

# Towards an Effective Multi-Stakeholder Consultation Process: Applying the Imagine Method in Context of Abu Dhabi's Education Policy

Sami Mahroum<sup>1</sup> · Simon Bell<sup>2</sup> · Yasser Al-Saleh<sup>1</sup> ·  
Nasser Yassin<sup>3</sup>

Published online: 12 February 2016  
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**Abstract** This paper is concerned with the many interleaving issues that emerge when engaging multiple stakeholders in decision-making. Whilst recognising the intrinsic value of group work and keeping in mind the numerous issues that obstruct group work (including multiple roles for participants, bias due to domination and distortion emerging from uneven group inputs), we applied the Imagine method to propose a new framework—the ‘Multiple Formation Consultation Framework’ (MFCF)—for organising effective multi-stakeholder consultations along the Policy Sciences Framework. Our proposed framework was applied in the context of education policy in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, where 24 small group formations were tasked and assessed in a systemic manner. Evidence from the exercise suggests that: (1) when moving participants from heterogeneous to homogenous groups, the working of the groups became more focused and the outcomes gained greater clarity in terms of the thinking of group members. (2) Yet, when groups moved from homogenous formations to heterogeneous, they became more inquisitive and explored broader aspects of the tasks at hand. (3) A repeat of the process over 2-day period where different members of the groups experience both homogenous and heterogeneous formations back and forth (in order to capture the unique value emerging from each composition) have led to more efficient and effective working and outcomes of the groups.

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✉ Nasser Yassin  
nasser.yassin@aub.edu.lb

Sami Mahroum  
sami.mahroum@insead.edu

Simon Bell  
simon.bell@open.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Innovation and Policy Initiative at INSEAD, Abu Dhabi Campus, P.O. Box 48049, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

<sup>2</sup> Innovation and Methodology, Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, England, UK

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Health Sciences, American University of Beirut, P.O. Box. 11-0236, Beirut, Lebanon

**Keywords** Stakeholders consultation · Multiple Formation Consultation Framework · Group formation · Imagine method

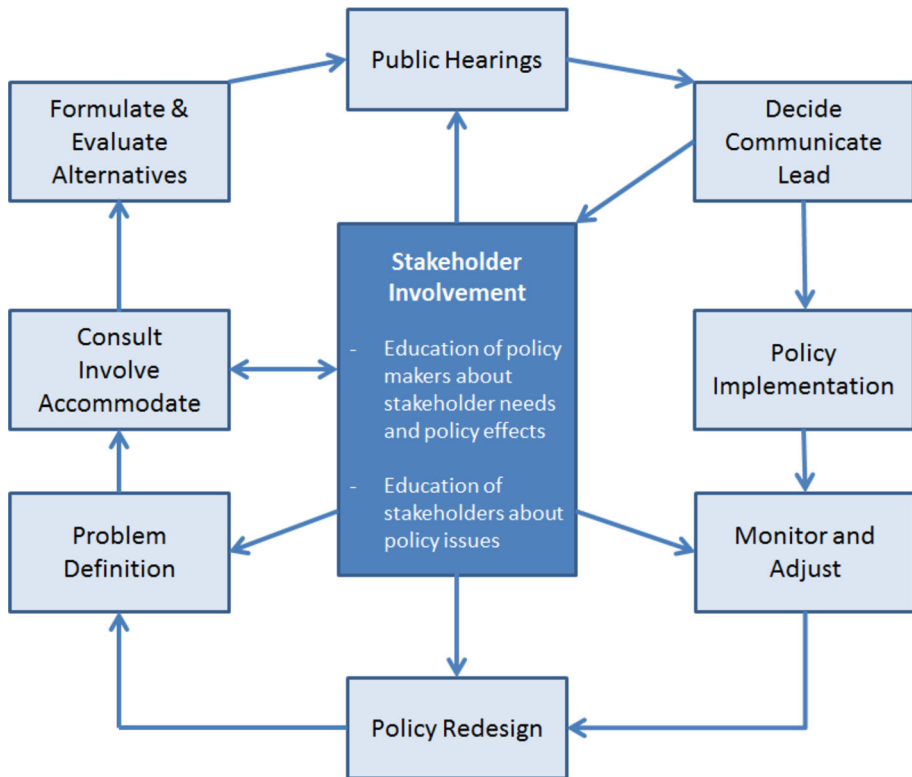
## Introduction

Engaging multiple stakeholders in decision-making has gained more prominence in recent years. Enhanced by a customer-oriented public sector management philosophy and participatory approaches to planning and policymaking, stakeholder participation has been perceived to add value and improve the quality of public decisions (Abelson et al. 2003; Altman and Petkus 1994; Beierle 2000; Forsyth 2010; Innes and Booher 2004; Van de Kerkhof 2006; Renn et al. 1993; Rowe and Frewer 2000; Wallner 2008; Watson et al. 1991). The rise of *collaborative governance* as an approach to decision-making and policy formulation has further contributed to the propagation of multi-stakeholder engagement processes involving both multi-sectoral state and non-state actors (Ansell and Gash 2008). In this context, the concept of a ‘Collaborative Governance Regime’ has been proposed as a “system in which cross-boundary collaboration represents the pre-dominate mode for conduct, decision-making and activity” (Emerson et al. 2012:10). Around the world, there has been a growing interest in moving public policymaking (pertaining to education, health, environment, among other policy areas) in a more participatory direction. Indeed, the OECD, in its review of the higher education systems of its member states, often makes a recommendation to increase the share of lay members (including students) in the governing authorities of educational establishments (e.g. see OECD 2004, 2010).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, calls have been intensified in both academic and policymaking circles to teach students the ‘art of democratic deliberation’ (Dahlstedt et al. 2011).

