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Managing School Success: A case study from Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: This article reports on case study research into the management of successful schools in a developing country, Pakistan. In Pakistan there are attempts being made to improve school education through decentralisation and involving school communities through School Management Committees. Whilst serious problems remain in the provision of quality school education, there are nevertheless, some successful schools and the research sought to identify three such schools and investigate how and to what extent the management of the schools was contributing to their success. In the article a case study of one of the schools is reported along with the findings from the cross case analysis of the three schools. The findings reveal that management strategies and techniques are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for school success. Perhaps just as important are the personal qualities of the person who is principal.

Introduction

The management of school education in Pakistan is undergoing significant change through decentralisation in recent years (Government of Pakistan, 2001a). In the context of a current three-year action plan, quality improvement is being achieved through the following plan:

Educational administration and management is devolved from the federal and provincial governments to the district governments. Much of the action concerning education is in the communities, tehsils and districts. Most educational planning and decision-making will now take place where the action is. Centralized systems and distanced planning will be replaced by governance which is people and learner-centred (Government of Pakistan, 2001b, 1V).

At this stage emphasis seems to be on community participation to improve schools with School Management Committees being created to secure more community involvement. This should make schools more responsive to the local community and eliminate top-down approaches thereby creating a broader base for decision-making (Memon, 2003). Whilst it appears that such reforms are taking place, there is little research evidence on the success of the changes and it is evident that significant problems of quality remain in the school education system in Pakistan.

The purpose of this research study was to identify 'successful schools' in various school education systems in Pakistan and reveal how and to what extent the devolved management practices of those schools is contributing to their success.

Context and Quality of School Education in Pakistan

Pakistan emerged as a nation on 14 August 1947 when British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan. It was a difficult birth and it was almost 10 years before the first constitution was agreed upon in 1956 when the nation became the Islamic Republic of Pakistan with a parliamentary form of government. Since then parliamentary democracy has been interrupted on a number of occasions by periods of military rule but it was most recently restored following elections in October 2002. With a current population of more than 140 million ethnically-diverse people, the provision of quality education has been, and continues to be, one of Pakistan's most pressing problems. Telling indications of this are an adult functional literacy rate of around 50%, a low school participation rate with some 6 million children not attending school and an unacceptably high drop-out rate. The situation is worse for girls than boys with a range of socio-cultural and economic factors in Pakistan causing a lower participation rate for girls; recent estimates are 55 percent for girls and 87 percent for boys (Farah & Bacchus, 1999).

Pakistan, like many other developing countries, faces crucial challenges with regard to quality of life. According to UNDP, Pakistan ranks 135 out of 174 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2000, p.149). This index measures dimensions such as life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate, combined primary and secondary enrolment ratio and per capita income. Perhaps the most crucial factor plaguing development is poverty. In Pakistan, one in every three families is poor (SPDC, 2000, p.30) and Pakistan ranks 68 out of 174 on the Human Poverty Index (UNDP, 2000, p.151).

These figures are a stark reminder of the extent of poverty in Pakistan, which is a significant cause of the crisis in both quantity and quality of education. In Pakistan there are some 43.5 million illiterate adults (15+), primary enrolment is 57%, secondary enrolment is 22% and higher education enrolment is just 1.9% (Hoodbhoy, 1998, p.2). That current (2003) public expenditure on education is only 2.2% of GDP (recently increased from 1.7%) seems to prove Hoodbhoy's point that "...education is not perceived as a vital, central need of Pakistani society, it is, therefore, not accorded the protection enjoyed by other [social] institutions" (1998, p.4).

The major problems with the quality of education are to be found in the government system that caters for four out of five children who attend school, but has been described as a 'failure' (Hoodbhoy, 1998, p.5). Furthermore, Hoodbhoy (1998) points out that "Pakistan's education system fails because, in its present form, it is simply not valuable or important enough to the society" (p.3). The argument is that the rich can afford the fees to send their children to private schools but few people care enough for the poor to be concerned about the quality of their education.

