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Effective head teachers of early years in Pakistan: An exploratory study

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*Qamar Safdar

Abstract

Effective head teachers of Early Years play an important role in the overall development of children (2+ to 8 years) and lead towards sustainable changes in school organizations. The present paper is based on a study on effective leadership. What emerged from this study was the discovery of ‘moral leadership’ as appropriate for Early Years and the importance of ‘networking’ among schools. The study suggests that shared vision, trust, commitment and collaboration play a crucial part in making the head teachers’ role effective in the Early Years.

Introduction

Effective leadership has played a vital role in school improvement (Ofsted Report, 2004). According to Stipek and Ogana (2000) children who attend higher quality early childhood centers show better academic outcomes, more positive student-teacher relationships, better behavior and better social skills. According to Muijs et al. (2004), “Whatever else is disputed the contribution of leadership to improving organizational performance, raising achievement remains unequivocal” (p.156).

Recent research studies have shown a strong correlation between effective leadership and children’s overall social, moral and academic development (Hayden, 1997; Rodd, 1997) However studies in Victoria (Australia) found that Early Childhood (EC) leaders had a narrow view of their role, focusing mainly on direct interaction with children and were uncomfortable with their leadership role (Rodd, 1996). Memon (2000) states, “Headteachers tend to work as administrators rather than educational leaders because of the increased demands of education reforms” (p.7). In contrast Fullan (1995) states, “Over the last decade, research has progressed from examining the principal’s role in implementing specific innovations to her/his role in changing the very culture of the school” (p.153).

Background: Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Pakistan

The role of the head teacher as an education leader in Pakistan is not yet properly recognized in the school effectiveness and improvement process (Memon, 1998). In the Education Sector Reforms (2000-10), the Government of Pakistan has given attention to Early Childhood Education (ECE) including opening of ‘katchi’ (meaning, ‘raw’ and refers to pre Nursery) classes, providing a choice in books,

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having proper teacher allocation and dispensing a type of training to both the teachers and assistants with a specified budget. But nowhere is the head teacher mentioned or taken into consideration. It is an important omission in the Education Sector Reforms (2000-10) that even in the revised planning policy there is no provision or attention to leadership of Early Years as evidenced in the budget table (see Table 1).

Table 1. Budget for Early Childhood Education Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Total in Mill.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s Salary</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>Rs. 2,500</td>
<td>36 months</td>
<td>90.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Assistants</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>Rs. 700</td>
<td>36 months</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture</td>
<td>1,000 schools</td>
<td>Rs. 10,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play Equipment</td>
<td>1,000 schools</td>
<td>Rs. 10,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books &amp; EC materials</td>
<td>1,000 schools</td>
<td>Rs. 10,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual education material support</td>
<td>1,000 schools</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>149.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Education Sector Reforms 2000-10

The omission of leadership is even more serious when we consider the need for change and improvement in the Early Childhood (EC) sector. Rodd (1999) points out:

While change has been recognized as a hallmark of the professional for sometime, scant attention has been paid to the concept of leadership which is a necessary condition for effective change. Yet when the problems associated with rapid changes in the early childhood field are examined little reference is made by early childhood professionals to the absence of leadership within the profession that could facilitate the gradual and systematic implementation of appropriate changes. (p.XVI)

In Pakistan, children start their schooling at the age of two to three years in Pre-Nursery and it can be a traumatic event for them. For instance, parents are not allowed to stay with their wards on the first day of schooling, leaving the children traumatized with their first encounter of school. This has a lasting impression on their young minds and as a result they may remain shy, afraid and hesitant throughout their lives (Nash, 1997).

Over the past four years, there have been major changes in the provision and delivery of services in early childhood areas in Pakistan. In agreement with the Dakar Framework of Action (2000) to which Pakistan is a signatory, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has prepared a National Plan of Action (NPA) for Education for All (EFA) 2000-15. This was presented at the Ministerial meeting in Beijing in 2001(Shakil, 2002). Of the six Education for All (EFA) goals, the first is a
commitment to expand facilities for pre-school and preparatory or early childhood care and education. Pakistan is also a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Unfortunately, following the adoption of these important international declarations and frameworks, early childhood development has still not received the support needed in concrete terms in most national development plans and processes in Pakistan (Shakil, 2002). In the case of early childhood learning, the definition and scope of Early Childhood Education (ECE) is generally limited to the concept of ‘Katchi’ class in the school environment.

