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Autonomy and School Success: A Case Study from Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper reports on a case investigated as a part of several case studies conducted under ANTRIEP (Asian Network of Research and Training Institutes for Educational Planning) in seven different countries (India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Nepal and Bangladesh) to look into the management of successful schools. Three cases studies were conducted in three different school systems in Pakistan: public school, private school and AKES (Aga Khan Educational Services) managed school. The study was designed to find the management practices in the successful schools. In this paper the case study of public and cross case analysis based on the findings of the three schools is reported. The findings reveal that school autonomy, delegation of authority, management of physical resources, community participation and proper monitoring system are critical for school success. On the basis of the findings the paper argues against the traditional and bureaucratic model of school management for devolved management structure (more autonomy to school) that can potentially transform schools into learning communities.

Context and background

There is little disagreement on the poor provision of quality education in developing countries. The concern for provision of quality education coupled with decentralization of educational governance has given impetus to the significance of effective school management. As a response to this increasingly mounting pressure, the school management framework in many countries of the region is undergoing significant transformation with direct implications for school management processes, school-community linkages, the role of the head teacher as well as external support and accountability mechanisms (ANTRIEP). The efforts to improve the school can be initiated both at macro (system level) and micro (at local level) levels. However, little empirical research is available that can provide sound basis for local level policy and practice. Against this backdrop, Asian Network of Training and Research Institutions in Educational Planning (ANTRIEP) initiated research program to undertake case studies of successful school management in selected countries of Asia. The case

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studies aimed to develop a critical understanding of the characteristics of successful school management practices and strategies in different countries with a view to understand how such practices and strategies can be adopted in various contexts of the Asian region. The ultimate purpose of the research program was to help institutions build school leaders' capacities in order to improve school management in different country contexts (ANTRIEP). Developing countries such as India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Nepal and Bangladesh participated in this program.

The Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) as partner institute of ANTRIEP undertook three case studies in Pakistan. These cases studies were conducted in three different school systems: public school, private school and AKES (Aga Khan Educational Services) managed school. This paper shares the case of public school in particular and on the basis of findings and cross case analysis argues against the traditional and bureaucratic model of school management and argues for devolved management structure that can potentially transform a school into a learning community. The case under focus is of particular significance because in recent years the management of public schools has been decentralized in Pakistan (Government of Pakistan 2001a).

*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 re-placed by governance which is people and learner centred (Government of Pakistan 2001b::p IV).*

Currently, the emphasis seems to be on community participation to make schools more responsive to the local community and eliminate top-down approaches to decision making to enhance community participation and accountability (Memon 2003). The efforts to engage community with school are made through formal structures like School Management Committees (SMCs). Whilst it appears that such major reforms are taking place there is no empirical research evidence on the effectiveness of the changes being made. These case studies can be seen as an effort to provide useful basis for developing and implementing school improvement plans.
Research process

The aim of the proposed research was to identify ‘successful schools’ in various school education systems in Pakistan and see how and to what extent the management practices of those schools contribute to their success. The main research question was: “How and to what extent does the management of schools contribute to their success?”

The first stage of the project was to develop a set of criteria of ‘successful schools’ for use in selecting the research sites. The research team of six AKU-IED faculty and tutors generated a list of 20 characteristics of successful schools (Appendix 1). The list of characteristics was then ranked ordered (i.e. 1-20) by three groups: a) the research team; b) other faculty of AKU-IED (10 responses); and c) a group of teachers and head teachers from Karachi schools attending a course at AKU-IED (20 responses). The top 5 ranked items from each group were selected. The criteria included: satisfied and motivated staff willing to go to school; students willing to go to school; flexibility and openness to change; effective professional development of staff; a moving school culture; curriculum has a view of the world beyond the classroom; a stress-free atmosphere; and increased life chances of students. Along with the above notes criteria, the additional criteria of geographical location and school system were applied and three schools were chosen that best fit the criteria. The schools were: 1) a government school in Lahore, Punjab Province; 2) a private school in Karachi, Sindh Province; and 3) an Aga Khan Education Service (AKES) school in Northern Areas.

Qualitative methods of research were employed to gather data for exploring the case studies. The samples for this study were the principal, five representative teachers, students and selected parents who were interviewed using a semi structured interview schedule. Triangulation of the data was achieved by interviewing a range of different stakeholders. Data was also gathered by observation of school management practices e.g. Meetings and analysis of pertinent documents such as School development plans.

