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Exploring Current Practices of Supervisors in Government Primary Schools in Karachi, Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper explores the current practices of supervisors in Government Primary Schools in Karachi, Pakistan. Research participants included two supervisors, two head teachers and four primary school teachers. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, informal discussions, documents analysis. Findings suggest that since, the supervisors are not provided with the TORs by Education department their practices are influenced by the way they are appointed and the ways they learn about their roles and responsibilities in the schools. Since supervisory practices are mostly hanging between supervision and monitoring, these neither fulfill the criteria of Supervision nor of Monitoring and Evaluation. Their routine work in schools is carried out through surprise visits. During those visits, they write visit notes in the visit logs maintained at schools. The language of these visit notes indicate that main concerns of the supervisors are dealing with the issues of teacher absenteeism and completion of courses. They seldom appear to be concerned with quality of teaching pedagogies in schools. Study concludes with recommendations for re-conceptualization of supervision as a moral practice. Other key recommendations focus professional development of supervisors, preparation of comprehensive TORs for supervisors and clustering primary schools with high schools, where supervisors can play the role of being liaison persons.

Keywords: Primary Education, Educational Supervision, Professional Development, Teacher Education

Introduction

Supervision, as found in literature, mostly written in the western world includes variety of responsibilities and functions from developing

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curriculum and organizing instruction, to evaluate instruction (Glickman, 1981). This paper attempts to understand the role of two supervisors in the two government primary schools in Karachi, Pakistan. Here, supervisors are mostly external inspectors known in the education department and schools as 'Supervisors' or Supervisors Primary Education (SPEs).

In the government primary schools in Karachi, the supervisor is a person who supervises from eight to twelve schools. Supervisors are senior teachers of high schools, who are given the responsibility of supervising primary schools. Their responsibilities include monitoring and evaluation of primary schools and collection of information from primary schools. Their monitoring and evaluation activities take place through surprise visits. In practice, they have two main responsibilities, (a) monitoring primary schools through occasional visits and (b) collecting information from schools.

In the contemporary age, as a result of changes that have taken place in the field of education and the concepts of transmission of knowledge to students being changed into facilitating students to constructing their own knowledge; the whole paradigm of teaching learning has considerably changed (Hsiao, 2006). Along with these changes the traditional practice of supervision (which is generally based on the practice of collecting data and rarely offering suggestions for improvement based on the data) has also become irrelevant. Bourke (2001) suggests that where teachers have made the transition to new ways of learning, "it makes little sense to have them supervised by people who cling to the old ways and still employ invalid criteria"(p.71).

Supervisors' role becomes more important against the reality, that in Pakistan and particularly in Karachi and interior Sindh, teachers are not appointed for primary schools because of their qualification for the job or their own interest. On the contrary, Smith et al., Ahmed and Ali (cited in Ali, 2000) have mentioned that appointments of teachers is a political process. Ali (2000) notes, "it is easy for politicians to oblige their voters by *arranging* teaching jobs for them" (p.178). In this situation, teachers would certainly be lacking in teaching skills and knowledge. Therefore, they would need more professional help from supervisors.

Moreover, literature on supervision in South Asia in general (Grauwe, 2000; Lamichhane et al, 1997) and particularly in Pakistan (Ali, 2000; Kazi, 1997; Khan, 2004), suggest that supervision has not been able to provide required support to the teachers. Furthermore, the supervisory practices in Pakistan, on the one hand, has not been studied in detail, while on the other, these practices are so multifarious that they encompass administrative, academic and coordination roles. This makes supervision of primary schools in Karachi and whole Pakistan an ambiguous one. It highlights the need of exploring supervisory practices. Exploring current practices of supervisors may also provide opportunity to look into the teachers' needs and their perceptions; regarding supervision. This may provide an informed basis for re-conceptualization of roles and responsibilities of supervisors. This re-conceptualization may envisage the idea of making supervisors active partners in teaching learning at primary schools, and then slowly scaffolding supervision to make it moral practice and supervisors as moral agents in future.

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and document analysis. The research participants included two supervisors, two head teachers of primary schools A and B and four teachers of same schools. Three interviews, followed by informal discussions, were conducted with each of two supervisors and two interviews with head teachers and teachers. The documents included two years visit notes of supervisors which they write in the visit logs maintained at schools.

Findings

Findings reveal that although there is an official criterion for the appointment of supervisors yet there are some other factors which influence the appointments of supervisors. As our main concern was to explore the current practices of supervisors according to what we believe and from what our experiences in government sector have been that the practices of supervisors are usually influenced by their qualifications. Therefore, it was important for me to know two things; a) what is the official criterion for appointment as a supervisor, and b) to what extent the criterion is followed.

