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Esra Karabag Kose & Mehmet Fatih Kose

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Strategic Management and Leadership of Education: Central and Local Perspectives in Turkey

Esra Karabağ Köse¹

Kırıkkale University

Mehmet Fatih Köse²

Ministry of National Education

Abstract

This study seeks to assess how Turkey's Ministry of National Education has implemented strategic management and planning by examining the views of upper-level administrators employed in Ministry's central and provincial administrative bodies concerning the strategic management which is a legal obligation for all educational institutions across the country. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 upper- and middle-level administrators. The findings on participants' responses to the research questions were subject to descriptive analyses. The findings of the study are interesting as reveal that the top down reforms and legal obligations do not guarantee adequate and effective implementation in practice. Upper- and middle-level administrators emphasize that a strategic management and planning culture has not been established in Ministry of National Education and the strategic management and planning process has become a weak formality, which increases the workload rather than being an effective management tool. The study revealed that instead of strategic management and planning being to a technical process, measures need to be taken to facilitate its transformation into a cultural process. Strategic management and planning needs to consider together as a whole every stage of each process. The centralist approach should be abandoned and local mechanisms' areas of influence need to be increased. It is an important research area that more comprehensive evaluation of the centralist strategic management approach based on strategy transfer from the center to the local level.

Key Words: Strategic leadership, Strategic management, Educational policies, Upper-level education administrators.

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¹ Assist. Prof. Dr., Faculty of Education, Kırıkkale University, ORCID: 0000-0003-1367-7793

² Dr., Human Resources, Ministry of National Education, ORCID: 0000-0002-2297-8152

Correspondence: m.fatihkose@gmail.com

Introduction

Education policies are institutionalized based on a variety of both short- and long-term planning endeavors, like development plans, government programs, and strategic plans. As a result of Public Finance Management and Control Law No. 5018, adopting and implementing strategic management and planning are also a legal requirement for Turkey's Ministry of National Education (MoNE). After having implemented its first strategic planning in 2010, MoNE moved into its second strategic planning term in 2014. It is expected that as the second planning term approaches its end, it is expected that a wealth of experience will have been gained at the corporate level during this almost 10-year period. Consequently, an extensive amount of literature discussing the efficiency of the strategic corporate planning process at different corporate levels and problems occurring during the planning process has come into existence (Akbaba & Yıldızbaş, 2016; Arslan & Küçüker, 2016; Balkar & Ekici, 2015; Balcı, Çanakçı, & Tan, 2012; Balkar & Kalman, 2018; Eren, Orhan, & Dönmez, 2014). Strategic planning is essentially a process based on continued education (Akgemci, 2008). This learning process is, from the standpoint of middle- and upper-level managers in particular, significant in terms of a strategic management and leadership abilities.

Strategic management is a management model based on gradual planning and realization within a specific vision of corporate goals and the identification, selection and implementation of an organization's long- term goals and objectives. It is about planning for both predictable as well as unfeasible contingencies. It involves the strategies that managers undertake so as to improve performance and achieve a competitive advantage for their organization. In areas pertaining to the corporate mission, this model envisions short-, medium-, and long-term plans being devised after conducting effective situation and future analyses that evaluate environmental factors to predict potential development and after identifying strengths, weaknesses, risks, and opportunities. These plans are then used to prepare budget and performance programs in order to realize corporate goals. In strategic planning, every action is based on a justification designated in situation analyses and is planned to accomplish a long-term ultimate goal (Dinçer, 2013; Eren, 1998). As such, it can be argued that consistent policies are interwoven with well-planned strategic management.

On the other hand, the implementation of consistent, long-term education policies finds itself at the fore of among those aspects of MoNE that are heavily criticized. The constantly changing implementations in various fundamental policy areas, ranging from student selection and placement exams to the appointment of teachers and administrators, are criticized by all stakeholders in education, and particularly by students, parents, and teachers (Akın, 2016; Tonbul & Sağıroğlu, 2012). As such, it is important to examine the reasons as to why consistent education policies have yet to be devised and implemented considering the near 10-year strategic management experience. The focus of this study is two-fold. Not only does it seek to investigate the strategic management processes adopted

by MoNE, it also endeavors to examine how administrators employed in both central and provincial administrative bodies perceive strategic leadership and its practical consequences in their administrative duties.