The analysis of the data was carried out using the NVIVO. This software enables one to make categories (or ‘nodes’) and the excerpts from the transcripts can be coded according to those nodes. Nodes were developed from the Analytic Framework to ensure that data analysis is consistent with the framework. Following the coding, a report was generated for each node that facilitated the writing of case studies.

The data was analyzed according to the analytical framework provided by ANTRIEP. This framework comprised of the school profile, including teaching learning conditions and process, management structure and organization, Parent/Community Involvement in school, profile and role
of the head teacher, management of specific processes, relations with administration, teachers, students and parents, and selected management devices. In the following paragraphs, we have briefly described the case school and some aspects of its management strategies.

**Case study: Royal School**

*School Profile*

Royal School (fictitious name) located in Lahore, Pakistan was established in 1908. It operates under the Department of Education of the Punjab Government and education is provided from Class I to post-graduate (masters) level. It comprises three sections (Junior, Senior and College) and a Section Head supervises each section. The Principal is the chief administrator. For almost a century, Royal School, Lahore has been tutoring generations of young girls to become useful citizens of their country.

In January 1998, Royal School was granted autonomous status in certain aspect of academic and financial management. The School is run by a Board of Governors appointed by the Punjab Government. At present, some 3,200 students are studying in the school (excluding college students) with a combined teaching faculty of more than 240 members. The buildings of Royal School present a picture of traditional architecture spread over more than twenty-two acres of land. It has well-equipped laboratories and spacious lecture halls with three libraries. The vast playgrounds provide many sports opportunities and the school offers residential facilities to students from all classes, i.e. from class I to Masters Level.

The size of the classes is large, ranging from 70-94 students per section. This is due to the constant demand of the community to accommodate their daughters in this institution. Despite the large number of students, the teachers were found to be quite up-to-date with the checking of notebooks that we selected at random for inspection.

The student teacher relationship was found to be very strong. In addition to regular classes, the teachers conducted remedial classes and often stayed at the school working for long hours to complete projects. Both teachers and students were willing to stay after school.

The teachers were very polite and friendly with the students and the teaching style was a blend of lecture and co-operative learning. The lessons were well planned (in the classes we observed) but could have been more interactive. Regular homework was given to students. There was a strong emphasis on the handwriting of students, which was uniform and neat.
Some aspects of the management strategies

The Principal runs the school through a vice-principal and three heads. There is a considerable delegation of powers to the heads yet there is a firm and strict control by the Principal.

"There are three sections, junior section, senior section and college section. There is one vice-principal and in every section there is one section head and they are there to look after all the problems of their section and then of course vice-principal is there, she also takes the rounds."
(Interview with the principal, 2004)

A unique feature of this school was that most of the teachers appeared to be involved in management as members of various committees. These committees were all working committees and were integrated with each other. For instance the Admission Committee of both the junior school and the college looked after the admission affairs. The Transport Committee was being run effectively through staff members. The Examination Committee organizes the setting of question papers and examinations. The Furniture Committee, after due inspection, decides on the future demands of the various classes. The Vision and Development committee was the highest decision-making body and it makes decisions about important issues as well as monitoring the school’s progress. But there was a fear that too many committees could lead to confusion. However, the sense of ownership and commitment with institution was quite notable (field notes, 2003).

In this school there are no formal associations between parents and school management. However, the relations are very cordial and contacts with the parents are through parent-teacher meetings, meetings with the Principal as required every day from 12.00noon to 1.00pm. Normally they have two formal meetings with parents in a year, especially after the examination results are announced. The Principal recounted, “Last year we had two meetings with the parents, parent-teacher meeting after the exams like we have one exam immediately after the summer vacation of all the classes, from class one up to matriculation and after that examination we have a meeting with the parents. We tell them about the regularity of the students and about the results of the students and I also check that how many parents they have come to the meeting and I think hardly 45% to 50% of them attend. Then the second meeting we have after the December exam. We usually have two meetings in a year and how we arrange it is that for one class we have a schedule; one day is fixed for one class”.