Official Criteria

The only official document, which we accessed with concerted efforts about the qualifications of supervisor was an 'Information Booklet for

Primary Teachers, Head Teachers, Learning Coordinators, and Supervisors', published by the Bureau of Curriculum and Extension Wing Sindh, Jamshoro in 1999. This document enlists four qualifications for a supervisor; these are having a Master degree in education, expertise in communication skills, administrative abilities and flexible thinking, minimum five years experience of teaching primary classes.

Appointment of supervisor- existing practice

Saleem describes a story of becoming supervisor. According to Saleem, He has a friend who once asks his intention to become supervisor. With Saleem's inclination, his friend made him supervisor without his tilt and aptitude towards research. So Saleem became research supervisor just like a Muslim child becomes Muslim because he is born to Muslim family. So it is the wish of my friend to become a Supervisor and I became supervisor.

Thus Saleem became a supervisor because of his relationships with a person, who somehow could manage this kind of appointment in the education department. He shared that in many cases supervisors are also sent back to their previous jobs as high schools teachers, and this happens when the education department officers develop a personal grudge with any particular supervisor. A grudge might result from personal like dislike or difference of political affiliations.

Shan in informal discussion told how she became supervisor, In 1988, as soon as I was promoted to the post of a high school teacher from my previous job of being primary school teacher, my Sub-Divisional Education Officer did not allow me to go and work in a high school, but he asked me to work as supervisor. Then I started working as supervisor.

Apparently, Shan was fulfilling two out of the four already discussed qualifications, required for being appointed as Supervisor. However, the procedure of her appointment was not clear for me. In Shan's case, the influence of the SDEO seemed to manipulate the appointment of a supervisor.

Terms of Reference (TORs)

We entered into the field with an assumption that supervisors have their TOR as a guideline to fulfill their responsibilities. However, during

interviews and informal discussions with supervisors we were informed that at the time when a High School Teacher (HST) is appointed as a supervisor s/he is not given any terms of reference. As Shan explained,

When we (HSTs/Supervisors) were promoted as supervisors, at that time, we were given no instructions, but we were given a letter, which said: You are promoted as Supervisor Primary Education (SPE) and your post is in this area, just these lines.

Saleem also affirmed that they were given just a two-line letter upon their appointment as a supervisor. In this study, I came to know the ways through which they learn about their supervisory responsibilities, which are as follows.

Learning Through On-job Trainings

One source for supervisors to learn about their job responsibilities is the reading material that they are provided during different training programs. Shan informed that she learnt her responsibilities from a booklet that she was given during a training program. On request, she provided researchers a copy of that booklet. That booklet was not more than a few stapled pages, and in that there was only half a page, which contained seven brief points under the heading of 'duties and powers of a supervisor primary education'. These include, assisting SDEO, inspecting schools, paying surprise visits of schools, examining school records, assessing requirements of schools, paying special attention to rural schools and recommending teachers' transfers.

We accessed the remaining part of that so called booklet from a faculty at a university. This part of the document mentioned five other roles of supervisors along with the seven mentioned earlier on. These five roles are:

- Keeping close watch upon low performing schools
- See the condition of private schools and recommend their recognition by education department
- Recommending the SDEO to strike of the unserviceable items in his or her office
- To submit monthly and periodical returns of schools
- To perform other duties as may be assigned by Sub-division or District education Officers

Furthermore, this document mentions seven academic responsibilities of a supervisor, which are:

- Evaluation of the quality of the educational provision by checking the quality of teaching methodologies, assessment and record-keeping policies, consistency in children's achievements across and between the schools, evaluating school development, meetings with learning coordinators, teachers and head teachers organizing in-service education for learning coordinators
- Advising head teachers on the school management
- To ensure planning by teachers for effective delivery of curriculum
- To maintain accurate record of data regarding schools
- To inform sub-divisional education officer regarding shortages of those articles in schools which may affect the satisfactory delivery of curriculum
- Monitoring of the achievement of schools and provide feedback on it to Sub-divisional education officer
- To appraise learning coordinators

These multifarious administrative and academic responsibilities indicate that a supervisor is a very important official in the hierarchy of education and his or her work is tremendously important and teachers head teachers and ADOE work in consultation with supervisor. His/Her responsibilities include professional development of teachers, evaluation of their work, monitoring and evaluation of the achievements of schools.

The responsibilities of supervisors that this document suggests are different from those responsibilities which the Information Booklet for Primary Teachers, Head Teachers, Learning Coordinators, and Supervisors, published by Bureau of Curriculum and Extension Wing Sindh, Jamshoro (1999) mentions, thus the authenticity of sources of learning job responsibilities is also questionable. The question arises to what extent supervisors like Shan are informed regarding their responsibilities, and what may be its implications for profession and practice of supervision?