Besides lack of government funding, other factors contributing to 'failure' are: political and bureaucratic interference (e.g. staff transfers, lack of merit-based appointments, corruption in contract awarding); lack of accountability and sound management practices; lack of internationally comparative learning outcome standards (i.e. curriculum and assessment); and, lack of high quality teacher and staff training (Bregman & Mohammad, 1998, p.68). Indeed, Warwick and Reimers (1995) state that "Pakistan has one of Asia's worst systems of government-sponsored education ... (and) the government has been aware of the costs of low literacy and enrolment, but

it has provided neither the leadership nor the resources to deal with these issues” (p.1).

However, despite this grim picture there are some positive signs. This needs to be emphasised because, seemingly against all the odds, some schools have shown positive change and are perceived by their local communities as successful schools. For instance, in the “Roads to Success” research study, Farah et al., (1995) found that the successful schools differed from the control schools “most consistently in terms of school/classroom climate, teacher ownership/commitment and teacher mastery/competence” (p.8). They describe a successful school in these terms:

A task-oriented, orderly, and relaxed school/classroom climate prevails in the successful schools. They contain competent teachers who attend regularly and express ownership of and commitment to the school, are able to implement the curriculum completely and on time, and with concern for student learning. Parents (both fathers and mothers) become aware of these school characteristics through the attitudes and behaviour of their children (p.8).

Research Process

The focus of the study was on management practices and strategies in successful schools in Pakistan. Using an approach based on consensus of informed stakeholders, three schools regarded as ‘successful schools’ were selected for the study. However, due to space limitations, only one case, that of Mountain School (fictitious name), is reported here.

The research question was: “How and to what extent does the management of schools contribute to their success?” Two researchers spent almost a week at Mountain School. One researcher, the present author, was an Australian academic who had been working in Pakistan for 2 years at the time of the research after some 30 years of experience with schools and teaching educational leadership and management courses. The other researcher was a Pakistani teacher who spoke English and Urdu. Qualitative data were gathered from three sources:

- Interviews, some in Urdu, which were audio tape-recorded and later translated into English (where necessary) and transcribed.
- Observations; including general observations around the school and focused observations in classrooms.
- Documents; where documents were made available they were analysed for content relevant to the research.

Analysis of data was carried out using the NVIVO program. This program enables categories (or ‘nodes’) to be formed and the excerpts from the transcripts to be coded according to those nodes. Following the coding, a report was generated for each node and that enabled the case studies to be written.

Case Study: Mountain School

Mountain School is located in a rural town in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. It is a diverse Muslim community with various languages. The national language, Urdu, is spoken by most and

English by very few. Most of the adults in the community are illiterate and earn their living by farming and trading. Because it is near a larger city and on the Karakoram Highway (old Silk Route) it is a lively centre for business and trading from China.

Mountain School is a girls' school of the Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKES, P). It was established in 1953 as a co-educational primary school up to class 3 and it grew year by year until it was upgraded to middle level in 1973. In 1982 the present building was occupied and in 1989 it was established as a high school with a single stream of Arts. From 1992 significant improvements were made through the work of a former principal; a School Management Committee was formed, a Science Stream was introduced, additional land was purchased and an examination hall and library were built. The school became very popular and student numbers grew to 720. This growth made the school over-crowded.

In 1995, it was changed to a girls' only school to relieve the over-population and a separate boys' school was established. Additionally, at that time some other schools were established in the town which meant that some students moved. For these reasons the student numbers dropped quite considerably and the school fell into a state of disrepair until the present Principal arrived in 2001.

The material conditions

Substantial improvement has occurred in the physical conditions of the school over the past 2-3 years through the influence of the present Principal. A boundary wall has been constructed, grounds have been planted with grass (previously bare and dusty earth) and interiors have been painted and cleaned up. The Principal's office has been extended and improved, the staffroom has been relocated and refurnished and the examination hall has been made into a multi-purpose facility. Classrooms have been cleaned and moveable furniture has been installed to allow for group work. Classrooms are also nicely decorated with charts and students' work (also displayed in the Principal's office). However, the library is not in good condition and there is no computer laboratory (at one point the school had hired 12 computers but they were unable to maintain payment of the hire fee so the computers were returned). All subjects have a textbook provided which also forms the syllabus for the teachers to follow. Not much other reading material is available due to lack of a proper library.