A broad agreement exists regarding the valuable contribution that multiple-stakeholder participation can make in solving complex problems (such as those related to educational or environmental issues), in addition to improving the quality of decision-making and in policy formulation and implementation processes. For example, a number of scholars have commended engaging heterogeneous groups when it comes to public participation in environmental decisions (e.g. see Beierle and Cayford 2002; Koontz and Thomas 2006; Sabatier 2005; Wood and Gray 1991). However, questions have been raised concerning the effectiveness of different methods and processes adopted to facilitate public participation (e.g. see Abelson et al. 2003; Innes and Booher 2004; Reed 2008). For example, Altman and Petkus (1994) put stakeholders consultation at the heart of the policy making process (see Fig. 1). This process is essentially based on the so-called ‘Policy Sciences Framework’, which is comprised of three main dimensions, namely (1) social process that is mapped in terms of participants and their perspectives; (2) decision-making process; and (3) problem orientation (Lasswell 1970). By advocating the notion of ‘Policy Sciences Framework’, Lasswell’s original aim was to set the stage for a comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding concerned with both the knowledge *of* and *in* the policy-making

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<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, however, there have been some exceptions to such a growing trend even in some of the world’s most democratic constitutions. For example, consider the Education Act 2002—an act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom—which has transformed state-funded schools into independent institutions. Such independence was secured by removing the powers of local governments to intervene in policy and practice of local education. Whilst this Act works in favour for schools that have innovative ideas to improve education, it imposes minimum standards in areas related to health, safety and space requirements (HM Government 2002).



**Fig. 1** A stakeholder-based public policy development process (Altman and Petkus 1994)

process for the public and civic order (Lasswell 1971). Whilst enquiry into this area is assumed to employ a range of methods, there seems to have been a fundamental reliance on participant-observation (Torgerson 1985).

Little research, however, has been carried out on ways to leverage the advantageous features of homogenous and heterogeneous group formations. While our research interests span to issue of forms of enquiry, participatory methods, and qualitative data gathering and assessment, this paper centrally aims to explore issues relating to homogenous and heterogeneous group work. We apply the Imagine method to test a new framework—the ‘Multiple Formation Consultation Framework’ (MFCF)—for organising effective multi-stakeholder consultations along the Policy Sciences Framework. We apply our proposed framework in the context of education policy in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, where 24 small group formations were tasked and assessed in a systemic manner

The paper is structured as follows. “[Literature Review](#)” section reviews the literature dealing with the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement methods and also discusses some of the prescribed solutions to address the problems associated with designing effective methods for stakeholder engagement in decision-making. In “[Methodology: Testing the ‘Multiple Formation Consultation Framework’](#)” section, we introduce our proposed framework for organising effective multi-stakeholder consultations; together with the assumptions adopted and the aim of this paper.

The rest of the paper reports on our research in applying the framework proposed in the context of school performance and education policy in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and in detailing some tentative conclusions.

## Literature Review

### Questioning the Effectiveness of Stakeholder Engagement Methods

Much attention has been given to the relative merits of, and conceptual frameworks for, public participation in decision-making. More recently, however, the focus has shifted towards the design of more informed, effective and legitimate methods of engagement with the public and their participation (Abelson et al. 2003).

Van de Kerkhof (2006) attributes the trend towards greater participation—at least in part—to a growing disillusionment with the power of scientific knowledge in contemporary decision-making processes. While scientific expertise has traditionally played an important role in decision-making and has seen scientists wield significant influence on public policy, Rip (1985) posits that pragmatic rationalism has required scientific experts to also possess a clear understanding and appreciation of the socio-political contexts in which advice is given and decisions made, including the impact of such advice on stakeholders (Jasanoff 1990). To this end, scientific considerations must be balanced against socio-political factors in both the decision-making and policy formulation processes.<sup>2</sup>

Fearon (1998) argued that among the benefits of public participation in decision-making processes is that it provides stakeholders with opportunities to:

- Share views on a subject that voting does not allow, including the ability to communicate the intensity and relative weighting of preferences.
- Generate a wider range of options that might not have been considered otherwise.
- Support public-spirited proposals in contrast to those motivated by self-interest.
- Increase the legitimacy of decisions and ease implementation or compliance.
- Improve the moral or intellectual qualities of participants.

Other motivations for increasing public engagement in decision-making include the pursuit of legitimacy, transparency and accountability, gaining public support for potentially unpopular decisions, developing social capital and a greater sense of community (Abelson et al. 2003). As a result, governments have increasingly sought to build public participation into the decision-making processes when feasible, in what is often referred to as ‘deliberative democracy’ (Rowe and Frewer 2000; Van de Kerkhof 2006). In that respect, the OECD (2001) regards engaging and partnering with citizens in policymaking as “...a sound investment and a core element of good governance” (p. 11). Furthermore, a wider participation by stakeholders contributes to the successful implementation of policies and programmes (Forsyth 2010). This is particularly apparent in cases when the support of the group is important to ensuring successful implementation. Vroom (2003), furthermore, emphasises the importance of a group-focused approach to decision-making

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<sup>2</sup> A case in point is growing public participation in scientific research, sometimes referred to as ‘crowd-source science’, where amateur scientists collaborate with professional scientists in research that has been facilitated by advances in technology and has seen non-scientists become more involved in decision-making and policy formulation, including contributing to decisions concerning the development and application of science and technology in society (McCallie et al. 2009).

when high-quality solutions and critical decisions are needed. For instance, Wallner (2008) attributes a failure in Ontario's educational reforms during the 1990s to a lack of stakeholder participation. She went further to argue that such a lack of engagement has resulted in alienating the various education stakeholders and has further generated a negative sentiment towards the government.