Learning Through B.Ed. Courses Texts

In his interview, Saleem revealed, "During our B.Ed. courses, we read in the texts of the courses about the responsibilities of supervisors, so on the basis of that information, we know what are our roles and

responsibilities” Whatever a supervisor learns in the texts of professional courses may be relevant, as it is procedural; but the manner in which one interprets those texts becomes very individualized, and translating those interpretations into practice, particularly when one is not provided with TOR, depends upon ones’ own understanding.

Learning through Apprenticeship

Formally, there is no such concept of apprenticeship for supervisors. However, it was a self-initiative from the supervisors that they intended to learn how to perform their roles and responsibilities. Saleem said, “I asked from senior supervisors, and then for some days, I went with a senior supervisor and started to practice what he used to do”

From such stories, we found that there is no uniform way for the supervisors to learn their roles and responsibilities, thus, their practices are being informed from different sources; consequently, the supervisory practices lack uniformity. Every supervisor works either according to his or her understanding of the job or according to the way he or she has learnt about her roles and responsibilities from any other source. As Shan said, “my way of work is my own; the others work as they find it suitable”. Saleem said, “I try to work as I learnt in B.Ed. and during my course of supervision in England”. Although our purpose of study was not to find or construct generalizations, taking into consideration the nature of a profession it was quite interesting to know how a profession may lack uniformity of practice. This trend may have serious repercussions for teaching/learning.

Supervision or Monitoring

If seen with precision, supervision stands as a support service, while the purpose of monitoring has dual objective, as simultaneously it stands for development and accountability as well. Moreover, in the case of primary schools in Karachi, supervision stands for both; support and monitoring. However, in practice, it appears that it does none of the above, as other findings indicate that it neither provides professional support to teachers nor serves the purpose of accountability and development. Both Shan and Saleem believe monitoring is the main purpose of supervision. According to her, supervision is an essential component of primary schools, because without it, schools cannot be monitored. She shared the concern:

How will our department know that our schools are working properly and our teachers are coming to school on time and they are leaving the school at proper time? All the information the government needs is sent by us supervisors, the government has no other way for monitoring the schools.

Along with believing that supervision stands for monitoring, she further considers that monitoring stands for collecting information and ensuring punctuality of teachers and school timings rather than monitoring for academic purposes or quality assurance. Thus, she also may hold a stereotype meaning of monitoring.

Saleem said, "The responsibilities of a supervisor first of all come from monitoring, which means to make teachers punctual".

Surprise Visits: A Classical Approach

Justifying the surprise visits Shan explained:

Informing them in advance results in them getting prepared for only that one day and shows us that this is the way we are working. However, surprise visit makes the entire story clear on the spot, that how the school is working, and how the teachers are teaching.

Warwick and Reimers's (1995) study, which they conducted in primary schools of Pakistan, support the claim made earlier:

External supervisors act as administrators rather than as managers or leaders. ... During their visits to schools they focus on classic questions of administration: Does the school have its own building? Are forms sent in on time? Are there enough teachers? Do the teachers and pupils attend school when they should? Does the school have adequate facilities and does its equipment have all of its parts? During their appearances at school they may observe classes and talk with teachers, but they do not have the time and inclination to be managers or leaders. (p.92)

Even after twelve years Warwick and Reimer's (1995) study, supervision still does not offer a viable leadership solution to the primary schools. Supervisors' main concern was to check the absenteeism of teachers, as Saleem's statement supports this view, "Supervisor checks the teachers' attendance register to see whether the teacher has come to the school or not. If a teacher is late, the supervisor notes it down and warns the teachers."

Focus of Surprise Visits

Teacher absenteeism seems the biggest focus of surprise visits as mentioned by supervisors as a concern. 28 visit notes were studied, two statements were found very common in the visit notes of supervisors; 'teachers were found present', and 'all teachers including head teacher were present'.

A visit note is most of the times a descriptive note, which informs how many teachers were present, on leave, or absent at the time of the visit of a supervisor. Some notes also indicate how much part of the syllabus has been completed at the time of the visit. Some other notes also disclose a given number of teachers, who have recently been transferred to or from a school. Although these transfers are not sanctioned by supervisors and are not under their jurisdiction, perhaps these records are maintained to check the teachers' apathy in attending the school and the constant absenteeism which is rampant in schools (Sindh Education Foundation, 2007).