Leaders able to define strategies and bring them to life constitute one of the most important components of the strategic management process. Strategic leaders are upper-level administrators who, by using strategic analyses and decision-making skills, define and implement the steps to be taken for a specific strategy in a given strategic management process (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Akgemci, 2008). Not only does the literature asserts that administrators should not simply follow environmental developments, it discusses their strategic leadership roles of bringing about innovation by making future predictions and of improving the organization. Since strategic leaders' basic responsibility is concerned with maintaining the competitive advantage, it is important that they be future-oriented and have administrative abilities and qualities more than other characteristics (Ülgen & Mirze, 2004). Leaders' effectiveness or ineffectiveness affects the strategic management process and therefore the overall success of the organization. In discussing the importance of strategic management, Eren (1998) emphasizes that in order to realize specific goals, it is essential not only to choose strategies that every member of the organization will accept but also to have the necessary skills to implement chosen strategies. Expected from strategic leaders is the ability to change the form of leadership to fit changing environmental conditions and to direct workers to new goals. According to Harvey, Drolet and DeVore (2014), strategic planning is the operational version of leaders' vision. Strategic leaders are individuals who through their knowledge, experience, abilities, and opinions, effectively prepare and implement plans. Strategic leaders establish relevant organizational structures, distribute resources, convey strategic opinions, and influence people (Guillot, 2003). Davies and Davis (2004) emphasize that certain organizational and individual abilities are influential in strategic leaders' success. Organizational abilities include strategic orientation, transforming the strategy into action, creating shared values, effectively evaluating strategic opportunities, and developing the organizations' strategic capacity whereas individual abilities include having an intrinsic disposition toward change and development, using scientific information, and being accommodating and creative.

Only through adopting a *strategic management* and employing *strategic leaders* that enable the organization to survive over the long term and maintain its competitive edge and not through simply managing its daily and routine affairs can educational organizations' accommodation of changes and their ability to maintain effectiveness be realized (Besler, 2004; Güçlü, 2003). Upper-level administrators and boards of directors are able to take on strategic leadership in the organizations (Besler, 2004; Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannella, 2009). As such, it is expected that upper-level administrators in central and provincial administrative bodies take on strategic leadership in MoNE. As mentioned above, since it is subject to criticism for inconsistencies in its education policies, it is important to predict just how MoNE will evaluate how strategic management, planning processes, and

upper-level administrators' roles are to be realized. Although a wide literature on strategic management processes in schools in Turkey (Akbaba & Yıldızbaş, 2016; Akın, 2016; Balkar & Kalman, 2018; Memduhoğlu & Uçar, 2012), examinations of central and provincial government perspectives are limited. This study seeks to make an original contribution to the literature on strategic management by examining the views of upper-level administrators employed in MoNE's central and provincial administrative bodies since they determine and implement strategies and by comparing the dominant perspectives held in central and provincial regions. Examination of strategic management policy and implementation, which is a legal obligation for all educational institutions across the country is deemed important, especially from the point of view of upper-level administrators in central and provincial administrative bodies.

Objective

This study seeks to evaluate MoNE's strategic management and planning implementations while the second planning term (i.e., 2015-2019 Strategic Plan) approaches its end and to examine the views of upper-level administrators working in the Ministry's central and provincial administrative bodies concerning leadership roles and the Ministry's strategic management process. In line with this aim, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What are administrators' views on the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of strategic planning processes?
2. How effectively do administrators fulfill their strategic leadership roles at the organizational level?

Method

The current study is a qualitative descriptive study. In-depth interviews were conducted between February and April of 2018 with middle- and upper-level administrators related to MoNE's strategic management process working in central and provincial administrative bodies. This section includes all the details about the study group, data collection tool and analysis of the data.