The teaching and learning conditions

The school has classes from Nursery to class 10 with 408 students and 21 teachers. Learning time is 8am to 1:30pm with one break of 30 minutes. The workload of teachers is 5-6 periods of 35 minutes per day; real teaching time is about 30 minutes per period. Teachers also take remedial classes in vacations (summer and winter vacations are 1.5 months each) and some teachers are at school on Sundays to take extra classes of students who volunteer to come to school on a weekend. All classes are mixed ability groups and class sizes are relatively small compared with most other schools in Pakistan (where classes can be 40 plus). This can be attributed to the fact that there are many AKES,P schools in Northern Areas and this school is for girls only.

Three 35minute periods were observed by the two researchers together in different classrooms with different teachers (one English and two Maths classes were observed). Time was efficiently used with classes starting and ending on time (a bell was rung to indicate this). In all three classes the teaching style was interactive and student-centred. Two of the classes were arranged in groups

and used cooperative learning strategies. The other class was arranged in a U shape (no class was in typical school rows which is also unusual for Pakistani schools).

The teachers were all friendly, polite and engaged students in a range of activities including group work. Teachers were well prepared, creative and they motivated students to participate in activities. They were all teaching for conceptual understanding where possible. In all cases it could be described as good teaching. Homework was set by all the teachers and there was constant checking of students' learning with positive feedback in all cases.

Some Aspects of School Management

The school has some autonomy in the area of financial management but not complete autonomy. The school has its own bank account which is a joint account of the School Management Committee (SMC) and the Principal. Recently the SMC consulted with government agencies and got about 35,000 rupees for school improvement. Community members also contributed to help the school.

The management of teachers is the responsibility of the Principal and there is an in-charge head assisting with this. Previously the in-charge was the head teacher of different schools so he was highly experienced. Preparing the timetable is an important aspect of teacher management and that is done with the teachers in the form of a workshop so everybody contributes to the decisions.

A number of aspects of daily management were mentioned by the Principal. First, for dealing with teacher absence one of the teachers has the responsibility to arrange alternate teachers for those classes. This can be quite difficult when the school is already short of teachers and often senior students are placed in charge of classes. Secondly, dealing with parents consumes a lot of time and the Principal does this himself and likes to be available all the time. When he is not teaching he likes to walk around the school rather than sitting in the office or classroom.

The Principal felt that the most difficult area of management was working with the senior teachers, because he found that to change their attitude was really hard: "those very senior teachers they are not that much energetic, not active to give extra time and normally they look at the watch and the time is over, they try to run" (Principal). The Principal indicated that the young teachers could be developed through strategies such as role modeling, workshops, giving them some feedback and taking them to other places for a visit. However, he found that it was much more difficult with the senior teachers because they have their existing notions and it is not an easy task to change them. "Even if I work as a role model, like if I was working physically, because they are younger they rushed and they helped me a lot, but the senior teachers didn't feel comfortable, they didn't want to work". One example the Principal gave was something he did when he first arrived at the school. He found that there was a lot of litter around the school and he decided that he would be a role model to encourage everyone to pick up papers. The senior teachers objected to this. They said, "that this is not your work, you should not do it. Even if I am picking up pieces of paper from the floor they said no this is not your job, tell somebody else to pick them up, you are the school head. So they have pre-existing notions and that's sometimes quite difficult" (Principal).

Parent/Community Involvement in School Management

There are four formal mechanisms for parent and community involvement in the school:

- School Management Committee (SMC)

- Parent-Teacher Association.
- Mothers' Mobilization Committee.
- Women's Organization of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program.

The most important of these is the SMC which represents the local community. There are 15 members (at present 11 males and 4 females), mostly parents of students from the school. Teachers from the school are not eligible for membership. Members are selected by the community on the basis of their role in community leadership. Members serve for one year and may be reappointed for up to three years.

They have a fixed monthly meeting but will sometimes meet more frequently if there is a need. The school Principal is the secretary and the chairperson is appointed from the members. The role of the SMC was described by the Principal: "they are mainly involved in maintenance of the buildings and to ensure good management practices in the school and they also help us in raising funds and getting teachers. If we are short of teachers then they appoint some community-based teachers and that also helps us a lot. At the moment we have two teachers appointed and paid by the SMC". The SMC female members usually contact the parents if any child is absent, irregular in attendance, not punctual or not paying fees on time. They visit those parents and ask the reasons and help to solve the problem. The SMC also has a role in checking punctuality and absenteeism of the teachers. They also check class test results and, if they find major discrepancies in students' results, they look for the reason behind this. Such matters are discussed in SMC meetings and then the SMC members talk to the individual teachers if necessary.