**Importance of Leadership in Early Childhood (EC)**

New scientists now believe that a young child’s brain needs serious types of stimulation to develop properly. Without that stimulation, certain types of learning would not be possible when the child enters school. Likewise, with appropriate stimulation, neutral pathways are developed that can enhance a child’s emotional, social and intellectual abilities. The more these neural connections are stimulated during this early window of opportunity, the stronger they become (Scott, 1998).

Children who attend programmes that meet high quality standards are more likely to receive the appropriate stimulation. Additionally children who receive warm and sensitive care are more likely to trust people, to enter school readily and to learn eagerly (Rodd, 1994). It is, therefore, important that everyone who has contact with infants and young children (0-8 years) including parents, caregivers, head teachers and teachers provide the children with a stimulating and caring environment in order to develop them to their full potential. The leadership style and performance of administrators of early childhood services will have an impact upon policy and practice and would determine the development and implementation of the innovative programmes (Jorde, Bloom & Sheeru, 1992).

Competent, committed and respected leadership was the main distinguishing factor between the most and least successful programmes of child care. According to Fullan, (2002), "Effective school leaders play a key role in large scale sustainable educational reform” (p.1).

**Purpose**

The purpose of my study was to explore the roles, beliefs and characteristics of effective leaders of Early Years and their influence on the overall development of children (2+ to 8 years). In Western literature, Early Years usually refers from 0 to 8 years (Rodd, 1994) whereas my research focuses from 2+ to 8 years. The reason for this is that in the culture of Pakistan and most developing countries, parents do not send their children to Day Care Centers from birth to three years. Although most mothers are in paid work, the child is looked after by the extended family, mostly grandparents, aunts and other close relatives. However, the trend is changing and now emphasis is gradually being given to the Early Years (Shakil, 2002).
Early Childhood Development (ECD) comprises all the essential support a young child needs to survive and thrive in life, as well as the support a family and community needs to promote children’s healthy development. My research in Early Years leadership was prompted by when Muijs et al.,(2004) when he says, “In terms of future research activity, it would seem both important and timely to explore what is meant by effective leadership in EC and by association, how leaders could be equipped to be more effective” (p.167).

**Limited Research on Early Years Leadership**

Although numerous research studies have been conducted on leadership in primary and secondary years, research on leadership of Early Years is limited (Muijs et al., 2004) and dominated by a relatively small number of researchers (Bloom, 1997; Rodd, 1996, 1997).

According to Rodd (1999), women dominate the field of leadership of Early Years and this is one explanation for the potential aversion to leadership which is often found in this field. He feels that women have a problem identifying with the concept of and need for leadership in the sector. It is further suggested that the leadership styles of women are very different from those being used by male leaders.

In this context my research, ‘Effective Leadership of Early Years in Pakistan: An Exploratory Study’ is, therefore, both early and late (Southworth, 2004; Daniel Muijs et al., 2004; Rodd, 1994). It is late because attention to leadership of Early Years is long overdue. It is early because it is perhaps one of the first research studies to focus on leadership of Early Years in Pakistan and consequently it marks a progress in our thinking and is a ray of hope for the children who are the future of Pakistan.

**Methods**

My main question was, “How does an effective head teacher of Early Years enact her/his role in the school”? My research was qualitative and in the interpretative paradigm. I used case study method and investigated through interviews and observation with different stakeholders. Robson (2002) points out that case study, due to its intensive nature, can only focus on a small number of cases.

I selected two private schools. The basis for my selection was that both these schools have given due importance to ECE and have developed ECE in their schools. Both head teachers were reputed by the community to be ‘effective’ head teachers of the Early Years (selection based on characteristics derived from Ofsted report and further adapted by the community). The basis for selecting two head teachers, six teachers, six parents and six students from two schools was to get a reasonable amount of data to inform my research.