Study Group

Participants of the study consist of one General Director, three heads of department and one assistant superintendent working in the central organization of Ministry of National Education and one provincial director and four assistant superintendents who work in a provincial directorate of national education. In the study, criteria sampling and maximum variation sampling, both purposive sampling methods, were used. These sampling methods were used to obtain the most extensive amount of information by reaching those individuals most able to provide meaningful contributions to the research problem (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). The basic criteria for selecting members of the sample group was that individuals be currently working as middle- or upper-level administrators in either

central or provincial MoNE administrative bodies since at least one year. In order to obtain a variety of views and evaluations, the researchers were careful to select a wide variety of participants. To achieve this, participants working in the Ministry's varying departments at different capacities in the hierarchy were carefully selected. One of the participants employed in the central Ministry was the Department Head of Education Policies and from the provincial directorates was an Assistant Superintendent of Strategy Development. It was deemed important to include these individuals in the study due to the above-mentioned departments' coordination duties in the strategic planning process. In order to compare the perspectives held by individuals in the central and provincial administrative bodies administrators working at different levels were included. When the distribution of the administrators by gender was examined, 2 were female and 8 were male. At the time of interview, 3 of the 10 administrators had 2-4 years' administrative seniority, 4 had 5-6 years' administrative seniority, and 3 had 6-8 years' administrative seniority at the ministry or provincial directorate of national education. In addition, participants had at least 10 years teaching and administrative experience in the schools.

Data Collection Tool

Interviews were used to collect data in the current study. We prepared a semi-structured interview form soliciting responses to administrators' strategic management process, their roles in the process, and to what extent they had fulfilled these roles. This form was composed of two sections and was created after having performed a review of the literature. After examining MoNE's strategic plans and the implementation process and conducting interviews with Ministry administrators, we developed the first draft of the form, which was then submitted to field experts experienced in strategic management and planning. This draft was amended per the experts' opinions and was brought to its final form. A pilot interview was conducted with an administrator and the comprehensibility of the questions was evaluated.

The two fundamental questions to which responses were sought on the form were: (1) "What are administrators' views on the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of strategic planning processes?" and (2) "How effectively do administrators fulfill their strategic leadership roles at the organizational level?" Follow-up and alternative questions were prepared for each question included in the form. The structured interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and were recorded so that participants would feel more at ease expressing their opinions.

Analysis of the Data

Descriptive method was used to analyze the data. While interpreting participants' responses to the interview questions, they were accompanied by actual statements made by the participants during the interviews. In descriptive analyses, the data obtained is first summarized into pre-defined themes and interpreted. Participants' statements are often included verbatim not only to provide a clear reflection of their views but also to increase the study's reliability. Since the objective is to present to

the reader the study's findings and their interpretation in an orderly manner in this type of analyses, the study's data are first systematically and clearly described. These descriptions are subsequently explained and interpreted, cause and effect relationships are examined, and a number of conclusions are reached (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). Codes were giving to the participants during the data's analysis. Regarding participants working in the central Ministry, the general director was coded as (GD), department heads as (M1, M2, M3), and the assistant superintendent as (MAS) whereas regarding those working in the provincial directorate, the superintendent was coded as (PD) and the assistant superintendents as (P1, P2, P3, P4). Their duties and positions were highlighted when necessary. According to Yıldırım and Şimşek (2005), descriptive analyses are appropriate for studies with a pre-defined conceptual structure. The current study takes the preparation, implementation, and assessment phases of strategic plans as the foundation for the conceptual structure for the strategic planning process (Eacott, 2008; Eren, 1998). A five-dimension conceptual structure related to strategic leaders' organizational roles and emphasized by Davies and Davies (2004) was taken as the basis for strategic leadership.

In addition to seeking expert opinions at every step of the study (i.e., preparing the semi-structured interview form and defining the themes) to ensure the validity and reliability of the research data, notes taken by the researchers during interviews were shared with the participants, seeking their confirmation. The assessments related to the findings were frequently supported and explained by verbatim statements. Furthermore, all of the study's methodological processes were explained in detail and the conclusions were presented in such a manner to allow them to be compared. Finally, it is important to emphasize that both of the researchers involved in the preparation and implementation of strategic plans at central and local level in their professional backgrounds and gained extensive experience.

Findings

The findings obtained through analyses of the interviews are discussed in this section. The findings are grouped into two themes. This themes are titled as *Strategic Management and Planning Process* and *Strategic Leadership Roles*.

A. Strategic Management and Planning Process

The views of administrators employed in central and provincial administrative bodies on strategic management and planning processes have been examined under the following three categories compromising the three stages of strategic planning: (i) Improving the Preparing Process, (ii) Strengthening the Implementation Process, and (iii) Revising the Assessment Process.

i. Improving the preparation process.