The real influence of the SMC and the present Principal may be seen in these comments from parent members of the SMC: "Before the students don't pay much attention on their studies and they were dull but now they are very active and pay attention to their studies. If you want to see the difference, just compare the present result and the result before 5 years and you will see a major difference between them" (Parent).

These changes and innovations are just because of the efforts of the Principal, whether it is physical changes or academic changes. Even he solved the problem of teachers' absenteeism. He hired 3 to 4 substitute teachers on a voluntarily basis and he also hired community-based teachers; they work on substitute if any teacher is absent. The school outlook is also changed now; before, the net on the windows was torn out, the glass of the windows was broken, the doors were broken, there was no boundary wall, the water of the rain fell from the roof. There was no ventilation system before. Here there is so much cold in winter and so much hot in summer and because of the unavailability of the ventilation system, in summer the students faint because of so much heat. But now everything is in order and repaired, the boundary wall and the footpaths were constructed, he also set skylights, he set ventilation system and exhaust in every class. These innovations and drastic changes are made just by the efforts of the Principal. If the head can't cooperate with us so SMC couldn't do all this alone (Parent).

The success of the school is attributed to the combined efforts of all participants working together: "The progress and development of the school is done by the efforts and understanding of all the people together. SMC, the school and the community people are all doing hard work and give their active participation, that's why the school is improving. We are also successful in motivating the community people and parents, so this all makes it a good school. And Inshallah it will develop more day by day..." (Parent).

Profile and Role of Principal

The Principal is a 34 year old male who has been head of this school for about three years. He is a local person having been a teacher at this school some years ago before doing his Masters degree in Teacher Education at The Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) in Karachi. For other professional qualifications he has done a Visiting Teacher Program at AKU-IED in 1996 and a Certificate in Educational Management Course. He has also attended different short-term training programs including one arranged and conducted by Phillips Academy, USA.

The Principal is highly motivated and satisfied with his job. Besides his good academic and professional qualifications, he also has excellent background experience for this position. Immediately prior to his appointment, he was working at the AKU-IED Professional Development Centre, Northern Areas as a Professional Development Teacher, where he had an opportunity to work in a number of different schools. From time to time he would visit the schools, sometimes twice a week. However, he was somewhat frustrated with that work. He commented: “When I was in one school for 2 days and when next time I was going there I couldn’t see any evidence of what I had done before. But here what is happening is different, if with the team we decide something to do, then I have an opportunity to follow up and to take it to certain stage and I can directly do something for the students”(Principal).

A lot of his job satisfaction comes from helping students and teachers to learn and change:

So specially when you visit, specially the lower class like class infant, class 1 and class 2 I think you will find a big difference compared to other schools. So what I see is that I want students to be very much confident, whatever they see, whatever they do, they should do with confidence but for that there is a lot to do to change. Teachers’ attitude needs to change as well, towards teaching and towards students because some of the teachers are teachers by chance, not by choice, so that’s why they take it really hard. Being a head teacher I was in a position to do a lot with those teachers and now our environment has been changed and students really love to come to school. So that’s why I am really happy and even I get recognition in the society. So they think that something has been changed in the school, they appreciate it and that also make lot of satisfaction (Principal).

When asked to name the most important role that he has in the school as the head teacher, he responded:

That is the team-building, that is to give respect to the teachers, to the people with whom you work. So sometimes I work as a team member and the teachers are the leaders where we have delegated tasks. So there I am a team member and one of the teachers is the head of that committee, so they don’t feel that I am the boss or I know everything but they feel comfortable working with me, that’s why they are ready to share everything.

Why is this a successful school?