As mentioned earlier, Royal School has very large class size up to and beyond 90 students. Such large classes in a successful school was quite a surprise for the researchers since it contradicts a lot of other research which suggests that small class size produces better learning outcomes. There were two factors operating in that school that could explain this
situation. First, there was very high demand from families in Lahore to send their daughters to that school because of its tradition and reputation; and second, the extraordinary commitment that teachers were showing by working so hard for the school because of their ‘love for the institution’. These factors are very unlikely to be found in many other schools so it is not suggested that such large classes would contribute to successful schools in general.

Findings

The cross case analysis of the three case studies were done to identify the factors that contributed to the success of the schools under study. Those emerging factors were:

- high degree of autonomy;
- shared responsibility and accountability for the management of the school;
- effective management of physical resources;
- teacher management and the management of pedagogy is an important focus;
- a broader view of the curriculum than textbooks and classroom learning;
- engage in some form of school development or improvement planning; school community relationship; and
- dynamic role of principle.

The cross case analysis revealed that school autonomy is closely linked with the school success. However, the degree of the autonomy varied across different school systems under study. It was evident that in all the schools the principals were involved in school based management and had power devolved to them. For the purpose of this paper, we will elaborate on school’s autonomy with particular reference to our case (Royal School) to develop argument for devolved management structures that can potentially transform a school into a learning community.

Royal School, initially a fully government school, was awarded ‘administrative and financial autonomy’ in 1998 by the Government of the Punjab (GoP). At the same time, GoP constituted Board of Governors for the school, with Minister of Education as chairman of the BoGs. The BoGs comprises of both official (Secretary Education and Secretary Finance) and non official members (public representatives) with principal as secretary of the BoGs. The BoGs has constituted different committees to carry out its functions. For example: Executive Committee, Finance and Development Committee and Academic Committee. The principal felt very empowered due to the autonomous status of the school. This autonomy is reflected through several new initiatives taken by the principal, like introduction of
post graduate classes, graduate classes with computer science and initiation of Cambridge Education System in school.

The School obtains finances through its own generated resources (tuition and admission fees) as well as a grant-in-aid from the Government. The BoGs approve the school budget. The principal appreciated that BoGs have always considered school’s needs and provided resources whenever the request was made. Inside the school, the Principal has organized the financial process in such a way that it is decentralized yet there is accountability. So, in this case there was a sense of mutual understanding, respect and regard for each other, which we felt contributed a great deal in making this a successful school.

The majority of the school staff members (teaching and non-teaching) were permanent employees of the DoE (Department of Education). In addition the school can also hire staff from its own resources if it needs so. For example, they have appointed gardener from accumulated school funds, in addition to the government appointee, to look after the grounds. However, the school can not hire teaching staff directly. “The powers of the principal are up to a certain level and after that we have to go to the Board of Governors” (Interview with principal, 2003). The school can also hire teaching staff with the approval of BoG. The principal says,

“We go to the Board of Governors and if we convince them and if our demand is genuine they do give us the permission that you can, this post is vacant and your demand is genuine you can advertise this post and select a person”
(Interview with Principal, 2003)

Decentralization involves the relocation of authority to take decisions. The principal noted that still many decision lie with DoE that must have been delegated to the BoGs. She asserts “In my opinion the Board of Governors should be more powerful as they know the inside story of the institution” (Interview with the principal, 2003).

Their ownership of the school was quite visible. “What keeps me here is the atmosphere, the working conditions, the children and my liking for this institution” (Interview with a teacher, 2003). One student in her interview notes that “I love my school. My teachers also love me. I am proud to be a Royal student. You can easily spot a Royal student in a crowd, the way she walks, talks and moves about”. Probably this sense of ownership has contributed to success of Royal School. Another indicator of the ownership was that school had very low teachers’ turn over and high motivation at work. Several research findings suggest that autonomy and ownership are linked with each other. These finding are consistent with
world-wide trends towards decentralization, flattening of bureaucratic structures in education systems and increased focus on school-based management.

