Book Chapters

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Effective school leadership: Can it lead to quality education?

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of effective leaders in bringing about quality in teaching and learning in schools. It is based on my doctoral empirical research undertaken during 2000-2005 under the auspices of the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE/UT), Canada. My study explores the roles, beliefs and behaviors of three reputationally effective secondary school headteachers in Karachi, Pakistan, in three types of schools – government, community and independent, assuming that contextual factors will influence the nature of leadership.

The findings reveal that all three heads' beliefs and practices show similarity in a vision of providing quality education, balanced between Islamic teachings and values, and modern, secular content and skills. As managers and leaders, the heads focused on building an environment conducive to better teaching and learning, enabling teacher development, and fostering productive relations within and outside their schools. They differed, however, in their rationale, strategies and application of these strategies, due largely to differences in their personal histories, specific beliefs and values, and organizational settings.

Introduction

The importance of the role of headteachers in making schools better for teaching and learning has been fairly established by a wide array of studies all over the world. "Scratch the surface of an excellent school", say Leithwood and Riehl (2003), "and you are likely to find an excellent principal. Peer into a failing school, and you will find weak leadership" (p. 1). Reviewing the leadership literature, Barth (1990) sums up his conclusions in the dictum, "Show me a good school, and I'll show you a good principal" (p. 64).

Though scant, yet the school improvement literature in the developing world also suggests that the role of heads is significant in improving schools (Abdulalishoev, 2000; Bacchus, 2001; Simkins, T. Garrett, V. Memon, M,. & Nazirali, R., 1998; Memon, 2000; Halai, 2002; Shafa, 2003; Wheeler et al. 2001; Yusufi, 1998). Shafa's 2003 study in the context of developing countries (such as Pakistan)

argues that efforts to bring about a change in teaching practice are often stalled by a "lack of appreciation and commitment from the headteachers" (p. 14). My own experience of school improvement efforts at the Aga Khan University's Institute for Educational Development

(AKU-IED), supports the evidence that the role of school heads is important for any meaningful school improvement (Simkins, T., Charles, S., Memon, M., & Khaki, J. A., 2001).

This study is a step towards the direction of providing further insights to developing theories about headteachers' practices. This is critical because theories of leadership or models drawn from the industrialized societies cannot be automatically applied in developing countries, because of inherent differences in many factors, such as school management, administration practices, ideologies, curriculum orientations, and so on. Many of the researchers from the West warn against generalizing their findings to the contexts of the developing world (Bajunid, 1994; Berrel & Gloet, 1999; Chapman, 2002; Duke, 1991; Sapre, 2000).

My study, therefore, is an attempt to fill this gap by looking at school leadership in developing countries to help construct a robust knowledge-base, which would be utilized to improve both practices and policies regarding school leadership.

Methodology of the Study

This paper studied three head teachers from public, community and independent secondary schools in Karachi, who were reputed to be effective in the public's eye. The rationale was to gain deeper insights about the nature of these heads' roles; their beliefs and behaviors; as well as the factors that influence them. In order to explore these dimensions, multiple data sources were used, including interviews, observations and relevant documents. Three weeks were intensively spent with each school's head, as well as interacting with the school staff during the school year. Various occasions and events of the school life were also attended in order to obtain further data from multiple observations.

The study explored the headteachers' behaviors in their actual settings by observation, interviews and gathering data from other individuals, such as fellow teachers, students, parents, and school governing members. Individuals, like these heads, can hardly be studied without looking at their relationship with those who work with them. The study therefore, attempted not only to understand the heads, but also some of the "significant others" (teachers,

students and officials). Data was also gathered from other sources, including school records, heads' reflective journals, and other documents, which provided insights about the beliefs and behaviors of the heads under study.

Before discussing the findings, a brief description is given of the heads and their schools, in order to provide a sense of context.