Typical classroom observations

Classroom Observation was found as a main academic practice of supervisors, which also takes place during surprise visits, the way this observation takes place is a 'typical style', it is like having a bird's eye view of a classroom. To know about the process of this kind of observation, we asked Saleem if he or other supervisors use any tools, for example, a checklist or any other thing to focus on the observation, he said, "No-no, I mean there must be tools, but formally we check the way of teaching" Saleem justifies his practice of not using observation tools by relating it with lack of teacher's competencies to focus their teaching, he said; "No I don't use observation tools because our teachers are not aware of focusing on their classroom teaching".

For Shan, observation of the classroom teaching was, "I sit in the class and then I call the teacher in the staffroom or in office, in case of good performance, I appreciate the work or if there are mistakes or the teacher missed something, I tell her the correct way".

Teachers informed that classroom observations are very rare and if they take place, it is just for a minute or two or sometimes five minutes. Regarding providing feedback Nisha (pseudonym a teacher in school A) shared her experience with me "when the supervisor observed my class,

he wrote a note in the visit book, which she shared with me: [the note reads] “I observed the school. Discipline is good, classes are good, children and teachers were busy in teaching and learning”. These kinds of generalized statements are common in visit notes. For Nisha, whatever the supervisor noted in the visit book about her teaching failed to inform her anything about her teaching. In the same way in all the visit notes that were collected, anywhere any statement from supervisors that could be taken as constructive feedback for teachers on classroom observation was not found.

Information collection

Another practice of supervisors is collecting information from schools through Sindh Education Management and Information System (SEMIS) forms. This information consists of the number of Physical facilities available in school, Staff and their qualifications, enrolment of children, School Management Committee and school finances. These forms do not touch the ‘how’ question regarding the usage of those facilities. It seems that may be the purpose of this information collection is just to update the SEMIS quantitative database, which may be useful for the government officials when they sit in the meetings with donors, where they can share the figures and give the impression of themselves being highly concerned regarding meeting the objectives of Education For All (EFA) to the officials. However, the authenticity of this data which is sent through SEMIS form is questionable, because no system of validation of this data exists. Saleem shared, “even there are such schools, where teachers are posted and SEMIS forms are sent with data. The school record shows the student enrolment, but in reality not even a single child is attending such schools”. Shan initially denied existence of such schools, but on further probing, she accepted that certain schools of such kind exist, she stated, “that there are not more than one or two such schools, where there isn’t even a single child attending school”.

Discussion

After careful reading of the data and findings, we can precisely relate the ambiguity in the field of supervision and its role in schools, with the state of supervision of government primary schools in Karachi. Hence, same question that Glanz (1999) asked “can we expect a field to attain historical maturity when difficulties prevail in both defining the field’s parameters and role in schools?” (p. 100) is again relevant to the state of supervision in this context.

Furthermore, as findings suggest that supervisors are not given their terms of reference, therefore, it is their discretion how they practice supervision. Since their sources of professional knowledge are different, as we have discussed in the findings, that there is no uniform way of learning about their roles and responsibilities, and everyone does it as s/he likes.

Considering this situation of primary education in Pakistan, one should simply understand the dire need for change. However, the question arises who will initiate change? Are our supervisors in position and equipped with the required skills to initiate change? It is not that change is only required to be initiated, but Fullan (2001) attributes three phases to the process of change: first- initiation, second- implementation, and third- institutionalization.

Taking this situation of primary education into consideration, it appears that there is a dire need of taking quite drastic improvement initiative at the very grassroots level, which should include such kind of supervision which is an essential support service for the improvement of instruction in primary schools and is concerned about the student achievement, and which also is accountable. In addition, such improvement initiative should also envisage establishing a viable monitoring mechanism, which should work on the basis of some standards and professional ethics.

To conclude, the officials working in the public system of education at all levels from supervisors to policy-makers are required to understand that supervision stands for the “improvement of classroom practice, for the benefit of students, regardless of what else may be entitled” (Bolin & Panaritis, 1992, p.31). To achieve these objectives the supervisors must understand that “supervision is a process of engaging teachers in instructional dialogue for the purpose of improving teaching and increasing student achievement” (Sullivan & Glanz, 2005, p. 27). This becomes more pertinent when “teachers in many government primary schools in Pakistan are still struggling alone in their classrooms to cover content with large groups of learners with few textbooks or resources to help them” (Rizvi & Elliot, 2005, p. 36). This demands the re-conceptualization of supervision as a moral undertaking, as suggested by Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007):

If supervision is to be moral action, it must respect the moral integrity of the supervisor and the supervised. That is to say the exchange between the supervisor and the teacher must be trusting, open, and flexible to allow both persons to speak from their own sense of integrity and to encourage each person to respect the other's integrity. (p.68)

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