When participants' views concerning the preparation stage of the strategic planning process are evaluated in a general manner, it is revealed that participants perceived the preparation process of strategic plans to be a technical process, pertinent legislation to be implemented by responsible authorities, and that the will of upper-level administrators devising National Education policies was not sufficiently reflected in this process. Planning processes at the provincial level adopt a centralist mentality, basing their own plans on those prepared by the central Ministry. Participants' statements highlighting this specific issue are included as follows:

We have a strategic planning commission composed of relevant upper-level departments. This commission collects the necessary information and carries out the preparation process by conducting interviews, surveys, document analysis, etc. (M3)

We fulfill all of our duties based on the mandates and instructions delineated by the Ministry. We prepare our strategic plans following the framework laid out by the Ministry. We conduct our business at the provincial level based on the Ministry's strategic goals. (P4)

Another point pertaining to the preparation process highlighted by participants is that the process changes based on the upper-administrator currently in authority. One participant expressed his views concerning this issue as follows:

The important thing is how the administrator approaches the issue. If a memo coming from the Strategy Department is to be forwarded to a sub-unit and they say to prepare and send it, previous documents' quantitative data are updated and, for want of better words, the dust is wiped off and sent away. (GD)

Another important dimension mentioned by participants is that the process's administration is not sufficiently coordinated and is conducted in haste.

Because coordination in the strategic planning process is not sufficiently facilitated, some people are expected to implement the plans that prepared by others. This makes it impossible to properly manage the process. (M2)

An examination of participants' views on strategic plans' preparation process illustrates that (i) needs and expectations surveys, (ii) PEST and SWOT analyzes, and (iii) decisions made in routine meetings serve as important guides in defining long-term goals related to duties having a legal foundation. Similarly, participants stated that contemporary developments and stakeholders' expectations are important in designating goals. It was seen that in general, participants were aware of the technical terms used in strategic planning and that Ministry employees had acquired direct experience in technical processes during the second planning term in particular. The assistant superintendent of the provincial education directorate shared his opinion on this matter:

I can safely say that although the assigned positions duties weren't far-reaching enough and that performance goals were not realistic during the first planning term, better plans were prepared in regard to these issues during the second term. (P1)

ii. Strengthening the implementation process.

When evaluating Ministry administrators' views on the implementation process of strategic planning, strategic plans are perceived more as a general policy document and understood to be of an intentional and recommendational nature rather than being implementation-focused. Participants emphasized that although strategic plans are devised to fulfill medium- and long-term projects, the process does not follow the administration's strategic plan during the implementation phase. Participants' views in regard to this specific issue follow:

When a strategic plan is added to our agenda and at the end of every year by the strategy department head, information and assessment reports regarding the projects being conducted are added to our agenda upon request. In the current process, there is no work defining where we are in the current strategic plan. (M2)

Another point highlighted in regard to the implementation process pertains to the planning approach. Errors in the approach adopted during the preparation phases of a plan negatively affect the implementation phase. One central Ministry administrator stated the following about this specific issue:

We sometimes witness a wrong approach when defining performance goals. For example, a goal seeking to increase the number of students receiving special education was introduced. Here, the goal shouldn't be to increase number under every circumstance; it's to provide students in need of special education with the ability to receive an appropriate education. So the inclination of putting forward a numerical goal where numbers gradually increase may cause mistakes that would render it impossible to even implement this plan. (M1)

Similar to their views on the preparation process, participants also emphasized the importance of strategic leadership in the implementation process. Participants' views on this issue reveal that the strategic management process espoused by the most upper echelons of the administration was far from being realistic.

At long as the same general director is around, it might be possible for the vision to be reflected onto the strategy. However, no administrator stays in his position long enough to make and institute either a medium- or long-term plan. For this reason, administrators give priority to projects that will bring short-term results instead of long-term strategic plans. Moreover, every new administrator means a new strategy and implementation. (MAS)

iii. Revising the assessment process.