Informed consent was obtained from the stakeholders involved in the research. Care was taken to protect the identity of the people involved including cultural sensitivity of the institution.
Characteristics of effective head teachers

According to Ofsted (2002) an effective head teacher of Early Years has the following characteristics:

- Has a vision
- Is well qualified
- Has expertise in Early Years
- Is a good communicator
- Strong desire to succeed
- Gives due importance to Early Years
- Listens patiently
- Is friendly & loving
- Is caring towards teachers, children & parents
- Has a positive attitude and approach
- Involves other stakeholders in decision-making
- Encourages professional growth
- Provides resources
- Sustains change
- Has a close relationship with parents
- Respects children’s rights

In order to develop a joint understanding of the characteristics expected of effective leaders of Early Years in Pakistan, I gave a list of the above characteristics to peers, parents and teachers. I requested them to identify and prioritize the ten most important characteristics they wish to see in their children’s head teacher. After conducting the activity, I got a list of the ten most important characteristics that were desirable in effective Early Years leaders in Pakistan. They are:

- Is well qualified
- Has an expertise in Early Years
- Is a good communicator
- Is caring towards teachers, children and parents
- Has a strong desire to succeed
- Has a positive attitude and approach
- Involves other stakeholders in decision-making
- Provides resources
- Sustains change

I further probed the few research studies on early year’s leadership of Bloom (2000) and Rodd (1998) in order to ascertain the characteristics highlighted in their research. According to Bloom (2000) the following characteristics were identified as key to being an effective leader in EC:
• Being patient warm and kind
• Being goal-oriented, using planning, assertiveness, vision, and confidence
• Having good working relationship with staff, who participate in leadership, and
• Being responsive to 'parent' needs and able to communicate with them

According to Rodd (1998, p. 3) the characteristics of effective leadership of Early Years are as follows:
• Provides vision and communicates
• Develops team culture
• Set goals and objectives
• Monitor and communicate achievement
• Facilitate and encourage the development of individuals.

With the above as characteristics needed in effective leadership of Early Years, I then explored the various leadership theories (Horner, 2003; Fiedler, 1967) to see which type of leadership suits the Early Years. Among the leadership theories, the approach that most closely resembles the characteristics highlighted in the Ofsted Report (2002), research studies of Bloom (2000) and Rodd (1998) is transformational leadership. It has similar characteristics.

The most fully developed model of transformational leadership in schools has been provided by Leithwood (1994). This model conceptualizes such leadership along seven dimensions: building school vision; establishing school goals; providing intellectual stimulations; offering individualized support; modeling best practices and important organizational values; demonstrating high performance expectations; creating a productive school culture and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions.

Dr. Shirley McClure in her keynote address to the School Years 2020 Conference at Colorado, USA, also advocates transformational leadership:

We need transformational leaders; leaders who call people to a higher level of morality and who understand the long term needs of society. We need leaders who are more courageous, who see themselves as change agents, who know what they believe in and who believe in people leaders who are life long learners themselves. (P.2)

After studying in detail the characteristics of effective ECE heads and other leadership theories I drew up a model of effective leadership of Early Years (see figure 1).
Fig 1: Conceptual Framework of Characteristics of Effective Leadership of Early Years

1. *Has a vision
2. *Is well qualified
3. *Has expertise in early years
4. *Is a good communicator
5. *Has a strong desire to succeed
6. *Gives due importance to early years
7. *Listens patiently
8. *Is Friendly & loving
9. *Caring towards teachers, children & parents
10. *Has positive attitude & approach
11. Involves other stakeholders *in decision making
12. Encourages professional *growth
13. *Provides resources
14. *Sustains change
15. *Has close relationship with parents
16. *Respects children's / Value

*Similar Characteristics

*Transformational Leadership

Building school’s vision & goals
Has high performance & expectation
Provides intellectual simulation
Helps in production of school culture
Offering individual support
Shares decision
Models best practices
Resources
Adapt change for the better
Relationships
Is organized & has moral values

1. *Vision & goal-oriented
2. *Is a clear Communicator
3. *Has expertise in early years
4. *Is a patient listener
5. *Is friendly & Loving
6. *Is caring towards stake holders
7. *Has good Rapport
8. *Has involvement
9. *Contributes Capacity Development
10. *Has Rich Resources
11. *Accepts Change
12. *Has close dealing with parents
13. *Has Values

Rodd (1999)
1. *Goal seeking
2. *Has Expertise in Early Years
3. *Is Good Communicator
4. *Is a Facilitator
5. *Encourages development
6. *Promotes team culture
7. *Has Empowerment
8. *Believes in Enhancement
9. *Is Enabling
10. *Plans for change
11. *Guides parents

Leithwood (1999)
1. *Setting directions
2. *Developing people
3. *Improving Organizational design
4. *Building relationship with the community

Muijs (2004)
1. *Vision building
2. *Has competent qualification
3. *Has Knowledge
4. *Is a good communicator
5. *Has Expertise
6. *Is a facilitator
7. *
My study focused on many of the characteristics included in the Figure 1 but not all. Keeping in mind the characteristics prevalent in many effective heads I have in my study developed a model (Figure 2) which serves as a guideline for my enquiry.

