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RESEARCH PAPER

UNDERSTANDING THE HEADTEACHER'S ROLE IN PAKISTAN: A CASE STUDY

By

Muhammad Memon, Rana Nazir Ali, Tim Simkins and Viv Garrett



INTRODUCTION

Since 1970 some new policy initiatives have been taken to improve the quality of education in Pakistan. These initiatives include nationalization and denationalization of private schools, formation of school management committees, participation of community, restructuring the national curriculum, textbooks and teacher education programmes etc. initiated through a 'centre-periphery' approach underlying the 'top-down' model of change. Literature on school management and improvement reveals that the quality of education in any educational institution depends on the quality of its leader, hence educational leadership is of vital importance (Dalin, 1993). However, there is the presumption that, in many developing countries including Pakistan, the role of the headteacher is relatively insignificant (Simkins et al, 1995). This may be because of the bureaucratic system of education where all the policy decisions are taken at the top level without involving the headteachers. Thus, in the whole process of educational innovation, the headteachers as educational leaders have no say in the policy matters who are eventually responsible for the implementation of new policy initiatives. This may lead them to develop a sense of frustration. This indicates that particularly the government school headteachers simply operate at a fairly low level within a multi-layered organizational hierarchy; the

main levers of changes lie elsewhere. Dalin (1993) argues that the headteachers as educational leaders play a crucial role in the school as a social organization and in changing of its culture, hence the success or failure of any school is dependent on the headteachers' performance.

Selection of government school headteachers varies from one province to another, however, in Sindh province the selection of government school headteachers is done through two ways. Firstly, 75% headteachers are selected from among the working teachers on a seniority cum merit basis. Secondly, the remaining 25% are selected through direct recruitment by the Public Service Commission, although this is not a regular practice. As far as the selection of private school headteachers is concerned, it is mostly done on merit basis through a rigorous selection process. This seems an encouraging trend that might help develop a healthy school management system at least in the private schools. The government schools may benefit from this process in order to improve schools' performance. Literature on school improvement also suggests that school improvement requires effective management at the school level to grapple with the issue of quality in education, therefore, headteachers should receive a special attention of the government in order to strengthen their role in schools.

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Substantive studies have been conducted to understand the role of headteachers in the context of the western world but a little research has been undertaken in the context of developing countries generally and particularly in Pakistan. The present study may be one of the first attempts towards understanding the role of headteachers in Pakistan. This may be considered as a 'stepping stone' in the area of school management and leadership. This paper reports some of the outcomes of the study which was jointly conducted by the faculty of two universities i.e. Institute for Educational Development (IED), The Aga Khan University (AKU), Karachi and the Centre for Education Management and Administration (CEMA), Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), England under the Higher Education Link Programme funded by the British Council, Karachi. The primary purpose of the study was to develop an understanding of the role of headteachers in Pakistan and of the ways in which the role might vary across different school systems and contexts. It was also hoped that the outcomes of this study might help

policy markers in making informed decisions that might contribute to the change process at the school level. A further purpose was to explore the implications for school management training and leadership development that might also help to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of headteachers in Pakistan.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Before describing the study, it is important to establish the context in which it took place. The IED selects a group of working teachers from Pakistan, including the Northern Areas, and overseas countries (Bangladesh, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Tajikistan, Krygistan) in consultation with school management of co-operating schools, and provides them with a two year rigorous field-based reflective professional development programme in teacher education leading to an award of M.Ed. degree. The programme is embedded in the philosophy of 'critical inquiry' where teachers are encouraged to question and reflect on their daily planning, teaching and assessment practice and share their

reflections with their tutors and peers. In order to do this, they are required to select peers who can act as 'critical friends' to work with them. There is a general consensus among the course participants that this process has helped them to move away from the transmission mode of teaching to an inquiry-oriented mode and has further helped them to begin to develop a collaborative culture in their schools. Apart from this, the programme is dedicated to the development of these teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, classroom organization and management skills, unit/lesson planning, problem solving skills, mentoring, action research and mentoring skills in the context of managing educational change. After completion of their masters, they are expected to work as Professional Development Teachers (PDTs) with their colleagues in their respective schools. Another group of working teachers is provided with a separate subject-wise eight week in-service teacher education programme for both primary and secondary education where they acquire relevant knowledge, skills and competence. This programme is called a Visiting Teacher (VT) Programme. Both programmes blend theory and practice and are embedded in the philosophy of reflective and critical inquiry. The overall aim of the programme is to develop a critical mass of teachers who can work as catalysts and change agents so that the multiplier effect in their schools can be established.