There are various methods of multi-stakeholder engagement and participation. Abelson et al. (2003) conducted a review of empirical studies of deliberative methods of public participation (i.e. collaborative problem-solving discussions) and their potential contribution to the decision-making process. They concluded that a critical element of deliberative processes—such as citizen juries and panels—was that they allowed “individuals with different backgrounds, interests and values to listen, understand, potentially persuade and ultimately come to more reasoned, informed and public-spirited decisions.” Abelson et al. (2003) contrasted this ‘social process’ to other approaches such as coercion, manipulation or deception. The study also highlighted, however, a number of weaknesses of deliberative methods including:

- The small number of citizens that can meaningfully deliberate at any one time.
- The selection of citizens to be included in the deliberation processes (e.g. mix of experts versus lay people; obtaining a representative sample).
- The amount of information presented and speed at which participants are asked to review and interpret it.
- Costs associated with deliberative methods, such as citizen juries.
- The impact of recommendations, especially where citizens have no delegated decision-making authority.

Innes and Booher (2004) argue that legally-required methods of public participation in the US—such as public hearings or review and comment procedures—have failed to achieve greater public participation or incorporate a broad spectrum of public participation into the planning and decision-making processes. Furthermore, they claimed that methods of participation often antagonise members of the public, with procedural requirements seen as discouraging public input. After reviewing different participation models, they recommended ‘collaborative participation’—or deliberative public participation—in which citizens engage in ‘authentic dialogue’ are equally empowered and informed; each is listened to respectfully and where each works towards a task of mutual interest. They claim that this leads to an increased understanding and acceptance of information. Through listening, people develop an understanding of the perspectives of others and realise the legitimacy of their ideas. Moreover, collaborative processes were seen to build networks that promote social capital and trust, jointly develop objectives and solutions and produce innovative approaches to policy challenges.

Van de Kerkhof (2006) highlighted the important difference between deliberation and consensus<sup>3</sup>; indicating that consensus building is characterised as a process of negotiation which seeks to reach a joint decision that meets the needs of all stakeholders. The study concludes that the consensus approach faces a number of constraints, including a bias in participant selection as sceptical participants were sometimes discouraged from joining discussions. There is also a tendency for groups to focus on the most tractable problems

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<sup>3</sup> Deliberative approaches to public participation require participants to be provided with information about the issues being considered. They are encouraged to discuss and challenge this information, exchange opinions and viewpoints and weigh and balance arguments before making a final decision regarding specific or alternative policy options.

and this produces difficulties in reaching a consensus when groups comprise members with heterogeneous interests, backgrounds, perceptions and viewpoints. A deliberative approach to stakeholder contributions was found to overcome these constraints by encouraging an open dialogue which led to improved decision-making.

Research by Forsyth (2010) determined that the effectiveness of group decision-making was reduced by:

- Communication problems and an inability of group members to clearly express themselves.
- ‘Shared information bias’, where groups focus discussions on examining details that two or more of the group members know in common rather than discussing unshared information.
- Judgment errors are often exacerbated in a group context and cause people to overlook important information and overuse unimportant information.

Other scholars questioned the impact of stakeholder composition on the quality of deliberations and outcomes. For instance, Postmes et al. (2001) conducted a study on the quality of group decision-making, which highlighted the importance of how different groups deal with information and how this affects the quality of decision made. The study addressed the importance of ‘groupthink’—a theory first discussed by Janis (1972)—where group cohesion and a desire for consensus override a realistic appraisal of the decision alternatives. The study determined that, “Groups in the consensus norm condition made poorer decisions and valued shared information more highly than groups in the critical norm condition.”<sup>4</sup> Consensus groups were found to be more conservative in accepting new evidence and more cautious about challenging the value of shared information. In contrast, groups in the critical norm condition were found to be more probing, challenging and investigative and made greater use of previously unshared information. Interestingly, group cohesiveness was not found to be a cause of group preference for consensus. Rather, group history was determined to affect the formation of group norms, which in turn had a significant impact on the quality of group decisions.

Wolfe and Putler (2002) questioned the validity of assumptions in normative stakeholder theory that the stakeholder role (e.g. shareholder, employee, customers, supplier, etc.) constitutes a ‘binding tie’ among individual stakeholders resulting in a homogenous set of priorities within stakeholder groups. A key assumption of stakeholder theory was that self-interest (e.g. wages and job security in the case of employees or dividend earnings in the case of shareholders) is the central motivating factor that creates the binding tie that generates homogenous priorities and influences behaviour within role-based stakeholder groups. Contrary to this assumption, however, the study found that self-interest did not represent the primary motivation of individuals and that homogeneity existed to only a limited extent within stakeholder groups. The self-interest assumption was found to be overly simplistic and not reflective of the complex social and organisational realities which enterprises face in developing effective approaches to stakeholder management.

Having examined a few of the common issues influencing the effectiveness of multi-stakeholder consultations, the next section highlights some of the prescribed methods from the literature.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Group norms’ can be defined as a standard or rule that is accepted by members of the group as applying to themselves and other group members, prescribing appropriate thought and behaviour within the group (Postmes et al. 2001: 919).

## Possible Methods to Achieve Effective Stakeholder Engagement

There are various methods in the literature to address the problems encountered in designing effective methods for stakeholder engagement in decision-making. These tend to differ in terms of their ability to capture the dimensions of contextual mapping (of both the social and decision-making processes) and problem orientation. For example, they differ in participant selection, the number of participants and their familiarity/involvement with the topic of consultation, as well as the type of input obtained and the number of discussions/deliberations/observations held. Whilst decades of debate over what makes an effective consultation process have not produced a conclusive answer, a systemic comparison of the relative merits of the different methods are hindered by the absence of universal benchmarks against which these methods can be compared and assessed (e.g. see Abelson et al. 2003; Alberts 2007; Dalkey and Helmer 1963; Goodman 1987; Linstone and Turoff 1975; Rowe and Frewer 2000).