Fig 2: Template of Characteristics of Effective Head teachers of Early Years’ Leadership in Pakistan

Data Analysis
By keeping the research question in focus I was able to explore the characteristics and roles of effective head teachers of Early Years. The key findings were:
1. Context and Early Years leadership
2. Head teachers’ notions about Effective leaders of Early Years
3. Teachers’ perceptions about effective leaders of Early years
4. Interaction of head teacher and students of Early Years
5. Hindering and facilitating factors
Context and Early Years Leadership

From a Pakistani context, the image of an effective head that emerged for Ms. Alina (fictitious name) was that of a ‘transformational leader’ as emphasized by Leithwood (2000). In the case of Ms. Hafsa (fictitious name) what emerged was a ‘moral leader’ emphasizing values. Fullan (2005) advocates ‘moral Leadership’ that can bring about large scale improvement. This leadership has purely emerged from my studies as the effective leadership of Early Years.

I have also seen that many factors influence the characteristics and beliefs of head teachers. If Ms. Alina was practicing transformational leadership it was due to the factors influencing her behavior. Likewise was the case of Ms. Hafsa. Thus head’s effectiveness in Pakistan cannot be judged only on the basis of professional efficiency but also on the basis of their socio-religious factors, such as family roots, beliefs, behaviors and the type of institution as seen in the model I designed, (figure 1).

Family Background, Beliefs and Behaviors

The data reveal that the kind of leadership practiced to a large extent depends on the context, beliefs, behaviors and family background. In the case of Ms. Alina of Ali school, her school context was of an institution that was a hundred years old with emphasis on pedagogy and professional competence. Her family background revealed that she came from a literate family and her mother has been an inspiration and a role model for her. “A powerful influence in my life is my mother, who has always encouraged me to excel and to contribute to society.” Her leadership traits closely resemble transformational leadership as outlined by Leithwood (2000).

In the case of Ms. Hafsa, her school context was based on values and emphasis is given to Islamic values. She had a keen desire to live her life according to the injunctions of Islam and perceives them as necessary values to lead a fruitful life. At the same time, the emphasis was on professional excellence, importance of human relations and commitment to the Early Years. The data revealed that Ms. Hafsa practices moral leadership based on values and principles.

Head teachers’ Notions about Effective Leaders of Early Years

The data revealed that the head teachers have a fair understanding of the characteristics and the roles they enact as effective head teachers of Early Years. Both Ms. Hafsa and Ms. Alina hold strong views about an effective head’s characteristics and roles of Early Years. Ms. Alina sees effective leadership in terms of accepting change and implementing the school development plan. Whereas Ms. Hausa’s image of an effective leader of Early Years depended on values, beliefs, knowledge and accepting change.

The importance of developing close relations with parents especially in Early Years was highlighted in this study. It is also important that a head teacher gives decisive powers to teachers and builds trust, for children of Early Years are at a crucial stage of their lives. Most of all she/he must be an effective communicator and a patient listener in order to avoid conflicts.
Ms Hafsa’s vision rotates around the axis of Islamic values-based education. She has a strong desire to make her students excel. Moreover, her vision was to develop students in such a manner that they make a difference in the world. In her view quality provision will be underpinned by high moral Islamic values. She was constantly endeavoring to practice Islamic values in the school and community.

Ms. Alina’s vision was more secular, based on a symbiotic learning environment for students and teachers to nurture critical consciousness, intellectual competence and high moral values. Effective heads work to define a vision, to ensure it is appropriate for the school setting and to ensure that policies are congruent with it (Baskett & Miklos, 1992).

**Teachers’ Perceptions about Effective Head teachers of Early Years**
The data revealed that there was both harmony and discrepancy between the head teachers’ statements and teachers’ perceptions. The truth lies somewhere between. It does not mean that they have not contributed but the notion is, a head teacher should be aware of her/his attitude and approach to all stakeholders. There is no doubt that both the head teachers have been effective in providing a congenial atmosphere and promoting close school parent relationships as well as contributing towards the curriculum of Early Years. Simpkins et al., (1998) states that private heads tended to be more proactive in terms of their response to curriculum, management and stakeholders’ relations.