It was decided to focus this study initially on six secondary schools (three government and three private schools) in Karachi. The schools were selected on the basis that:

- a) they were already working with the IED, AKU, Karachi on the school improvement agenda and were therefore identified as IED's 'co-operating schools'
- b) the local researchers had good working relationships with these heads and their school management system; and
- c) the headteachers and their management systems voluntarily offered their participation in the study.

We were cognizant of the fact that, due to the small size of our sample and the lack of representativeness

of schools in the study, we cannot generalize the findings in the context of Pakistan nor any other developing country. On the other hand the small size of the sample is legitimate in such an ethnographic study and allowed us to focus on understanding the perspective of the headteachers in relation to their job demands, constraints and choices and how they manage their schools. In spite of already having easy access to visit the identified schools, we decided to go through formal procedures for seeking permission from the concerned management system to conduct this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

We are convinced by Ribbins (1994) that headteachers' management practices and actions need to be understood in their specific context, otherwise legitimate conclusions cannot be drawn. The headteachers work in schools as social organizations where they deal with the different aspirations, expectations, attitudes and behaviours of those who serve as stakeholders and who may influence their daily management practice. The main assumption of this research is that the nature of the headteachers' role varies across the school systems and contexts in Pakistan and has its own impact on school management practice. This study is an attempt towards understanding the ways in which both systems and contexts may differ and how heads operate in the given scenarios. We were initially guided by Stewart's (1982) work that managers' (headteachers') roles can be defined in terms of the following three variables:

- i) demands: what anyone in the job has to do;
- ii) constraints: the internal or external factors to the organization that limit what the job holder can do;
- iii) choices: the activities that the job holder can but does not have to do.

As mentioned above, the expectations of the role set or stakeholders influence the headteachers' managerial behaviour, practice and style, moreover, it will also depend upon the managers' perceptions about their role. It might be argued here that all demands and constraints

determine the actions of the headteachers as managers and are filtered through the perceptions of the individuals. However, within a similar context, some headteachers as managers might pay more attention to formal rules and rituals than others. In that case the area of choices available to managers then depends on the nature of the demands and constraints under which they operate; the managers' actions will be strongly influenced by their perceptions of these things. The greater the demands and constraints perceived by a manager, the smaller the area of choice. It is pertinent to explore the choices available to headteachers in a particular school at a particular time. To do this, it is also necessary to explore how headteachers perceive the demands and constraints upon them and the implications of these perceptions for the actions they choose to take. This study addresses the following research questions:

- i) What factors in their context and system do headteachers see as significant sources of demands and constraints and why?
- ii) What kinds of actions do the headteachers feel are required of them as a result of the demands and constraints as they see them?
- iii) How much freedom of action, in what areas, do the headteachers feel that they have, and how do they choose to use this?
- iv) Do the headteachers feel they can influence any of the demands and constraints and if so, how?

Such exploration would be necessary to explain why headteachers in similar situations may have very different perceptions of the pressures under which they operate and hence chose to enact their role in different ways. How far are headteachers in Pakistan able to express their individuality within their role? Do they express themselves mainly in terms of superficial matters such as appearance and personal style, or are they able to explore ways which impact significantly on the character of their schools?. In order to understand the headteachers' managerial actions, the following conceptual framework of the study was devel-