Research Participants and the Context

The study selected one school head, named in the study as Naz Sahib, from a government secondary school. The school had a population of around 490 students and around 35 teachers. Naz Sahib had served this school for three years at the start of the study. This was his first tenure as a secondary school head. His career spanned over three decades serving different schools and different positions. He was also serving as an Assistant Sub Divisional Education Officer (SDEO), in the Department of Education. Being an SDEO, he looks after around 80 primary schools, as the chief of several supervisors in a single school district in Karachi. He had been appointed by the Education Department in the school, as he was seen as a "tough person" to handle the socio-political issues of the area within which the school is situated. The staff reported that the said is regarded as a "top" school in the Karachi Central District.

The other headteacher, named in the study as "Fatima Apa", served an English medium community school, comprising of three major branches of schools, having around 1680 students and 108 teachers altogether. The school is part of a larger chain of schools run by the community. When the study was started with her, she was promoted to become the head of the entire school network, having previously served in the Boys' Branch for around 10 years as its founder-head.

The third research participant is named "Khadija Apa", serving what is described as a "New Age School". The name of the school represents the spirit of the school which is meant for the coming generations. Khadija Apa comes from a military and religious background (her father served in the Pakistan army). She studied medicine and worked as a doctor for some time overseas. Due to some critical incident, Khadija Apa's family decided to come back to Pakistan and establish a school to teach "Islamic values". In 1990, she established her own "value-based school", the New Age School, with the vision of providing "quality education through academic excellence based on values resulting in leadership qualities" by creating "a happy place to learn".

Thus, the research participants came from different backgrounds in terms of their family, schooling, and training. Their schools also differed largely in terms of student intake, their orientation and emphasis in their curriculum.

We now move on to the findings and their analysis, in terms of what was common and what was different among the three heads. The thematic analysis has led to the categorization of the findings under five major headings which are briefly discussed below.

Key Findings and Discussion

In the beginning of the study, the question was raised: What are the prevailing roles, beliefs and behaviors of effective headteachers in government and private urban secondary schools in Karachi, Pakistan? This question assumed that successful and effective head teachers play roles in entertaining beliefs and exhibiting behaviors that tend to make them "different" from many a "typical" head teacher. This assumption led to two more questions: What are the socio-cultural factors that inform and/or influence heads' beliefs and behaviors? How do the key stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, parents and school-related district officials/governors) view effective headteachers?

To investigate these questions, the study explored the beliefs and behaviors of three reputedly "effective" heads in Karachi in three types of schools (public, community and independent). The three heads for the study were selected on the basis of their reputed "effectiveness", generally because their schools achieved high pass rates in the Matriculation Board and O levels exams, and the already mentioned fact that the said heads were reputed to be highly "effective" by various stakeholders.

The findings regarding the three heads' roles, beliefs, behaviors, and influencing factors in the three different types of schools in Pakistan, reflect many commonalties and individualities. The comparative analysis of the data led to five key findings about the roles, beliefs and behaviors that the three heads have in common:

1. Having a passionate vision to develop their schools;

2. Making efforts to balance religious and secular education, leading to a prophetic professional role;

3. Developing their schools as conducive places for teaching and learning;

4. Developing teachers as part of school development and delegating responsibilities to them to help encourage leadership; and

5. Fostering collaborative relations within and productive relations outside their schools.

These five major areas of effectiveness are briefly explained below:

A Passionate Vision to Develop Schools

All three heads – Naz Sahib, Fatima Apa and Khadija Apa – have some common and some differing visions for their schools.

All three heads' visions focus on developing students as moral beings while providing them with good secular education, through building their schools as enabling places of teaching and learning, and achieving success by creating teacher leadership. However, they differ in their rationale, strategies and aims for achieving their visions.

Naz Sahib has a vision of learning that makes sure his students develop morally and achieve a high pass rate in the Board exams, creating many successors and improving his school's conditions. He has focused on these priorities since he joined Gharibnawaz School. He has a relatively stronger sense of performance-efficacy than his peer public school heads, believing that he can make a difference in his students' lives. He thinks that all his students should and can succeed and go to the next stage of their education. He also emphasizes character building by providing many extra-curricular and curricular activities, meant to engender Islamic religio-moral qualities. He also struggles to make a difference by improving the school environment physically and socially so that teachers can teach and students can learn in a proper atmosphere.