The data also revealed that head teacher Ms. Alina was at times too strict, to the extent that a teacher had to resign. In the case of Ms. Hafsa she could be too direct in her approach, hence de-motivating teachers. In this scenario, one cannot ignore the hierarchical influences and constraints of their respective systems. In Ms. Alina’s case, it was the context of a demanding management that contributed to her strictness with teachers. Such a situation makes a head teacher vulnerable while managing school affairs. The findings reveal that there are no structures or mechanisms installed to prevent head teachers from over-riding their authority. I endorse Khaki (2005) when he called Pakistani head teachers as ‘benevolent dictators’ who at times in their zeal for overall school improvement trample on teachers’ esteem.

**Interaction of Head teacher and Students of Early Years**
What is most significant is their attitude and approach to children. In the case of Ms. Alina she said, “Whenever I see a kid crying, I immediately pick him up and console her/him. Life is with kids otherwise it is very quiet. So in the case of Ms. Hafsa I noted in my field notes (November 15, 2005) that when I was walking with her to take a class observation, she noticed a child whose shoe laces were open and she tied them. Most of the researchers of Early Years leadership (Rodd, 1999; Pugh 2000) stress a loving attitude and caring approach towards children of Early Years as a prime attribute of effective Early Years leadership.
Regarding global changes in Early Years Ms. Alina was not only familiar with Children’s Rights but her teachers were also able to follow the rights of children in her respective school. Whereas Ms. Hafsa (although she was aware of the Rights of Children) did not familiarize her teachers as much as she promoted the rights of children as quoted in the sayings (Waheeduddin, 1960) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Leithwood et al. (2000) argue;

History has taught us …that the meaningfulness of each approach to leadership is significantly context dependent. Truly productive leadership depends not only on engaging in commonly held practices, it also depends on recognizing and responding to the unique challenges and features presented by particular type of organizational contexts.(p.23)

Hindering and Facilitating Factors
The facilitating factors according to the study are congenial atmosphere of belongingness that is evident in the staff of both the schools being treated as a family and their own close knit families. Close parental involvement was very evident and literature of Early Years does emphasize it (Pugh, 2002; Bloom, 2000; & Rodd, 1999). Both schools have ample resources. Among the hindering factors were conflicts among staff, lack of teacher commitment, teacher turnover and lack of training facilities of Early Years.

Contributions of the Study
This study contributes to the literature on effective heads of Early Years particularly in the developing countries and more generally to the literature on leadership. It first informs policy and highlights the importance of effective head teachers of Early Years in Pakistan. According to the Education Sector Reforms (2000-05), in the revised policy, there is no mention of the head teacher to the extent that even in the budget there is no provision for a head teacher. It is my earnest desire that the government will rectify this glaring omission.

The importance of networking among schools was very evident from this research study. The data revealed that there are ‘pockets of excellence’ in both schools. In the case of one school there were successful practices, such as; the establishment of a day care center for employee teachers with babies, morning meetings, inviting mothers on the first day of school and in Ali School curriculum, Monitoring and Evaluating Cell and expertise in Early Years. Both these schools could have networked and mutually benefited each other. It is incredibly important in this field to make friends with those with whom one works.

The study enhances our understanding about school leaders in Pakistan in particular and in the developing countries in general. Very few studies in Pakistan have looked at leadership of Early Years. The characteristics of effective head teachers as seen in the data come very close to transformational leadership. Ms. Hafsa’s style of leadership was very close to moral leadership. Fullan (2005) advocates moral
leadership as it can reinvent the principalship and bring about large-scale improvement

The data also reveal a strong need for specific training for leadership of Early Years. At present in Pakistan there are leadership courses offered by private institutions as well as at AKU-IED. According to this study, the training should also include themes such as expertise of Early Years Education, including neurological studies on the human brain and how it functions and develops, studies on child psychology, and close school parent partnership in order to succeed.

Conclusion

The characteristics of effective head teachers as seen in the data are generally consistent with transformational leadership. Even pedagogical leadership with its emphasis on overall development of students and teachers is also compatible. Muijs et al. (2004) argues for distributive leadership for it empowers all stakeholders as the effective leadership of Early Years. But what emerged from my study was ‘moral leadership’. Ms. Hafsa’s style of leadership was a form of ‘moral leadership’.

Overall effective head teachers of Early Years are those who enable others to become leaders in order to develop their ability and capacity. This will positively impact our children of Early Years, for it is these impressionable children who are the future of Pakistan.

REFERENCE