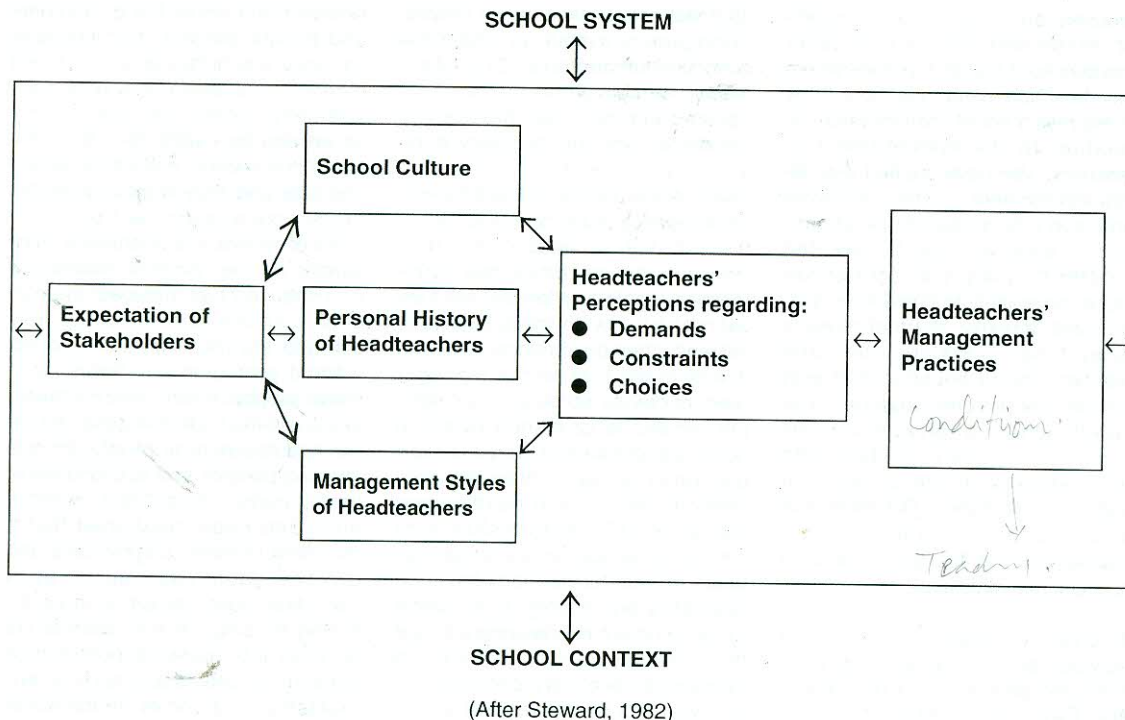
oped. This guided our actions while collecting, analyzing and interpreting data. (See Graph)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The nature of research usually dictates its methodology. The complexity of factors such as demands, constraints and choices which affect the performance of the headteachers cannot be understood without capturing the contextual reality which the headteachers face in their managerial practice. We are convinced by Ribbins (1994) and Ribbins and Marland (1995) that the accounts of headteachers need to be considered in their specific context in three ways. First, the views and actions of the headteachers must be examined across a representative range of issues and events to reflect the complexity of the worlds in which they work. Second, the views of significant others should be taken into account, not just those of the headteachers themselves, since roles are enacted within a context of interaction which generates a variety of perspectives. Third, the headteachers must be observed in action; we need to be at least as interested in what headteachers do as what they say they believe in or intend. There are a number of ways of researching the nature of management roles Mintzberg (1973) and Stewart (1988) which include:

- preliminary discourses and visits to the managers' work places.
- in-depth interviews with the managers
- interviews with members of the managers' role sets
- completion of diaries by the managers themselves at their work places
- observation of the managers at work
- post observation meetings for seeking further information.

It may be noted here that each method has its advantages and disadvantages, therefore, a triangulation approach was used to cross-check the required information in order to avoid any problems of reliability and validity. Our initial semi-



structured discussions with the managers and stakeholders helped us to establish a quick rapport with them and allowed them to raise as many questions as they desired before we conducted in-depth interviews. This also served as a familiarization process to the members of the research team from SHU who were relatively new to the Pakistani system and these particular schools. The following four questions formed the basis of the interviews:

- What kinds of things do managers do?
- How do they do them?
- Why do they do these things in these ways?
- What are the consequences of their actions?