Discussion and Conclusions

Harber and Davies (1998), on the basis of their research in developing countries, noted that ‘bureaucracy is rigid, closed and non-participatory form of organization’ (p. 59) that has negative implications for students learning. Almost the same findings were echoed by Memon (2001) as he observed that the issue of centralization has been persistent in education system of Pakistan. Centralization has contributed to the ineffectiveness of the system and has created a culture of dependency. He further notes that educational policies of 1972 and 1992 have proposed decentralized structure of educational management but little was put in to practice. The National Education Commission (1959) mentions that:

*The creation of separate sections with considerable autonomy within their spheres of responsibility introduces a concept of devolution of authority that has not received much practical application in our educational administration. We have been hampered in the past by failure to delegate authority and responsibility effectively and as a result those in high educational posts has been buried under an unnecessary load of administrative duties... Unless there is willingness and a conscious effort to decentralize the making of decisions, problems will never be solved rapidly nor the pace of educational progress quickened* (p.324)

Recent reforms (2001) carried new promises for effective school management. The cross case analysis of the case studies done under ANTRIEP offered empirical support for decentralization of education especially the public school having autonomous status in certain areas has more potential to advocate the case of decentralization as the power were devolved to school in this case in 1998. On the basis of our case studies, we argue that bureaucratic model of schooling, with power and control concentrated at the top of the system does not hold much hope for school effectiveness.

Marshall (1997) argues that discoveries in diverse fields like quantum physics, chaos, mathematics, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, cognitive sciences, system theory, revolutionary insights about the universe, and human learning have converged in to new understanding of organizations. She further says “Every organization must become generative
learning and teaching community if it desires to enhance the fullness and diversity of human capacities” (p.1).

Bureaucracy is impersonal and based on hierarchy; it aims to achieve efficiency and control, not to release and develop the potential of individuals through learning. Since the core business of schools is learning, we argue that a different kind of institution is needed to foster values such as care, belonging, trust and collaboration which encourage learning. These values are more likely to be found in the notion of community rather than in factory or bureaucracy. The learning community idea can challenge and transform the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Tyack & Tobin’s important point is that there appears to be a taken for granted ‘grammar’ of traditional organization and teaching practices in schools that dates back more than a hundred years to the industrial revolution when schools were established using the metaphor of the ‘school as a factory’ and it has been remarkably consistent across the whole world. Perhaps the defining characteristic of this is the organizational form known as bureaucracy that was brilliantly described by the German sociologist, Max Weber, as an “iron cage”.

Successful schools are devolved institutions where power is shared and meaning is constructed through dialogue, not through orders from the top. The devolution of power or the granting of a high degree of autonomy to the school produces ownership, commitment and acceptance of responsibility for the outcomes of the school. It also enables the school to take initiative, make changes and shape the vision to meet the needs of its stakeholders or constituency. This suggests to us that school organization needs to be transformed.

There is considerable international momentum behind this idea to the point that one writer says, “Within the past decade, the term ‘learning community’ has been used with increasing frequency to describe a good school” (Schussler, 2003: 498). At the heart of all good or successful schools is a clear and sustained focus on student learning and the learning community idea emphasizes that point. What it adds to other approaches, however, is the focus on ‘community’; the idea that a good school is a community of learners – all of the participants; be they students, teachers, administrators and even parents are positioned as learners with a strong sense of belonging and care for others which is the essence of community.

The essence of the learning community idea is that all stakeholders or participants in the school are viewed as learners and engaged in reciprocal, rather than hierarchical or top-down, relationships (Mitchell & Sackeney, 2000). Sometimes the term “professional community” is used to focus on teacher collegiality and the need for teachers to be lifelong, continuous learners Sergiovanni, (1996) states though we prefer to use the more generic term “learning community” since our interest is in all
participants in the school. Of course the primary function of schools is student learning and that cannot be overemphasized:

"Although a school can exist as a pleasant community where all students feel valued and cared for, it does not exist as a learning community unless education is emphasized and academic rigour is expected of everyone" and, of particular importance, "the empirical data that exists indicates that students in schools operating as learning communities seem to do better than students in traditional schools" (Schussler, 2003: 506-9). The benefit for student learning is, then, our major reason for advocating the learning community approach to schooling.

Improvements in the quality of school education are desperately needed in most countries throughout Asia and the learning community approach could make an important contribution to that (Retallick and Farah, 2005). To begin with, what is needed is capacity building at the personal, interpersonal and organizational levels to improve the internal conditions of teaching, learning and leadership in the schools. In the international literature, much is known about school improvement (Beach & Lindahl, 2004) though it is also well known that significant school reform on a widespread basis is notoriously difficult to achieve.

References

ANTRIEP: http://www.antriep.net/html/school.htm