Fatima Apa's vision centers on her belief in creating, in her words, a "leader-full" school, and her desire to develop students faithful to their "Jamat" yet capable of living in the modern world with skills such as English language, critical thinking and computer literacy. She is optimistic that she would be able to achieve her vision within a couple of years through her teacher-education programs within and outside the school. Fatima Apa is struggling on two fronts: First, she is trying to develop teacher leadership by giving the teachers her personal encouragement, appreciating their work and providing leadership opportunities; secondly, she struggles to convince the Board to raise the compensation package for teachers in order to retain the good teachers who otherwise would leave due to monetary dissatisfaction.

Khadija Apa's main vision rotates around the axis of Islamic-values-based education, coupled with the best possible secular education. She shares a strong desire with the other two heads, making sure her students achieve a very high pass rate in the final (O level) exams. Moreover, her vision is to develop students in such a way that they make a difference in the world. Her vision for her school is to develop it as a highly competitive organization underpinned by the religio-moral values, trying to balance the sacred and secular.

Balance Between Religious and Secular Education

All three heads are committed to providing a balanced and integrated religious and secular education, which the government and their stakeholders also expect. In actual practice, this means that all three schools emphasize moral and religious education besides secular subjects like Science and Math. All three heads encourage Islamic values and character building through curriculum as well as extra-curricular activities, though they relate to these values in different ways and to different degrees. These religious values include belief in one God, in God's communication to human beings through the channel of prophecy, in the Divine Books, in equality of humanity, in balance between reason and faith, in respect for human dignity, in moral virtues like respect for teachers and parents, in the Day of Judgment, and in the importance of prayer. These general, key concepts are explicitly or implicitly repeated in the curricular, extra-curricular and informal experiences, which all these secondary schools provide to their students. These values are explicitly emphasized in assemblies, Islamiat courses and texts, and heads' addresses given in their ceremonial capacities.

Fatima Apa is mindful of her community's values and traditions; she attempts to integrate and balance the community's traditions, general Islamic education and at another level, secular education. This integration takes place at two levels: curricular and the extra curricular. A substantial chunk of curricular lessons involve Islamic concepts, and examples, which are supplemented through extra-curricular experiences like celebrations of community's sacred historic personalities, festivals, and prayers. Khadija Apa's vision is particularly underlined by her desire to impart religious values and the purpose of life to her students and stakeholders. She does this by trying to create a balance between Islamic teachings and modern, Western secular subjects like computer skills, critical thinking and English language skills.

Developing Schools as Conducive Places for Teaching and Learning

Although their school contexts differ in their school structures and cultures, all three heads focus on creating enabling environments for better teaching and learning. Naz Sahib, despite limited resources, struggles to provide a decent environment for his teachers and students by providing basic physical facilities.

On the other hand, many public and private school heads would envy the resources that both Fatima Apa's and Khadija Apa's schools provide, with their modern computers, libraries and other well-structured facilities. These heads focus on maintaining, upgrading and adjusting their facilities as new needs arise and as their priorities change with time.

Fatima Apa's Board primarily ensures structural adjustments like maintaining the buildings, but she looks after the existing facilities, adjusting them to her teachers' and students' needs. She also adds or builds on the existing facilities; for instance, adding teaching material in the classrooms, buying audio-visual materials, adding curricular materials, restructuring her office or re-designing spaces like the Social Area.

Khadija Apa has to think about the whole structure of buildings, facilities and resources as the owner of the school. She has a custom-made school building and keeps on adding or improving facilities, for example, building or expanding library facilities or computer rooms.

Though differing in emphasis, all three heads focus their attention on their schools' environments in order to ensure that their schools are safe and socially conducive places for teaching and learning.

These measures tend to add to the attraction and reputation of their schools.

Developing Teachers and Delegating Responsibilities

Teacher development to encourage teacher leadership is common to all three heads, though with different aims and priorities. Fatima Apa and Khadija Apa have more or less the same goal: to develop teachers professionally, as part of their organizational philosophy; they equate teacher development with school development.

Both encourage teachers to engage in inside- and outside-school professional development, for which they provide support by giving them leaves or letting

them use their school time to attend courses. Both heads themselves also attend professional development programs in order to develop themselves, as well as to provide an example for their teachers.