1994; and Leithwood et al., 1994 have preferred to classify and categorize similar data which, in our view, forms a 'forced classification' that might not help us to highlight and portray the contextual reality of the headteachers' role. Therefore, we have deliberately avoided the classification of data, and have preferred to use a thematic approach to report the emerging issues.

We need to clarify the terminology we have used to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. In this paper, the term 'manager' is used for the headteacher; and 'governance' is used for the school management system. When we report the views and findings of 'government heads' and 'private heads', we refer to those in our sample only. The statements are not intended as a generalization across all government and private schools.

MANAGING CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Both government and private schools are subject to accountability through external management structures. However, the nature of the demands and constraints which are placed on the headteachers by the systems in which they operate is different. On the one hand, the government schools operate within the complex bureaucratic system that Handy (1993) calls a 'club culture'.

However it has been interesting to note that the headteachers tend to develop another culture which Handy labels a 'role culture' perhaps because of their manner of survival in the system. On the other hand, the non-government schools are responsible to either their boards of trustees or directors. Although the system varies from school to school, this seems very close to the 'person culture' or 'task oriented culture' as identified by Handy (1993). This was confirmed during a two day workshop on managing education change with twenty one headteachers in the private sector. In the 'task culture' the managers enjoy their freedom and work as a team and exhibit a joint responsibility whereas in the 'club' or 'role' culture the managers have to rely on the instructions of the school governance. Unlike the headteachers of private schools, the headteachers of government schools reported major constraints in the management of the curriculum and instruction. There seemed a general consensus among the government headteachers that they are not allowed to deviate from the prescribed curriculum. For example, one government school headteacher said that 'I consider myself only as a chowkidar' and 'I can't do any thing related to curriculum'. The government headteachers tended to have a shallow understanding of curriculum and instructional issues and they

seemed to be dependent on the government's prescribed curriculum embedded in the philosophy of official knowledge (Apple, 1982). The headteachers of the private schools tended to have a deeper understanding of the curricular issues; in spite of the pressure from the government side for the adoption of a national curriculum, they intelligently maneuver the national curriculum and enrich it as and when required.

Another example of the rule-bound nature of the government sector is the management of resources. The headteachers of government schools are given a small budget to buy science equipment and materials for which they need to have approval from the relevant education officers. They also have some funds collected through tuition fees etc. but they cannot utilize them without prior permission of the officers; this permission can take so long that the particular item loses its importance and necessity. As one of the government school headteachers said '(the funds) are difficult to spend on time because of a cumbersome procedure...'. In the private sector, however, the headteachers seem to have more freedom of choice. They feel able to spend up to a certain amount, and even if there is a need to seek permission, they do not foresee too many problems in it being granted. The private school heads feel free of the pressures of possible charges of mishandling of funds experienced by government heads who have to operate within the rules and regulations of their sector.

However, some variations in management practice were found within the same context. This indicates that, even in the same context, headteachers were operating in different ways because of their different perceptions of constraints, demands and choices.

Managing Teaching Quality

A common concern for all the heads we interviewed was the issue of teacher quality. It was noted that recruitment is managed in different ways: government headteachers do not have the choice of recruiting their own staff, whereas in the private schools, if a teacher leaves for some reason, recruitment becomes a major headache for the headteacher. It seems that both systems get inefficient or unmotivated teachers which seems a concern of head-

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Data gathered for this study has been analyzed in detail. But, here we intend to discuss some critical emerging issues that might help all of us to understand the contextual reality of the role of the headteacher in Pakistan. The remaining issues have been discussed elsewhere (see Simkins et al 1997). Many researchers including Dadey and Harber, 1991; Harber and Dadey, 1993; Chapman and Burchfield,

teachers everywhere. The private school headteachers thought that 'the quality is failing...the young generation is not committed'. Government heads felt that teachers were 'lazy and not dutiful'. One headteacher mentioned that 'I can't change teachers who are performing fairly poor' and, on the issue of control, another said, 'I sometimes issue warning, sometimes do checking, sometimes write to the school governance'. In contrast to this, the private schools, all of which claimed to have low teacher turnover, the emphasis was much on avoiding disciplinary action and using other strategies such as staff development to deal with the issue of teacher quality. Indeed all the private school heads in our study demonstrate a commitment to in-service education which was not nearly so apparent in any of the government schools.

