Blase (1995) posited that the course of relationship between principals and teachers particularly, "-include conflicts surrounding formal decision-making processes" (Blase, 1995, p. 215). Based on his review and subsequent studies on micropolitics, Blase (2005) suggested that "[a]nother potential rich area of research would be micropolitical studies of restructuring processes such as decision-making …" (p. 272). Therefore, this research drew from Malen (1995) and Blase's earlier studies (1995; 2005) in order to examine the influence of formal and informal groups on school principals' decision making. This was with a view to depicting the actors at play in the decision-making process. More recent studies (e.g., Chen, 2009; Salo, 2008) have focused on the relationship between principals and teachers as regards decision making especially during staff meetings. Thus, the unit of analysis for this study was the school principals. As regards the methodology employed by previous researchers, Blase and Bjôrk (2009) suggested that "[m]ethodologically, it will be important to employ both quantitative and qualitative research approaches" (p. 248) in subsequent research on micropolitics. The current study utilized quantitative research approach as an identified gap to be filled based on interaction of formal and informal groups in the decision-making processes of school principals.

Methodology

According to Clark, Astuto, Foster, Gaynor, and Hart (1994), "organizations as social systems focused attention on the interaction between and among organizational parts ... the actions of organizations reflect both subunits of the formal organization (institution, role, expectation) and the people within the organization (individual, personality, need disposition)" (p. 31). These authors examined the different epistemological paradigms of organizational studies such as functionalist, interpretivist, and critical theorist, to mention just a few. One of the assumptions noted by Clark et al. (1994) on functionalist paradigm is "that knowledge about organizations can be obtained solely through social-scientific research" (p. 48). This current research study utilized functionalist paradigm and also drawn from neo-Machiavellian perspective in the classical school of organizational politics. Bacharach and Mundell (1993) concluded that politics from the neo-Machiavellian perspective "are predicted by the interaction between leadership and structure" (p. 426). The study is based on this perspective based on interaction between school principals and other school stakeholders in decision making.

The study design was a descriptive survey meant to describe the micropolitical analysis of school principals' decision making as regards the influence of formal and informal groups on school administrative process from the point of view of school principals. The target population for this study was all the 24 public secondary school principals in Ile-Ife community, Osun State, Southwestern Nigeria. From this population, a sample of 10 secondary school principals was purposively selected randomly for the study. Ball (1990) noted that purposive sampling is used in order to have access to knowledgeable people, that is, those who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues, maybe by virtue of their professional role, power, access to networks, expertise or experience. The 10 sampled secondary school principals have a School-Based Management Committee (SBMC) system in their schools. The SBMC became operational as a result of government directives on the need to encourage local citizens' participation in the affairs of schools in Osun State, Nigeria. The chosen school principals seem to be in a better position to provide in-depth information about influence of formal groups and informal groups in decision-making processes in the school system. As a result of their schools'

participation in the SBMC system, the main concern of the researchers is to acquire in-depth information from the school principals because of their experience. Altogether, eight school principals responded to the instrument properly for data analysis. This implied 80 per cent response rate. The demographic information revealed that five were males (62.5%) and three were females (37.5%), that is, total number of participants was eight and their total experience in schools averaged 4¼ years.

The instrument for collecting data was a standardized open-ended questionnaire- enabling principals to offer a range of information, which contained the same basic questions in the same order for all participants. The title of the instrument was "The micropolitics of school principals' decision making in Nigeria: Principals' perspective." This instrument was based on actors involved in the school decision-making processes. The instrument was divided into two sections. Section A provided demographic information about the principal (gender and years of experience as a principal in the current school). Section B elicited information on a number of decisions taken in the school, the actors that participated and influenced such decisions, and the strategies adopted for enhancing formal groups' participation in such decisions. The subjects were asked to describe the items in Section B succinctly. The participation in this study was voluntary and the anonymity of participants and the school system was protected.

We were able to administer the instrument through the assistance of two of my colleagues at Faculty of Education, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The administration of questionnaire lasted for 10 working days. Altogether, the two researchers and the other two assistants visited each participating school to hand in the instrument and also collect it back immediately. At the end of this field period, eight open-ended questionnaires were found useful for analysis. The remaining two were discarded because they were not properly filled by the participants. The qualitative data were analyzed by exploring relationships and themes.