Participants' views on the assessment process emphasize that evaluating unrealistic goals is not meaningful. Studies examining end-of-term assessments conclude by stating that there are justifications for goals that have gone unrealized. Participants' views on this issue follow:

Today when we evaluate the performance goals written up three years ago, we see that they've already been surpassed or that we didn't designate their numbers very realistically. We can even see that sometimes goals that are no longer valid. (M3)

In 2014, we placed a goal that sought to increase the achievement scores for transitioning to middle school whereas we now see that we've eliminated the test altogether. (P2)

Although there are strengths in the physical structure, deficiencies in assessing performance constitute our weakest point. (PD)

I think that the institutions culture of preparing long-term plans and then instituting and assessing them hasn't fully caught on yet. (M1)

Participants stated that budget deficiencies constitute the most serious limitation when attempting to implement the long-term goals defined by MoNE. This perception is further reinforced as a result of the weak relationship between budget management and strategic planning. The assessment process evaluating the weak relationship between performance goals included in strategic plans and budget management has turned into a mere formality. Participants' views on this subject follow:

We have difficulty finding resources to materialize the goals we've placed in strategic plans. Actually, our problems and deficiencies in physical and human resources terms are clear. However, the solution to the majority of these problems is a financial matter. (M2)

We see ourselves miles away from being a clear and transparent institution that gives priority to accountability and self-assessment. (M3)

Every year, our Ministry carries out an administration-related performance program and submits it to public opinion. Even if this program isn't a part of the strategic plan, we can't say it's completely separate. Five years can be a long period of time in today's world. For this reason, we're obliged to make changes in our strategies and goals. (GD)

It is observed that studies assessing performance are not effective and that neither a mechanism nor a culture evaluating performance markers based on the goals defined in strategic plan studies exists.

B. Administrators' Strategic Leadership Roles

This section of the study seeks to highlight how leadership factors into strategic management processes and make relevant conclusions. In order to do this, participants' organizational-level strategic leadership roles have been examined. As such, interviews were structured following the following dimensions conceptualized by Davies and Davies (2004): (i) *Being Strategic Oriented*, (ii) *Transforming Strategy into Action*, (iii) *Creating Shared Values*, (iv) *Effective Assessment of Strategic Opportunities*, and (v) *Supporting Strategic Capacities*.

i. Being strategic oriented.

Central Ministry administrators' roles pertaining to *being strategic oriented* revolve more around an administrative understanding in which a long-term, visionary approach shaping the education system's future is dominant than around daily and short-term policies (Davies & Davies, 2004). This approach requires operational planning done in accordance with a powerful vision. Central Ministry administrators' views on their roles pertaining to *being strategic oriented* reveal that they find the strategic orientation professed by the upper-administration to be insufficient.

I've been a department head for two years. Other than two meetings that I attended representing the general director, I've never attended a meeting with the minister or undersecretary. We have frequent meetings with the undersecretary's assistants, but these meetings are assessment meetings that focus on specific issues. This makes it difficult for us to understand the general policies related to the strategic approach of the highest-level administrators. (M2)

Our agenda is so busy that it's sometimes difficult to look up ask where we're heading. (P3)

I don't think that the processes for devising policies or for defining strategies in the Central Ministry are run with a sufficiently comprehensive decision-making mechanism. If there even is a strategic orientation, it's not visible. (P4)

I think that since decisions are bound to the upper-administration's approval, long-term planning projects are significantly deterred. We act based on whatever the strategic framework devised by the Central Ministry is. Administrators at the provincial or school level don't have extensive enough zone of influence. (PD)

Criticism toward strategic orientation and especially toward the upper-level administration's ability to convey their strategies to subordinates and the provincial superintendent's criticism regarding centralized structure of the strategic planning process are noteworthy. As a result, it can be argued that, intensive routines restrict the strategic orientations of the administrators.

ii. Transforming strategy into action.