### *Addressing Group Composition*

Accurately identifying stakeholders and understanding their priorities is vitally important for the effective management of stakeholder relationships as it enables organisational priorities and actions to be aligned with stakeholder needs. This is an important element of the Policy Sciences Framework, particularly as it relates to the social dimension component of policy making. An important issue that arises in this regard the extent that different social groups participate in consultation processes to represent their interests (advocacy) or provide insights and feedback in the light of their roles in society. A study by Wolfe and Putler (2002) rejected the assumption in stakeholder theory that groups tend to be more or less homogeneous and can be classified by their roles. Their research indicated that stakeholders can more accurately be defined by their *interests* rather than their *role* and members of role-based stakeholder groups can have heterogeneous interests and priorities. Effective stakeholder management therefore requires that managers understand the underlying priorities within stakeholder groups.

Abelson et al. (2003) discuss group composition and the use of citizen juries, panels and consensus conferences to integrate information provided by technical experts. This is combined with public values provided by non-expert citizens who act as ‘value consultants’ in decision-making processes. These approaches also offer opportunities to address representational problems by enabling a range of views at local, regional or national level to be included. Also discussed is the use of deliberative polling which combines the benefits of traditional opinion polls with large representation, offering opportunities for discussion and deliberation. The significant costs associated with this approach have, however, limited its application.

In a corporate perspective, Mitchell et al. (1997) presented a theory of stakeholder identification and salience that can be used to explain to whom and to what managers should pay attention. They argue that managers must know which stakeholders hold a legitimate claim (i.e. moral, legal and property-based) on them and their organisations, as well as the type and level of stakeholder power (Wood 1994) and the urgency of their claims. Beyond that, Mitchell et al. (1997) argue that managers must also understand the dynamic and heterogeneous interests and priorities that exist within stakeholder groups. They anticipate that the salience of a particular stakeholder will be low if only one attribute

(i.e. power, legitimacy or urgency) is present, moderate if two are present and high if all three are present.

### *Addressing Group Communication*

Research into methods of group communication has questioned how groups interact and influence one another. This is an important issue as it relates the effectiveness of groups as decision-making mechanisms. Innes and Booher (2004) contend that one of the biggest problems in group communication is *information*, including “who controls it and whether it is trustworthy,” as this has a direct impact on the quality of decision-making. They highlight the benefits of joint fact-finding as a means by which stakeholders can question data, potentially uncover errors and generate more accurate information that can be used in the deliberation process. In order to also advance fairness and justice through group communication and collaborative participation, they recommend that dialogue be inclusive and that action be taken to ensure weaker stakeholders are effectively represented. Ultimately, they argue that participation must be fair, representative, well informed and transparent.

Insofar as shared information is argued to be more highly valued in group decision-making due to group norms that value consensus building, Postmes et al. (2001) argue that strategies aimed at reducing consensus—e.g. forming heterogeneous rather than homogenous groups—are likely to result in greater value being placed on unshared information leading to improved decision-making. Further to this—and in order to avoid the problems associated with ‘groupthink’—Forsyth (2010) makes the following recommendations with regard to group communications:

- Limit premature seeking of concurrence.
- Correct misperceptions and errors.
- Improve group decisional methods.

A study by Maznevski (1994) into the group decision-making literature indicates that the diversity of group members can lead to groups producing an increased number of solutions and alternatives to problems. This reflects the ability of diverse groups to view problems in a variety of ways, while also offering a varied range of skills and knowledge conducive to superior decision-making. Nevertheless, Maznevski (1994) contends that diversity in perceptions can also present obstacles to smooth communication and interaction which can, in turn, reduce group performance in decision-making. In order to overcome these problems, she argues that group members need to, “...be made aware of communication processes and the preconditions and of the role of communication in group performance”. Preconditions are discussed in detail in Maznevski’s article, but include, inter alia, a shared social reality (e.g. shared language base and perspective), an ability to take the perspective of others into account, a motivation to communicate and an agreement among participants with regard to how these interactions will take place.

### **Methodology: Testing the ‘Multiple Formation Consultation Framework’**

Against this backdrop, the paper is designed to test an alternative effective participatory process with the primary objective of mitigating the drawbacks usually associated with the deliberation process in terms of contextual mapping and problem orientation. The design of

this framework—named ‘MFCF—is inferred from the set of problems identified in the literature as hampering stakeholder engagement mechanisms. Its significance lies in testing and proposing how stakeholder engagement problems can be addressed. The paper seeks to test the proposed framework by operationalising it on a set of four workshops.

The paper uses the Imagine method as the first element of the Triple Task Method (TTM) as a facilitation tool to observe the dynamics of work among groups and the ways they think, plan and decide in a collaborative manner. Imagine was originally developed by Bell and Morse (2008) as a deliberative approach and was applied as a means to allow citizen groups to discuss and make progress with shared issues of concern and to monitor this process. Imagine is described in a number of contexts elsewhere (e.g. Bell et al. 2013; Bell 2011; Coudert and Larid 2011). Triple Task as a whole has been described as a process that “sets out the basis for understanding group dynamics” (Bell and Morse 2012, p. 44). Imagine is the primary device to allow groups to work and problem solve together. Other methods could have been chosen as the basis for the group assessments, but Imagine has the advantage of allowing groups to work in a relaxed manner and to provide easy opportunities for group and facilitator observations and insights. Imagine is primarily concerned with the process and outcomes of group work and is key to the themes of the research discussed here. Other aspects of TTM whilst being valuable in assessing deeper group issue are not described in this paper.