Some similarities were found in the ways in which schools manage their teaching staff. All have supervisory processes which are centred around visits to classrooms and the process of checking copies. The government headteachers do these things themselves, the private school heads them to a greater or lesser degree. This raises another important difference between government and private schools. In the government system, teachers receive no extra payment and they do not seem to have much delegated power, although this issue needs further investigation. In contrast, all the private schools have organization structures which, although differing from school to school, all involve the explicit delegation of management tasks which is reflected in a formal salary differentiation in relation to the levels of responsibility.

There also seems to be a greater emphasis in private schools on facilitating teachers meetings, with teachers often using their personal time for meetings between teachers and between teachers and parents. Government schoolteachers, on the other hand, seem to be reluctant to give their personal time for meeting and school development planning. Finally, private schools are more likely to have developed a teacher appraisal system which generally goes beyond the basic core of class visitation and checking of copies and seems to be more rigorous than the generally discredited 'Annual Confidential Review' to which all civil servants including government

teachers are subject. Taken together, these dimensions of teacher management create a picture where private school heads are more likely to express a set of positive values in relation to the management of teachers: 'We have created a collegial atmosphere'. 'I delegate work and give it to those people whom I trust... what we have all decided together'. Images of control are much more likely to come from government schools: 'If I feel there is something lacking in the teacher...then I become strict with teacher not with the students'. The headteachers of private schools might use controlling methods with their teachers but we do not have sufficient information. But there was evidence that government headteachers do not attempt to establish collegial relationships.

A clear difference was found between power granted to government and private school headteachers. First, the headteachers are accountable to different people in the hierarchy. One government headteacher recognized that she may have influence over decisions which affect her school although the degree of this influence depends very much on the approach taken by the particular education officer to whom she relates. Second, it was clear from the interviews that the management of private schools tend to give their heads freedom in academic and curriculum matters, however, for policy matters they need to consult them. The private school heads have relatively easy access to their management systems whereas government heads have to go through bureaucratic channels. Third, headteachers of private schools have some freedom to hire or fire teachers and other staff, whereas government headteachers have to approach their superiors for hiring and firing the concerned staff. This shows that the headteachers in the government schools do not have delegated powers like their counterparts in the private sector. As one of the headteachers of a government school mentioned 'I've nothing to do with the appointment or termination of staff, sometimes I become worried about my job if the concerned officer is unhappy and I might be transferred'.

Managing Relationships with School Governance

As has already been stated, different

approaches are taken by the specific management system to whom the school is accountable. One headteacher of a government school recognized that she may have some influence over school policy decisions which affect her school, although the degree of this influence depends very much on the extent of the choice available to her. However, the remaining two headteachers (male and female) felt they did not have any choice to be able to influence their governance. Although it was found that all the management of private schools in our sample tended to give their heads a good deal of freedom, they did exert pressures on such things as academic matters. Each headteacher manages the relationship with his/her governors in a unique way which reflects his/her personal characteristics and history. It is normal for government headteachers to feel they are required to be 'yes men': a perceived necessary condition for survival. One headteacher of a government school seemed reluctant to compromise on principles with his school governance, therefore he sees his relationships as one of constraints and potential conflicts. He mentioned that 'in our system the teachers are not fired; the headteacher is fired for everything'. Another headteacher seems primarily concerned with keeping the books straight because she is near retirement and any financial mismanagement could affect her pension: 'I see my role more as an accountant rather than administrator or academic'. It was found that the headteacher with a strong personality can challenge these constraints and take decisions in the interest of the school, for example, refusing to release a teacher or seeking teachers on detailment from other schools which are overstaffed. However the general perceptions of government heads are that they see their boss as an inspector, unfriendly and over critical. They generally feel that their managers are working against them rather than working with them whereas their counterparts in private school saw their boss as 'friendly', 'marvellous', 'understanding and supportive' who allowed them to enjoy their professional autonomy in their daily management practice.