Leaders' roles pertaining to *Transforming Strategy into Action* revolve around sharing the strategic orientation behind institutional processes with employees both verbally and in writing and around facilitating the structural development to realize these strategies (Davies & Davies, 2004). Some of the participants' views on the roles in question indicate that strategic leaders in MoNE's strategic management processes are included as long as they are part of the highest level of administration. The participant working as general director discussed this point as follows:

Decisions are made by the Minister or Undersecretary in weekly upper-administration meetings. All of the general directors and sometimes relevant department heads attend these meetings. Here, we implement whatever decisions have been made by first systematically ordering them from easiest to hardest and level of feasibility, and of course considering the strategic priorities. (GD)

It is understood from participants' statements that in spite of these upper-level strategic meetings, there are difficulties in conveying these strategies to lower administrative levels. The participant employed as department head made the following comments regarding this point:

We even learn about certain issues after the fact. We hear about important Ministry policies only after they've started to be implemented. Sometimes we find out from social media or other websites. As the most senior administrators in the Ministry, we have extreme difficulty trying to explain some of our policies when going to the provinces. (M2)

In addition to these issues, we find that several studies have been conducted on propagating and implementing strategies in the ministry's central and provincial administrative bodies. Views on this issue are as follows:

We implement our policies in the field by trying to change negative attitudes toward work, convincing, increasing awareness of the roles undertaken, frequently reminding about the importance of our mission, motivating, following up, defining steps problems, and performance criteria for each goal, and preparing projects. (M3)

We revise goals based on the feedback we receive before implementing them and we try to increase the rate strategies implemented and the amount of monitoring and evaluation studies. (P2)

It is understood from participants' statements that the strategic planning process is top down which does not fit the nature of strategic management. The emphasis of the participants points out that the strategic planning process is carried out with a centralized approach. In addition, some participants directly stated that strategic planning was centralized.

iii. Creating common values.

It is impossible to realize organizational change without supporting mission, strategy, culture, and behavior (Wilson, 1997). Strategic leaders gather workers around a mutual vision and form a shared group of values to realize this vision. When participants' views on MoNE's attempt to create shared values are examined from a strategic management perspective, it is seen that instead of a policy approach that takes organization culture into consideration, an approach based on the chain of command is dominant in propagating strategy in the field. Participants' views on this issue follow:

We spend a lot of effort trying to break resistance to change. To achieve this, we have come together with teachers and administrators and shared the Ministry's vision and road map during province, district, and school visits. (GD)

I think that teachers' reactions aren't taken into consideration for a large number of decisions made by the Ministry. It's not enough to simply share the vision; we need to aim at create a well-balanced structure that not only successfully realizes the institution's goals but also fulfills workers' needs. (PD)

We don't have a systematic structure where we can relay our thoughts or recommendations about policies to higher levels. Maybe only like the National Education Council can conduct broad-based studies on at irregular intervals but it's not clear as to what degree they are reflected on policies. All stakeholders who may be affected by the Ministry's decisions should be included in the decision-making process. (P3)

I think it's necessary from a group studies, a team mentality, and collaborative work strategy standpoint. However, efficiency and functionality should be discussed here. (M1)

iv. Effective assessment of strategic opportunities.

The effective assessment of strategic opportunities concerns itself with strategic leaders' management of competent interventions in the proper time frame. Participants' views on this subject reveal criticisms about strategies' effectiveness in regard to the timing methodology of MoNE. Below are participants' views highlighting this issue:

We follow changes and developments in the field of education both in Turkey and throughout the world and try to adapt them to education institutions. Sometimes a number of important steps may be taken toward reading the strategic transformation occurring throughout the world. I think it's important to have a vision like the FATİH project (Movement of Enhancing Opportunities and Improving Technology) in terms of Industry 4.0 and 21th Century Skills discussions. However, we need to discuss the implementation process and our capacity to manage it. (GD)

I think that if we made a medium-term assessment of the Ministry's policies, it would be difficult to say that there's any strategic harmony. It's hard to know what intervention we're going to initiate this year or what implementation we're going to do two years from now. I can certainly say that in this case, strategic opportunities are not taken advantage of in an effective time frame. So, there's definitely a need for a common mind to be used throughout all processes and for collaboration in such processes at the higher level (P1)

v. Supporting strategic capacities.