We utilised the ‘Imagine’ technique in which different groups of stakeholders are provided with minimal guidance to draw pictures which are later judged in terms of their richness. In Imagine, the groups—once convened—engage in three main tasks. First they share ideas by drawing a free form diagram known as a ‘Rich Picture’. The Rich Picture, derived from Soft Systems methodology, is a drawing exercise allows the group relax, become familiar with each other rapidly and share task representations and cognition about context (Checkland and Scholes 1990; Van Ginkel and van Knippenberg 2008) and to provide the main assessable output from the process, which are a sequence of tasks and issues. The deriving of tasks and issues from the rich picture comprises the second task in Imagine. Tasks and issues indicate the priority concerns of the group. These are then, in the third task of Imagine more formally prioritised and clarified which in this case involved the groups in conceptualising around policy and indicators.

We also move further in applying Imagine in a new framework for structuring multi-stakeholder consultations as a decision-process. The framework proposes the division of consultation groups into homogenous and heterogeneous formations where they are observed and analysed using the Imagine in stage 1 and then in stage 2 re-shuffle the groups that those who were in homogenous groups move to heterogeneous and those who were in heterogeneous move to homogenous groups.

The research comprised engaging multiple stakeholders from various interests in the area of schools performance and education policy in Abu Dhabi, in the UAE, with the aim of generating results in terms of identifying appropriate performance indicators and a list of policy priorities for the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC). The research was of limited scope and comprised a pair of ‘two-day’ workshops carried out in March and May 2013 involving a total of twenty-four groups. Each consisted of five or six individuals representing the various stakeholders and interests involved. The workshops considered the role and value of Indicators and Policy with regard to performance measurement in the context of schools in Abu Dhabi. In considering this, the views of staff working for the ADEC, professional administration staff from schools including Heads and Deputy Heads (Administrators) and fathers and mothers of children in the schooling system in Abu Dhabi

(i.e. Parents) were assessed whilst working in group contexts. It is worth noting here that the Abu Dhabi Emirate has around 265 public schools and 185 private schools. These range from kindergartens to adult education centres, with a total population of over 200,000 students (ADEC 2014). The context of the Abu Dhabi's education sector was deemed appropriate for the purpose of this research because of the diverse array of stakeholder interests involved. The need for addressing the—potentially diverged—education stakeholders' needs and expectations makes it a key area of policy concern (Whitty 2006).

Our study is exploratory in nature and action-oriented. It is guided by two working assumptions, guided by our review of the literature relating to ways in which stakeholder groups might be expected to behave when confronted by the task of consultation.

**A1:** When stakeholder homogenous groups deliberate (e.g. ADEC, Administrators or Parents), because of their uniformity, we would expect them to select a range of common and narrow set of indicators related to their stakeholders interests. The decision process would therefore be straightforward and would require less time than heterogeneous groups. Yet, because of their homogeneity the deliberations will be based on a narrower range of information.

**A2:** When stakeholder heterogeneous groups deliberate, because of their diversity, we would expect them to produce a more diverse process of discovery. The discussions would take more time than homogenous groups before moving from advocacy to exploratory and thus the decision process is expected to require more time, but it is based on a broader range of information.

The workshops were observed for group dynamic and each participant was asked to provide feedback to a questionnaire. Group observation is not a problem free method of data collection. As noted by DeWalt (DeWalt and DeWalt 1998) the observer brings with them many biases related to their gender, ethnicity and class, etc. and is not a clear mirror to the group dynamic. Nevertheless, if undertaken with care and in cognisance of the limitations of such observations, this form of data collection remains a widely used and valuable form of qualitative data collection (Kawulich 2005). Forms of observation were first defined by Gold (1958) and, in this case our approach to observation was based on Gold's 'observer as participant stance' with its advantages of the group remaining in control of its action but the observer sharing an identity with the group (Merriam 1988; Adler and Adler 1994). This form of observation is based more recently in action learning models such as that provided by the psychodynamic tradition (e.g. Bridger's 'Double Task' (Bridger 2007; Klein 2001)) and action learning (e.g. see Zimmer 2001; Ison 2010) and as reported in previous research (see Bell et al. 2011; Bell and Morse 2011, 2013).

Concerning the mechanics of the group observation, during the Imagine workshop three facilitators, who are the authors of the paper with experience in qualitative research, independently visited each of the groups on three separate occasions (nine visits to each group each day overall). The facilitators were tasked with not engaging the groups unless they had a specific question relating to process clarification. The facilitators were not to provide any guidance or lead to the groups working. The facilitators were to sit quietly and observe the groups at each visit for 5 min. During this time the group dynamic was assessed in terms of four criteria.

- Firstly, the overall mood and tone of the group (for example as indicated by noisiness, manner with which group members worked with each other)

- Secondly, the way in which group members were engaging with the task (e.g. inviting each other to make a contribution, including quiet people).
- Thirdly, the way in which group members used their existing knowledge (e.g. evidence of people saying: “from my experience”, “in my opinion”, “I remember when ...”)
- Fourthly, how the group self-managed (e.g. signs of an obvious leader or changing leadership or no leadership).

At the end of each day the facilitators would debrief and compare notes on the qualities and performances of each group. By this means, and undertaking the process blind to each other’s individual observations, the facilitators could compare notes on each group and produce an overall assessment of the various group dynamics observed.