The Principal was asked why he thinks the school is successful. He identified teamwork and cohesion amongst the staff, building trust and quality relationships, shared decision-making, empowerment and positive community involvement in the school as the major factors. He emphasised the school has adopted a slogan of, “We sink or swim together” as part of the school vision statement. This means there is a shared sense of responsibility and accountability for the

school and that everyone is expected to be a part of the team.

When asked what the school was like when he first took up the appointment of Principal and how it has improved, he mentioned four points. First, the environment: “the physical environment was not that much safe and that much appropriate, even there were different kinds of vehicles used to cross this area and even animals could be seen in the school premises”. Second, he referred to the teachers’ attitude to students: “most of the teachers strongly believed in harsh, physical punishment and there was a definition of discipline, that if there is pin-drop silence in the classroom it means it is a well disciplined classroom but we had some sessions of professional development where we discussed it and we tried to modify that definition”.

Third, he mentioned the staff room and staff room culture “that was also very much strange like the things which were displayed in the staff room were vividly showing an environment where teachers are not very careful about things, such as the bookshelves on the back side, there were books inside but they were full of dust and everything was just jumbled inside. Now fortunately you can’t see that sort of thing here”. Finally, he mentioned the aspirations of the students:

Students were not that much confident and I do remember when I asked the students ‘how many of you want to go to university’, they used to say ‘We are not those people who can go to the university’. This sort of remark they had about themselves, but now if you will say most of the students will raise their hands because encouragement has been given, the feeling has been given that you can also join universities, they are not for all special people, you are the ones who can go there, so this is what has been done.

To summarise this point the Principal said:

To make this a good school, first we focused on change in teacher’s attitude. Their attitude must be optimistic towards students and towards teaching and learning. Now they are looking at teaching and learning in a broader perspective, now they are not confined or limited to that industrial approach that we should get only good results but they are trying to develop students holistically. And another thing is that teachers are also concerned about their professional development and their academic enhancement and they are striving, struggling to better themselves. Also now parents are quite encouraged ... compared to our previous state we are now in quite a good position with parents now taking an interest, they are coming to school, they are not afraid to visit the school, they come and they sit in my office and they talk to me, they share their problems. And the students have developed confidence ... so that’s why I think that this can be considered as a remarkable school.

This view of the school is also shared by the SMC: “Yeah it is very good according to the past. Like in the past there was no involvement of community people as such. But now as you all see that the community people, the school, the staff, SMC, even the students, everyone is so involved and they participate in progressing the school day by day ...” (SMC member).

Characteristics of Management in Successful Schools

A cross-case analysis was carried out on the study of Mountain School and the two other case studies. The analysis revealed a number of characteristics of management of successful schools. First, shared responsibility and accountability for the management of the school was evident in all

three schools. In all cases the principal delegated significant responsibility to others in the school e.g. head of department, coordinator etc. and ensured that accountability accompanied the delegation of responsibility. This produced a sense of shared responsibility for the outcomes of the school by empowering others to make decisions and take appropriate actions, though always within a framework or a set of guidelines provided by the principal. The principals did not abdicate their responsibility but they shared it and then ensured that those given delegated responsibility would be accountable for their decisions and actions.

Second, all the schools had a fairly high degree of autonomy. Whilst the degree of autonomy varied across the schools and in specific areas e.g. in financial management in particular, it was evident that all principals were involved in school-based management and had power devolved to them. The finding here is that successful schools are part of decentralised systems of education and have a degree of autonomy. This finding is consistent with world-wide trends towards decentralisation, flattening of bureaucratic structures in education systems and increased focus on school-based management.

Third, effective management of physical resources has a high priority in successful schools. In all cases we found that the management of physical resources is an important role for the principal – it could be said that ‘a good school looks good’. Whether it is the proper maintenance of buildings and grounds, adequate classroom space, the provision of libraries and laboratories or simply clean washrooms, it seems that successful schools give high priority to these matters. What is important here is that this aspect of a school is highly visible to all concerned, particularly parents who make decisions about which school to send their children to. Interestingly, improvements in physical resources such as building a boundary wall, sends a strong, visible message both inside and outside the school that this school is successful.