One of the basic requirements to improving institutions' strategic capacity is to develop human resources able to transform strategy into action. Two further areas in which a strategic leader needs to be involved in order to define strategic goals and to reorganize the organization are administrative processes and organizational culture. Since these two areas in particular are so intimately related with human resources, they find themselves among the duties and roles of top priority of a strategic leader's determining and improving workers' strategic capacities. When participants' views are examined from a strategic human resources management standpoint, it is observed that MoNE continues to apply traditional methods in managing processes in this area. Participants' views on this issue are as follows:

During the last term in particular, we have added very high caliber young individuals by devising our assistant specialist team. The Ministry gives a great deal of importance to effectively training that these young individuals. I'm of the opinion that these young people will be able to make vital contributions in the coming years. (GD)

Our colleagues in the Ministry who work more effectively than others certainly stand out. Of course one who succeeds in delivering the water isn't the same as one who breaks the jug. Every administrator needs a team whose members in whose potential, talents, and work ethic he can trust. This is how it is now as a result of our new faculty policy, even for upper-level administrators. Those who work inefficiently are let go. (MAS)

I can't really say that we've adopted a different method than the one we were using 20 years ago in terms of developing our human resources. Maybe there's been increase in the number of in-service programs and informative meetings and knowledge flow has improved in parallel with advances in technology. However, no systematic improvement mechanism has yet to be developed. (PD)

We use technology to share information more efficiently within our respective departments. We use messaging programs to share informal information in addition to online informative meetings. (M3)

We conducted a few training programs on strategic planning with school principals and other faculty members, but the lack of functional oversight negatively affected the learning process and the planning process didn't fully reach its goal. (P1)

Despite the spread of digital communication technologies and other specific developments, the means used by the central Ministry's to develop its human resources do not exceed traditional in-service training policies. The participants emphasized that a major problem is that school principals in particular do need receive the necessary level of training and education in regard to strategic management policies. In addition, the need for new approaches and practices in in-service trainings was an important emphasis.

Discussion

In this study, the views of upper-level administrators employed in Ministry's central and provincial administrative bodies were comparatively examined, unlike many studies (Akbaba & Yıldızbaş, 2016; Akın, 2016; Altınkurt, 2010; Balkar & Kalman, 2018; Frantzen, 2018; Memduhoğlu & Uçar, 2012; Williams & Johnson, 2013) in which the challenges of the strategic planning process in educational institutions were evaluated by the local/school perspective. A joint examination of the findings on MoNE's strategic management and planning process and on the strategic leadership roles of both middle- and upper-level administrators employed in the Ministry's central and provincial administrative bodies reveals that upper-level administrators have some strategic leadership roles but these roles cannot be reflected onto ministry policies in a planned manner. The strategic planning process is perceived as an independent job carried out by specific responsible departments. Furthermore, middle-level administrators criticized not only the deficiencies in disseminating strategies defined by upper-level administrators to lower levels but also the strategic approach adopted by upper-administrators and their failure to develop shared values. These critiques indicate that the hierarchal structure in the Ministry's bureaucracy is excessively strict and that transfer of strategic knowledge between different hierarchal levels is weak. According to Mintzberg (1994) the lack of participation of administrators in the process is an important problem in the strategic planning. Rigid hierarchy is not out of keeping with the nature of strategic management. Because of the gaps between central vision and school implementation (Peters-Hawkins, Reed, & Kingsberry, 2018), an effective strategic management requires a model that institutions can identify and implement their organizational goals, strategies, performance measures, and actions in a more free environment (Layland & Redding, 2017). The results of the present study are consistent with similar studies that criticize the rigid hierarchical and centralized structure of strategic management of MoNE (Arslan & Küçükler, 2016; Şahin & Arslan, 2008). Similarly, Çoban, Özdemir, and Pisapia (2019) argue that administrators in MoNE could not indicate strategic leadership attitudes during the organizational change management. It is known that a mechanical strategic planning approach does not succeed in

achieving the expected goals. According to Cook (2001) the first and most important stage of strategic planning is organization's beliefs and culture. As a consequence, it is understood that a strategic management and planning culture has not been established in the MoNE, and in this sense, there is nothing wrong in saying that, Turkish experience has not falsified Cook's (2004) predictions related to *creating artifactual systems* and *authoritarian organizations* in planning process. Even if there is no evidence that strategic management increases the authoritarianism in MoNE, it can be argued the rigid hierarch has not been decreased by way of strategic management and planning.