To cross-check the observations made by the observers with the real experience of the participants, each participant was asked to fill in a short confidential questionnaire before leaving. The questionnaire was designed to discover how the participant had experienced the day both as an individual and as a member of the group.

## Results from the Action Research Engagement

### Group Formations

Bearing in mind that the aim of this is to examine the learning journey of the groups, as already noted, we applied Imagine as a mean to assess the thinking of the individuals within group formations; both homogenous (i.e. ADEC, Administrators and Parents) and heterogeneous (a mix of the three).

For the first workshop in March 2013, the thirty participants were organised in twelve groups over 2 days, six groups per day. All participants show variances including problems of incentive and people not showing up on the day or leaving early (to mention just three). Therefore in this case, we tried as much as possible to ensure that the groups had a balance of participants representing a range in terms of seniority in organisation, age and gender. The groups which emerged were as follows:

Day 1: Groups A1, B1, C1, X1, Y1 and Z1

A1 were ADEC personnel, B1 Administrators and C1 Parents. X1, Y1 and Z1 are mixed groups of ADEC, Administrator and Parent groups.

Day 2: Groups A2, B2, C2, X2, Y2 and Z2

A2, B2 and C2 were mixed groups of ADEC, Administrators and Parents. Group X2 was comprised of ADEC personnel, Y2 Administrators and Z2 Parents.

Each group comprised between five and seven individuals. During the first workshop, the groups considered the question: “What indicators are considered to be most valuable in the performance measurement of schools among all key stakeholders?”

For the second workshop in May 2013, the nineteen participants were placed in three groups on each day—these were organised as follows:

Day 1: Groups X1, Y1 and Z1

X1, Y1 and Z1 were mixed groups of Schools Administrators, Parents and ADEC staff.

Day 2: Groups X2, Y2 and Z2

Group X2 was comprised of ADEC, Y2 Administrators and Z2 Parents.

Groups ranged in size from four to seven. During this workshop, the groups considered the question: “What policies are considered to be most valuable in the performance measurement of schools among all key stakeholders?”

For both workshops, the groups were provided with identical guidance and methods. Each participant would experience the workshop twice; once in a homogeneous and once in a heterogeneous group. We ensured that some participants experienced the homogenous group first whereas others experienced the heterogeneous group structure first. Participants were encouraged via the use of the ‘Imagine’ method to draw a shared ‘Rich Picture’ of the situation as they understand it. Following this and a briefing to all groups in plenary, the groups were asked to draw out ‘Tasks’ (things that needed to be done to improve the current situation) and ‘Issues’ (items that need to be addressed—possibly problems) evident in the Rich Picture. It was necessary to link these ‘Tasks’ and ‘Issues’ to current indicator or policy areas of concern and to prioritise their policy thinking. At the end of each day, the groups were asked to feedback their assessment of the current priority indicator or policy considerations for the education sector in Abu Dhabi. A great deal of data was stored over the 4 days of the two workshops. The data for the aforementioned three tasks is presented in [Appendix](#).

## Deliberation Outcomes

Thirty-one participants attended the first workshop, whilst 18 attended the second one. In a general sense, participants of both workshops were observed to be very positive in outlook, willing to go along with the research process and treated all elements of the workshop with a serious level of dedication which provided a superb tone for the exercise. There was no visible evidence of undue conflict or annoyance between participants and both events appeared to be undertaken in good humour. Generally speaking, a great deal of enthusiasm has been observed on the part of the participants during the workshops. We discuss these observations in terms of each workshop separately.

### *Workshop 1: In Answer to our Primary Questions*

“*What Indicators are Considered to be Most Valuable in Performance Measurement of Schools Among all Key Stakeholders?*” In order of incidences, these are: Suitability of Curriculum (9 incidents); ICT (9 incidents); Safety Facilities (8 incidents); Student Performance (6 incidents); Teacher Qualifications (6 incidents); Involvement of Parents (5 incidents); Alumni (5 incidents); and Employment (5 incidents). Some tendencies are reasonably clear from our sample. For example parents tend to look for both child safety and IT in the curriculum. Administrators are also interested in safety and security but also look out items like professional development while ADEC have a more strategic assessment relating to performance, qualifications and curriculum. In heterogeneous groups, the indicators appear less focused and more mixed.

“*How do Different Stakeholders Engage with Ideas from Other Stakeholder Groups Concerning Different Indicators?*” In the workshops, we noted little discernible difference between the mood and tone of the various stakeholder groups. The research showed that heterogeneous groups often had more self-perceived issues with their internal dynamic and yet groups of all make-up were able to undertake the tasks provided and work together to produce the outputs requested to a reasonable standard.

*“How Malleable are Different Stakeholders When Confronted by Alternative View to their Own?”* The heterogeneous groups had more and deeper self-perceived internal issues when dealing with each other. The indicators, which they produced, were significantly differentiated across the groups. Only eight indicators were well supported by five or more groups. Of the eighty-four indicators noted by the groups over a third had been noted by a total of one, two or three groups. The heterogeneous groups on both days produced wide ranging indicators and this implies that different stakeholders are both open to—and able—to accept alternative views.

*“What are the Implications for Indicator Development and Performance Measurement Routines at Organisations with Multiple Stakeholders?”* The implications are that multiple stakeholders, if engaged with each other in a benign and tolerant atmosphere such as that represented in this workshop process, seem capable of working together reasonably well. This is the case even if the self-perception of the groups in some situations is that they are divided.