Fourth, teacher management and the management of pedagogy is an important focus in successful schools. There is a clear and sustained focus on teaching and learning in all three cases and the principals were very much involved in it. Whilst the nature of the principals’ involvement varied considerably, they all demonstrated a strong interest in what was happening in classrooms on a daily basis with a particular concern for student achievement in external examinations as an important indicator of success. In fact, this focus on teaching and learning goes beyond management into the realm of ‘pedagogical leadership’ (Memon & Bana, 2005) which is becoming increasingly recognised as a feature of successful schools around the world.

Fifth, in successful schools the principal is in touch with everything happening through very effective communication. In all cases the structures of communication were hierarchical but the nature of the communication was decidedly non-hierarchical and personal. The principals did not ‘give orders’ to be carried out, as is possible in a hierarchy, but they discussed matters with their staff, students and parents in ways that allowed diverse views to emerge and be taken into account in decision making. This form of symmetrical communication results in clearer understanding of meaning than does a ‘top-down’, hierarchical approach to communication which often results in distortion of meaning through the exercise of power (Habermas, 1984).

Sixth, parents have open access to the principal in successful schools but they do not exert control over the school. It was evident in all cases that the schools viewed parents as important stakeholders and they were given opportunities for regular meetings with the principal and through the principal they had access to the teachers. There was a range of approaches to parental

interaction with the schools. In no case, however, did we find that parents were denied access to the school and particularly when it came to student examination results, all schools provided formal mechanisms to enable parents to discuss issues with the teachers.

Seventh, principals of successful schools are dynamic and well educated individuals with a strong commitment to the school and the profession of education. The finding here is that the principal definitely ‘makes a difference’ in the school. In all cases the principals were found to be outstandingly dedicated people who had gone to great lengths to get a sound education themselves (two had masters degrees and one a PhD) before becoming a principal. Though their qualifications were not always in teacher education (only one case demonstrated that) it seems that postgraduate programs might be important for producing the kind of openness, thoughtfulness and confidence that a person needs to be an effective principal. Perhaps the matter of commitment is related to the background knowledge of the principal; if a person is not sure of his/her knowledge then they may not be able to generate the level of commitment required to be an effective principal.

Eighth, successful schools engage in some form of school development or improvement planning. In Mountain School, planning was quite pronounced and called the School Action Plan with a focus on school improvement on an annual basis. There was strong evidence of the Whole School Improvement Program (WSIP) as advocated by AKU-IED in that school and this derives from the principal’s extensive education at AKU-IED over a number of years along with his work as a Professional Development Teacher at the Professional Development Centre, Northern Areas for two years prior to becoming the principal. Successful schools plan for their future; they do it in different ways and with different emphases but it is clear that they are not satisfied with success in the present; they are searching for success in the future as well and they have a vision of what that might look like.

Conclusion

The research began with the question: “How and to what extent does management contribute to school success?” It is appropriate to re-visit that question and attempt to answer it to conclude the article.

The word ‘management’ has two different meanings in common usage. It can refer to the people who are in charge of schools as in “the management will carry out teacher appraisal” or it can refer to processes and strategies as in “teacher appraisal is a management strategy”. When we started the research project, the second of those two meanings was generally adopted so the focus was on the actions that were performed in the schools rather than on the personal qualities of the people carrying out those actions. However, what became evident through the research is that those two meanings of management actually represent two dimensions of the one phenomenon and they should be viewed in a holistic way as both contributing to school success. We found that the person who was principal and the *processes* used both played very important parts in our understanding of school success. We went looking for processes and we found that it was the outstanding personal qualities of the people who were the principals that really caught our attention. They were actually educational leaders, not just managers, who had a vision of a better school, indeed a better world, and they were able to share it and inspire others to join them in

pursuing it.

Our response to the research question, then, is that effective management processes and strategies are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for school success. Management strategies and techniques are important but perhaps it is just as important to have the right people in the management of schools. Of course defining and selecting the right people are problematic issues though we would suggest that qualities such as commitment, caring, openness, tolerance, vision and a broad education are just some of the qualities required. It has often been said that such matters should not be considered because they are too difficult to deal with and that ‘people cannot be trained’ in such things. If that is taken for granted, then perhaps we should not expect significant numbers of successful schools to emerge in future. What this research is telling us is that education systems in Pakistan, and perhaps the wider world, need to pay more attention to the personal qualities of the people who are to be principals of schools.

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