From an administrative standpoint, considering that there is no strategic transition or breaking period in political/managerial terms and the strategic mind that determines and applies educational policies has been based on the same government programs for about 15 years, it is noteworthy that the upper- and middle-level administrators composing the research group, that they did not see themselves as members of a strategic management team, and that they had a critical perspective. This can be interpreted as the fact that the Ministry could not present a strategic vision to be shared by all of its stakeholders, especially the upper-level central and local administrators. On the other hand, as in some countries such as Denmark, new governance models that *treating schools as self-governing institutions managed directly from the MoNE* increase the importance of strategic planning as a managerial tool (Moos, 2014). Moreover, the importance of strategic planning for *local governments* has not decreased in countries such as the United States, where decentralization prevails (Baker, Campbell, & Ostroff, 2016; Frantzen, 2018; Strunk, Marsh, Bush-Mecenas, & Duque, 2016). Within this context, the Turkish experience about strategic management of education reveals that centralized and constitutionally obligated process carry some important risks and the central government's commandments, top down reforms, and legal obligations do not guarantee adequate and effective implementation in practice.

Central Ministry administrators' views on MoNE's strategic management and planning processes reveal that participants consider there to be gaps in the causal relationship that connects the preparation, implementation, and assessment processes to each other. An ineffective preparation process causes the implementation and assessment processes to turn into formalities, which consequently turns strategic management and the planning process into an insufficient formality that serves only to increase workload instead of an effective management tool. In this context, participants' emphasis on the lack of information and education provided on strategic planning is also an important point. As emphasized by Mintzberg (1994), one of the important problems of strategic planning is the limitations of the analytical information flow in the organization. Insufficient information and training in the strategic planning process is noted by many researchers (Arslan & Küçüker, 2016; Memduhoğlu & Uçar, 2012). In the scope of strategic planning, Altinkurt (2010) concluded that, insufficient information causes resistance and distrust among administrators. According to Erdoğan (2004), the root cause for unsuccessful policies in Turkey's is that knowledge and awareness levels are

insufficient in the training provided to human resources. However, continued education-based teamwork is necessary in order to ensure the effectiveness of strategic management (Akgemci, 2008). Yet, a well-functioning strategic management has not yet been reached due to, among other reasons, the fact that strategic implementations in MoNE require a paradigmatic change in management.

Conclusions and Recommendations

At the conclusion of two planning terms, although employees in the central Ministry have gained knowledge and experience on certain technical processes, the root problems raised by the participants concerning strategic management and the planning process may be listed as follows: (i) Strategic plans do not reflect the strategic mind of upper-level administrators, it is perceived as an advisory policy document rather than a practice-oriented plan and a technical reporting process carried out by the related unit, board or commissions. (ii) The relevant bodies have not attained the necessary level of knowledge and awareness concerning strategic planning, (iii) Education stakeholders are not adequately included in the strategic plan preparation process and inter-department coordination is weak, (iv) Environmental changes and local dynamics are not sufficiently assessed during the strategic planning process and planning processes at the provincial level simply follow plans developed by the Ministry, thereby breeding a centralist mentality, (v) Inadequate attention is paid to ensure that performance programs and goals incorporated in planning projects are realistically defined and strategic goals align with budget programs, (vi) Studies evaluating performance have yet to be effectively conducted and no study on strategic plans has developed a mechanism evaluating performances by gauging whether strategic plans followed pre-defined goals, and (vii) Shared values pertaining to MoNE's strategic management have not been created, management processes change depending on the department/administrator, and an approach that facilitates strategies' dissemination into lower levels while taking organizational culture into consideration has not been created. Finally, it could be concluded that as Peter Drucker famously stated "*culture eats strategy for breakfast*".

The study revealed that instead of strategic management and planning being to a technical process, measures need to be taken to facilitate its transformation into a cultural process. As a result, the following recommendations can be made: (i) Strategic management and planning needs to consider together as a whole every stage of each process, including the preparation, implementation, and assessment processes, (ii) Both strategic leadership and this process should be pursued and adopted by the highest level of administration in particular, (iii) The centralist approach should be abandoned and local mechanisms' areas of influence need to be increased in strategic management, (iv) Researchers should examine in greater depth the link between the Ministry's strategic plans and strategy documents, such as activity, performance, and budget reports, especially in the context of assessment processes, and (v) In addition, within the scope of strategic management, it is an important

research area that more comprehensive evaluation of the centralist management approach based on strategy transfer from the center to the local level.

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