### *Workshop 2: Our Primary Questions Were*

*“What Policies are Considered to be Most Valuable in the Performance Measurement of Schools Among all Key Stakeholders?”* Among groups of all kinds is most important policy was the area of child health and safety. This was the only policy area highlighted by all six groups. The four top frequency policy areas for the groups were: Safety, Security and Health (7 incidents); Teaching Learning and Development (6 incidents); Governance (4 incidents); and Inspection (4 incidents). The groups agreed on the importance of health and safety but it would be accurate to infer from the results that the groups did not value different policies; rather they valued different visions of policy. The ADEC group valued policy as a strategic tool, whereas the Administrators and Parents did not really understand policy as a clear idea and therefore did not have clarity of vision in terms of different policy values.

*“How do Different Stakeholders Engage with Ideas from Other Stakeholder Groups Concerning Different Policies?”* In the heterogeneous groups, similar themes arose as in the homogenous groups where the three types were segregated into ADEC, Administrators and Parents. All groups showed tolerance to different ideas. There was, however, greater clarity of thinking in the homogenous stakeholder groups.

*“How Malleable are Different Stakeholders When Confronted by Alternative Views to Their Own?”* Tolerance to alternative views was noted in the heterogeneous groups. It was also noted, however, that some ADEC personnel were frustrated by the lack of understanding of the purpose and nature of policy by the other stakeholders.

*“What are the Implications for Policy Development and Performance Measurement Routines at Organisations with Multiple Stakeholders?”* If performance measurement routines are to become clear and unambiguous, the policy which drives it needs greater clarity and force in the mixed stakeholder groups.

We observed a general improvement in the quality and outcome of the discussions on the second day for all groups. Participatory techniques do not usually engage with task repetition and yet we found that the repetition of the ‘Imagine’ process with different group

composition provides higher quality and more insightful group work on the second pass. Such improvement would need further empirical testing, but is potentially quite interesting for participatory and multi-stakeholder engagement and particularly for those deliberating on a policy or programme reflecting the significance of repeating such exercises to improve the quality of their outcomes.

### Discussion of the Outcome from the Observation of the Group Dynamics

Working with a sample of twenty-four groups and pursuing an exploratory approach, we were able to derive some overall conclusions on the group dynamics. Our cross-checked observations with group participants own reporting suggest that both group formations (homogeneous and heterogeneous) improved in practice (engagement with task) and