Results

In this study, the first question was: mention few decisions your school has taken collectively in the past few days? The objective of this question was to give information about school administrative processes that have occupied the principals in their schools generally. Most participants wrote of activities

varying from instructional function, school finance, and school physical facilities. A representative sample of these subjects was:

> The collective decisions taken by the sch. Body centered mostly on how to manage our time, materials, equipment and man. A) proper cleanliness of the sch. compound B) staff & students punctuality to the sch. C) maintenance culture of the chairs & lockers D) improvement on stds spoken English. (Principal 2)

> (i) Appointment of a competent and professional Mathematic teacher for our final year students. (ii) Plastering and electrification of the newly constructed science preparatory form. (iii) Re-plastering of the floor of the school hall. (iv) commencement of afternoon lesson and Saturday coaching classes. (v) screening test or selection test for newly admitted SS 1 students. (Principal 6)

These representative statements focused mainly on decisions for improving academic performance of students. The themes of these decisions were improving the quality of teachers and the deteriorating state of physical facilities in their schools. The quality of teachers and physical facilities are key factors for determining school effectiveness. From these representative statements as indicated by two respondents, it can be inferred that the quality of teachers and physical facilities appeared to be at low ebb.

The second question was: kindly describe the key actors (e.g., teachers, students, parents, or government officials) that participated in those decisions, including you? The essence of this question was to determine the legitimate power or authority holders in terms of formal groups who were consulted before taking such decisions. A representative sample of these participants included:

> Although the principal is both the administrative & educational leader, a number of duties, responsibilities & tasks have to be delegated to other members of staff. Note that many hands make a load lighter.
> A. The tr. in charge of the students affair expressed the importance of punctuality, cleanliness, respect for others and elders. etc.
> B. The guidance counselor gave advice on the reading culture, good manners & on the sts future careers.

C. English and maths trs are not left out.
D. The PTA executives also addressed the sts & trs on various issues.
(Principal 2)

The principal has the head of the school is the accounting officer of the school, who is totally responsible for all delegated duties. Likewise the parents in lending support to all actions taken by the school authority. Similarly, all teachers are liable to any defect or abnormal situation in their teaching subjects. Government officials i.e. Local Inspector of Education monitored the school activities for successful decision making. Principal's decision making process is highly successful where there is massive support by all and sundry since teaching and learning is a collective responsibility. (Principal 5)

The theme of most school decisions as emphasized focused on what the chain of responsibility is for principal. It is quite interesting that teachers, government officials as employers of teachers and owners of schools, and principals too were adequately informed about the issue of poor quality of teachers. As regards the poor state of infrastructural facilities at schools, government officials, teachers, parents, and principals were also consulted on extent of such deterioration.

The third question was: also explain other actors that influenced such decisions? The rationale behind this question was to explore the informal groups that have interests and influenced such decisions. A representative sample of the eight respondents included:

1. P.T.A Executives
2. Non-Teaching staff of the school
3. The Guards in the school. (Principal 1)

-NGO
-Corporations
-Individual
-Landlords
-Students. (Principal 3)

> Other actors that influenced decisions are the mass media- radio,
> television and newspaper including educative magazines and journals.
> (Principal 5)

Based on the themes, it would be noted that school principals involved the guards (watchmen or night guards), non-governmental organizations, mass media agencies, and landlords (owners of buildings around the schools). These are informal actors who may not necessarily understand some of the instructional implications of these decisions. School principals might be involving them in order to create good public image or understanding of his or her predecessors' reactions to these issues. Since the hierarchical structure of the school presents the principal as "the accounting officer", these informal groups might be involved in order to have better school-community relations.