Relationships with Parents-Community

The relationship of school headteachers with parents tended to vary

between and within the government and private schools. For example, the government headteachers found parents' involvement in school management matters as 'interruption' which can be exemplified from the quote 'the parents have their vested interests and they want to politicize the school environment and as a head of school it is eventually problematic for me'. Another headteacher mentioned that 'I respect the parents' opinions and views but they demand too much from the school without providing any financial or moral support which I and my teachers don't like'. On the other hand, the headteachers of private schools seemed positive and appreciative of their parents' interest and contribution. One head mentioned that 'I welcome parents' suggestions and involve them as much as I can...they have helped us in establishing a computer lab which is not an easy job...parents' contribution helps us to understand each others' problems...'. Another headteacher said that 'parents are our great asset, they guide us in many ways and they give us constructive feedback that help us to correct our way of actions... Our whole effort is aiming at for coming up to their expectations since they have chosen this school for their children in spite of going through the tough process of admission...'. The research conducted in this area shows that school performance has improved where parents have participated in the affairs of the school. Keeping in view the importance of the parents' participation, the Sindh Education Department has asked its schools to establish Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) in order to shoulder the responsibility of managing schools effectively. Although PTAs have now been established in each government school, headteachers have difficulty in finding parents who can serve as members since the majority of them are illiterate and work on a daily wage basis.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this paper, an attempt is made to share our perspective and understanding on the headteachers' role in Pakistan with the professionals, educational managers, leaders and policy makers who might benefit from it. As we mentioned earlier, this study does not intend to generalize the situation across Pakistan nor to recommend any radical changes in

the role of headteachers. The nature and small size of its sample means that it can only report the perceptions of those headteachers included in it. However, we found a great variation in the headteachers' role within and between the school systems and contexts. Within the government and private schools, every headteacher tends to behave in his/her own preferred way keeping in view his or her perceptions of the role.

We can conclude that there are some important differences among the school systems in their regulatory frameworks and these will undoubtedly have implications for the ways in which headteachers carry out their roles. These differences will influence the heads' perceptions of the demands and constraints under which they work. Although these regulatory frameworks impose particular demands and constraints, we have noted that headteachers are also limited by their perceptions of the expectations of others. Thus, the government headteachers felt they had no room for exercising their choices and initiating any personal plan because they had to be approved by their superiors. Dalin (1993) has rightly mentioned that school leaders in the government sector are acting as civil servants rather than as managers and they have difficulty in finding room for maneuver. On the other hand, the private school heads were encouraged by their governance to take a leading role as school managers and reported that their jobs sometimes became too challenging and demanding of their time. It can therefore be seen that while heads from the government sector feel limited in their areas of choice by perceived *constraints* imposed on them by their school management system, private school heads feel that the *demands* of their jobs may limit their choices.

These perceptions of constraints and demands, along with the regulatory frameworks of their governance, also have an effect on the managerial style of the headteachers. For example, there is a noticeable difference in the way government and private school heads manage teaching quality. The government heads do not go beyond the controlling mindset of checking copies and monitoring teachers' marking and adherence to the curriculum. The private school heads in our sample, however, showed that they were more pre-

pared to think beyond that traditional mindset and consider teachers' meetings and school development planning in a more collegial atmosphere. There was also evidence of the positive use of teacher appraisal.

One underlying factor, which was evident throughout our visits and interviews, was the lack of professional development opportunities for the headteachers, whether government or private. If we can accept that it is the heads who should serve as levers of change to improve the quality of education being offered, they need to develop their managerial and leadership qualities. The research findings suggest that the heads, particularly from the government schools, tend to be more involved in administration than academic or curriculum matters. The government and private school headteachers need to be able to balance their involvement in all areas and lead the way towards school improvement. That road to school improvement starts with the headteacher but is closely related to the professional development of all teachers. Once the headteacher has undergone a programme in management training and development, they will be better prepared to develop

their own resources for 'on-the-job' training for teachers in their schools. A field-based professional management and leadership training programme will expose them to knowledge and reflection about school improvement, enable them to understand the practical issues involved in improvement and change, and introduce them to strategies of effective management. We hope that will be the start of a widespread professional development programme for headteachers, which will benefit those from both government and private sectors, and lead to an improvement in the quality of education on offer.

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