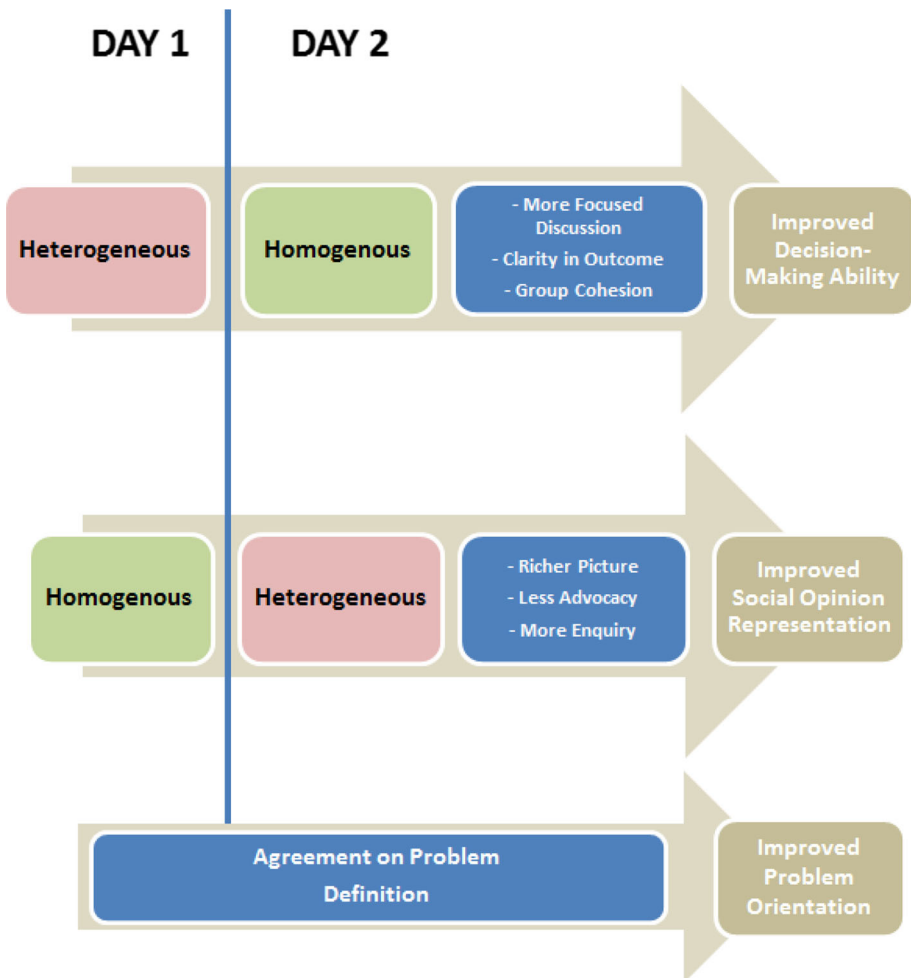


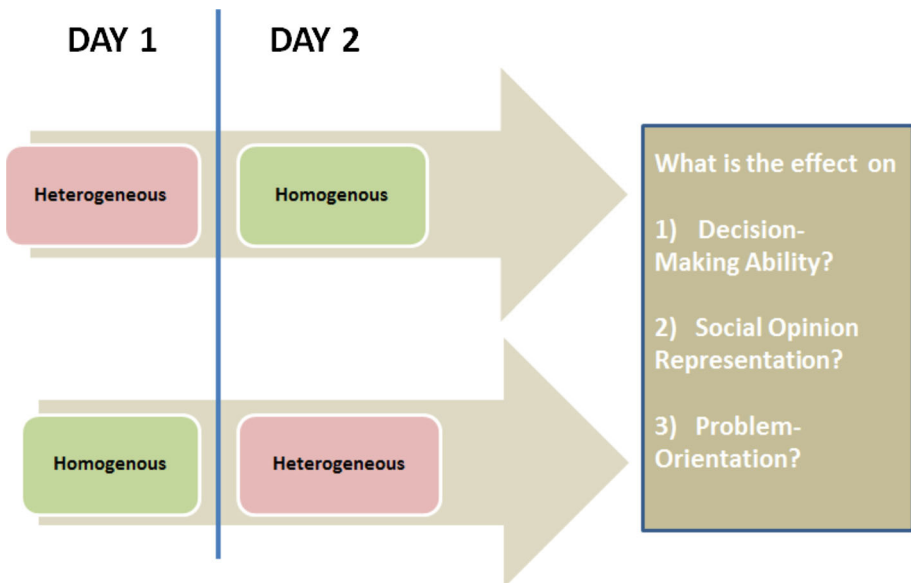
Fig. 2 Results of the research throughout the 2-day workshops

process (use of the method) from day one to day two and that heterogeneous groups had more richer deliberations whereas homogenous groups had more efficient cooperation. This is demonstrated in Fig. 2.

Working from Fig. 2 some further qualified insights can be made regarding the quality of both events and the nature of the group dynamics. The findings suggest that a deliberation process would become more effective if it is designed over two stages, where in stage 1 groups formation were heterogeneous in nature, and in stage 2 groups re-composed along homogenous basis. Stage 1 heterogeneous compositions will enhance the richness of the deliberations while stage 2 homogenous formations will enhance their efficiency in reaching conclusions. The overall process will become more effective in terms of decision-making ability, social opinion representation, and goal orientation.

Subsequently, we suggest that deliberation processes that involve multi-formation consultation groups may be more effective tools for achieving better policy design outcomes. Adopting such as process design, as illustrated in Fig. 3, would help wed deliberation techniques with the Policy Sciences Framework, decision-making speed, social opinion representation and problem orientation are enhanced.

The potential premise of what we call a ‘Multiple Formation Consultation Framework’ lies in its ability to mitigate both the communications problems usually associated with heterogeneous group compositions and a lack of representation associated with homogenous groups. The proposed framework manages to incorporate the contextual mapping and problem orientation elements of the ‘Policy Sciences Framework’ in terms of bringing together the necessities of the social dimension representation with the urgency for efficient decisions-making mechanisms and for an effective conclusion (i.e. agreement on problem orientation). Testing this framework on the context of education in Abu Dhabi has yielded promising results both in terms of bridging the gap between opinions of various



**Fig. 3** A Multiple Formation Consultation Framework

stakeholders and mitigating the shortcomings typically associated with the deliberation process.

## Conclusions

The move from heterogeneous to homogenous groups showed that groups have become more focused in their outcomes with a greater clarity in the thinking of group members. Such a bridge in perception gaps reflects a key relevant aspect for multi-stakeholder discussions that can adopt a two-level form of deliberation. Deliberations can start among members from a variety of mixed backgrounds and interests especially when the issues at stake have unclear outcomes, and then move to homogenous groupings.

Whilst the benefits of heterogeneity for such deliberation circumstances have already been established in previous studies (e.g. Beierle and Cayford 2002; Koontz and Thomas 2006; Sabatier 2005; Wood and Gray 1991), a repeat of the process over 2-day period where different members of the groups experience both homogenous and heterogeneous formations back and forth (in order to capture the unique value emerging from each composition) have led to more efficient and effective working and outcomes of the groups.

This study represents one empirical case of structuring a consultative process in a specific context. It is hoped that our paper will stimulate further research in designing effective participatory consultation processes. The application of the MFCF suggests a practical approach to bridge the perception gap through leveraging the effectiveness of homogenous groups and the richness of heterogeneous groups. Facilitators and planners when engaging various community groups and stakeholders in resolving a complex problem can test and apply this approach.

## Appendix

See Tables 1, 2 and 3.

**Table 1** Data for task 1

Group Name	Type	WS1	WS2	Average
A1	Ho	3		
B1	Ho	3		
C1	Ho	2.75		Day 1: 2.9
A2	Het	1.5		
B2	Het	1.5		
C2	Het	2.25		Day 2: 1.8
X1	Het	1.5	3	
Y1	Het	1.5	4	
Z1	Het	2.5	2	Day 1: 2.4
X2	Ho	2	1.75	
Y2	Ho	2.75	1.25	
Z2	Ho	1.5	1.5	Day 2: 1.8

**Table 2** Data for task 2

Group Name	Type	WS1	WS2	Average
A1	Ho	3.65		
B1	Ho	3		
C1	Ho	2.3		Day 1: 3.0
A2	Het	2.5		
B2	Het	2.7		
C2	Het	2.4		Day 2: 2.5
X1	Het	1.6	3.5	
Y1	Het	1.8	3.4	
Z1	Het	2.1	2.25	Day 1: 2.4
X2	Ho	2.6	2.5	
Y2	Ho	2	1.95	
Z2	Ho	2.2	2.3	Day 2: 2.3

**Table 3** Data for task 3

Group Name	Type	WS1	WS2	Average
A1	Ho	5		
B1	Ho	4		
C1	Ho	1		Day 1: 3.3
A2	Het	5		
B2	Het	6		
C2	Het	7		Day 2: 6
X1	Het	5	7	
Y1	Het	1	7	
Z1	Het	5	5	Day 1: 5
X2	Ho	4	3	
Y2	Ho	3	2	
Z2	Ho	2	2	Day 2: 2.7

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