The fourth question was: explain the strategies you have adopted to ensure that those actors that should make decisions actually did it? The essence of this question was to know the administrative skills the principals had put in place to ensure that legitimate power holders or formal groups were actually involved in order to reduce the interests of informal groups. A representative sample of these participants included:

> The blue-print of these decisions had been distributed before hand.
> Different meetings, workshop and seminars are organized to make the
> education in this school move forward.
> Prayer:- Both the teacher and the students offer prayers for our country
> and our leaders to practicalize the so good decisions they have on
> education. (Principal 2)

> Relating with them and explaining the rationale for it. Explaining what
> the students stand to gain from it and how it would be of help to them in
> their future endeavour.(Principal 7)

> (1.) Discussing with the Zonal Inspector of Education
> (2.) Writing formally to the Local Inspector of Education
> (3.) Inviting the Local Inspector to attend the meeting where decisions are
> taken

(4.) Forwarding the decisions reached to the Ministry of Education through the Local Inspector of Education's office. (Principal 8)

Also, to enhance the formal groups' participation on these decisions (improving the quality of teacher and physical facilities), the school principals engaged with formal actors such as frequent interaction with government officials and offering prayers to Almighty God for guidance. The government officials might be frequently consulted by principals because they are accountable to inspectors of education and other officials who appointed them. Prayers seemed to be relevant because there appears to be inadequate preparation or pre-service training opportunities before appointment, and principals were relatively new to their professions based on average of 4¼ years of experience.

Discussion

In this study, the findings revealed that the micropolitical situation focuses on decisions (low quality of teacher and physical facilities) in schools which are responsible for poor performance of students in public examinations. The results have also shown that there was a micropolitical interaction between formal groups (government officials and teachers) and informal groups (non-governmental organizations and mass media agencies) in the school decision-making processes. This interaction provides means for current understanding of administrative behavior of school principals within the school.

The study showed that formal groups responsible for these decisions were principals, teachers, government officials, and parents. The informal groups were watchmen or night guards, non-governmental organizations, mass media agencies, students, and landlords (owners of buildings around the schools). These findings appear similar to the findings of Lindell (1999) and West (1999). However, this study extends the group membership further to incorporate night guards or watchmen, who are mostly semi-literate people in the school system. The rationale for incorporating such people by school principals may be the need for more information or strategies previous school principals have adopted. The position of night guards or watchmen appears significant because most of them might have been in the school system for a long period of time or even since the establishment of

the school. They usually recalled or possessed informal information especially about the history of the school and previous school principals. The non-governmental organizations, particularly, civil society groups and owners of buildings within the school may also be consulted in order to have good school-community relations or based on the nature of school-community power structure. The school-community power structure in the study area is hereby the subject of another study in order to reveal most importantly the rationale behind landlords' involvement (owners of buildings around the schools). The civil society groups may be adequately consulted because they serve as watch-dog on the implementation of government policies. School principals may be consulting civil society groups and even mass media agents in order to improve the public image of their schools. It can be concluded that a complex micropolitical interaction existed between formal and informal groups because of the influence of informal groups as being indicated by the school principals. Noteworthy, the participating schools have an organized School-Based Management Committee (SBMC) system. The SBMC is responsible for decentralization of decision-making process and greater involvement of concerned citizens in the school system. The complexity of micropolitical interaction may be depicted when members of the SBMC are parts of the informal groups influencing decision-making processes of the school principals.

The study also found that the strategies for enhancing formal participation on these decisions were frequent interactions with mostly government officials and offering prayers to the Almighty God for guidance. These findings are quite similar to Lindell's (1999) question of survival for school leaders. Formal groups particularly trained government officials in school administration may be involved in order to limit the influence of informal groups' participation in such decisions because principals' preparation into principalship seems to be inadequate. Specifically, adequate political knowledge and skill necessary in order to make effective decisions may not be emphasized in their annual in-service training program. Principals rely on the experience of a few government officials who are trained educational administrators. The training deficiency in principalship accounts for adequate preparation program for school principals before appointment into principalship. This finding also negates Blase and Anderson's (1995) position on the strong influence of school principals on micropolitical interaction in the school system.

Conclusions

This study has added to the body of knowledge as regards the micropolitical significance of school principals' decision making. It has indicated that school principals are also taking decisions on the low quality of teachers and physical facilities responsible for poor academic performance among Nigerian secondary school students. However, the study is limited to eight school principals who responded well to the study and may limit the extent of its representation to the entire community. The perceptions of other actors such as teachers, government officials, and parents were not accommodated in the study. Also, data collection tools such as observations and in-depth unstructured interview guide were not included as additional research methods, which may limit the thickness of the research findings. The limitations to the study are hereby subjected to further micropolitical studies of school system. Lastly, in order to implement policies effectively for addressing poor academic performance, there is a need to manage micropolitical interaction in the school system.

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