Naz Sahib faces a different situation: his District Office selects teachers for professional development courses. As a result, he focuses on teacher development through assigning school responsibilities within the school through committees to create what he calls his "successors". He argues that he wishes to develop teachers in such a way that even if he were to be removed from the school, his school improvement efforts would not be undone and that no vacuum would be created in his school after his departure.

All three heads delegate various levels of responsibilities to their teachers for different purposes. While Naz Sahib delegates partly to create his successors, and partly to help the school run smoothly, particularly in his absence.

Fatima Apa and Khadija Apa delegate because they need support to manage their large schools, and also because they want to develop their teachers' leadership abilities. Fatima Apa wants to create a "leader-full" school.

Khadija Apa wants her teachers to provide an example of Islamic values and to simultaneously provide quality education. The essence of all the three heads' intention is to develop their teachers in making their schools as effective as possible.

Fostering Relations Within and Outside School

All three heads share the idea of building relations inside and outside the school, but their methods differ. They try to develop collegial and collaborative relationships among their staff by appointing committees, groups and teams for different purposes. Naz Sahib has constituted many committees like the Discipline Committee and the Literary Committee.

These work informally and usually meet when the need arises. Fatima Apa and Khadija Apa also appoint committees and societies to work, but on an ongoing basis and not just sporadically as in Naz Sahib's case. Their committees work mostly on curricular, pedagogical and other extra-curricular activities to design and implement changes.

In all three schools, teachers have varying levels of collegiality and collaboration. While Khadija Apa's school leads in this respect; Fatima Apa falls in the middle, and Naz Sahib at the other end of the spectrum. These variances stem largely

from the nature of the curricular approaches and the pedagogical perspectives adopted for implementing the curriculum.

All in all, the findings show that the heads focus on five key areas: vision building, teacher development, providing an enabling school environment and emphasis on relations building; along with a balanced education both inside and outside school.

These are the major key areas these heads focus on. They have some common strategies for fulfilling these objectives, yet they take different approaches, largely due to their organizational needs and their own approaches to school development.

Conclusion

If leadership is about leading people to goal fulfillment, these heads do just that. All three heads - Naz Sahib, Fatima Apa and Khadija Apa – strive to invest their lives into making the world of the young a little better or happier. They want to give their students something to stand on in life, whether a good career (Naz Sahib), life skills with tools of communication (Fatima Apa) or a bedrock of values (Khadija Apa).

These heads lead their schools with a singularity of mind, a totality of heart, and a missionary spirit. They have made their schools a success story in a difficult world. Each head tells us a unique story of struggle and leadership. They tell us that a high vision can motivate people to accomplish things generally seen as difficult. Naz Sahib makes a difference in his school, despite the stereotype of public school heads as mere administrators.

Fatima Apa shows that a head can lead a community by providing committed leadership to its schools. Khadija Apa demonstrates the importance of seeing dreams and working towards them. The commitment of all three heads to their individual beliefs and their missionary spirit to serve their communities as prophetic professionals in a country, which desperately needs such dedication, teaches us a lot.

All three heads have shown that struggle gives meaning to life and that success can eventually come, if struggle is authentic, honest, and persistent. Their efforts to raise the quality of education through their preferred roles and practices are a lesson to learn for many headteachers and teachers who are striving to do the same.

Future Research

The heads with whom we worked have strong ideas about Islam and Islamic values, which guide their notions of management and leadership. Future studies could focus on this area and investigate in depth how the heads see the role of religion in their management practices in many ways.

The consequences of heads' actions on students' learning and on teacher motivation offer a second area of exploration; it has to be remembered that influences on, not of, the heads' beliefs and behaviours were explored in this paper.

Third, as this study is limited in scope, future studies need to examine how a larger sample of heads manage and lead their schools, in order to be able to generalize the conclusions of this study and at the same time develop a larger knowledge base on school leadership in Pakistan.

The exploration of the role of the assistant heads or vice-principals affords yet another area of study. These middle-level managers play, after the heads, a major role in all three schools that were studied. Sandwiched between the heads and the teachers, they play a major bridging role between the two power bases. Exploration of their management practices may be a rewarding exercise.

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