Exploring Leadership Practices in Rural Context of a Developing Country

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Abstract

The success or failure of any institution has closely been linked with the leadership practices exercised in the institution. Whereas the number of private schools is rapidly increasing in the rural context of Pakistan, the leadership practices of these institutions are interesting and timely questions to ponder upon. Drawing upon the data of a qualitative case study, this paper discusses the leadership practices in a private school in rural Pakistan. It is found that the school leaders in this context have still traditional approach to leadership with little possibilities of shared or distributed leadership. Since the private schools are owned by the individuals and the teachers are hardly involved in decision making processes, they show less motivation towards school activities and thus, there remains a gap between the expectations of the principal and the performance of the teachers. It is suggested that the leadership of these private institutions should have maximum exposure to updated management and leadership theories and practices if they have to successfully run their schools in this challenging and competitive era.

Key Words: *Private Schools, Rural Context, School Leadership*

Introduction

The role of leadership in school improvement has highly been established in literature and there seems consensus that as compared to other stakeholders, school leadership plays greater role in the improvement of school (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1998; Louis & Kruse, 1998 & Mulford & Sillins, 2003). However, the concept has usually been debated and explored in developed context. The role and influence of school leadership could not be denied even in developing context but the conditions which facilitate school leadership in Western or other developed countries may not be similar across the globe. The school culture and practices change according to the changing context (Yanow, 200) and thus, bring different implications for school leadership. Though the role and practices of school leadership have also been studied in Pakistan, no single study has been conducted on this topic in context of Chitral, a remote and mountainous district of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province. Moreover, for the last two decades, a huge number of private schools have been established in Chitral and when there is a growing competition among these institutions, their leadership practices also require exploration. This study aims at exploring the practices and challenges of school leadership in a private school in the rural context of a developing country, Pakistan.

School leadership

The conceptual debates and empirical studies have persistently stressed upon the role of school leadership in school effectiveness and school improvement. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) believe, "Scratch the surface of an excellent school and you are likely to find and excellent principal. Peer into a failing school and you will find weak leadership" (p.64). It suggests that the success or otherwise of any school totally depends upon the school leadership practices as it is the leadership who has the most influential role in developing facilitative culture and structure for learning and improvement (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1998; Louis & Kruse, 1998; Mulford & Sillins, 2003). Each school has a unique structure and culture influenced, created and shaped by the school leadership that determine the effectiveness or otherwise of that particular school. Schein (2004) believes that leaders develop a particular culture through imposing their own assumptions and values on the group.

Though a number of leadership theories and styles have been presented, debated and explored, the contemporary debates suggest that school leadership needs to be transformational, i.e. providing individual, cultural and structural support to staff, capturing a vision for the school, communicating high performance expectations and offering intellectual stimulation (Leithwood, Leonard & Sharratt, 1998; Silins, Mulford & Zarins, 2002). The concept of transformational leadership is supported by the speedy process of change at the present day where individuals and schools have to constantly update their practices to keep abreast with the rapidly changing trends. School leadership has very important role to initiate this change because he/she can restructure school, influence school governing authorities to support the new structures and get teachers' commitment towards the new initiatives. In this sense, leadership identifies vision, conveys expectations, provides appropriate model and required support, empowers teachers and thus facilitates the process of learning and improvement (Leithwood, Leonard & Sharratt, 1998).

An effective leader uses a number of techniques and strategies in cruising the school towards effectiveness. One of such leadership strategies is to confer teachers with authority and then to trust them (Harris, 2002). The concept of distributed leadership assumes that leadership is stretched over all the individuals in school (Gronn, 2000 & Spillane, 2006). Research also proves that people possess potentials for leadership but they need confidence and the confidence could be developed through developing their capacities (Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1991; MacBeath, 2005). MacMahon (2001) asserts that effective leaders create supportive climate and give people "belief that they can improve and yet challenge them by highlighting weaknesses" (p.125). When the teachers are developed and empowered, they would bring in, pilot and implement innovations and through such innovations, they would convince their colleagues more effectively than the school leadership (Collinson & Cook, 2003).

While discussing guideline for principals, Leithwood (1992) suggests treating the teacher as a whole person and establishing a school culture based on norms of technical collaboration and professional inquiry. Similarly, the collegial relationship of principal with teachers and creating learning opportunities have been found yet another leadership strategies to enhance the performance of teachers (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2001). Moreover, providing the opportunities to teachers to build their capacity through collaboration and sharing knowledge are important leadership strategies to motivate teachers (Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008).

However, leadership practices and approaches differ from context to context based on the contextual and ground realities. While exploring the leadership approaches in three different countries, Jurasaite-

Harbison (2009) found that in Russian school principals depend on close supervision and judgment whereas in US, principals accommodate teachers' professional need. The principals in Lithuania empower teachers to take responsibility for their work quality and professional growth. The studies conducted in Pakistani context on school leadership have also highlighted the practices and challenges of school leadership. These studies have identified the influencing factors of school leadership such as the competency of headteachers (Khaki & Safdar, 2010), ongoing management support to headteachers (Shafa, 2010), hierarchical system (Simkins, Sisum & Memon (2003) and leadership styles (Memon & Bana, 2005). However, these studies have been conducted either in urban context or in public sector. Where the present day has witnessed the explosion of private schools in rural context, the leadership practices in these schools especially in context of Chitral is an unexplored area. Exploring the leadership practices in the private schools of rural context would be helpful in identifying the best practices which might assist the newly emerging schools in improvement and effectiveness. This is where the current study is grounded. The study aims at achieving three specific objectives, i.e. identifying;

- leadership practices in a private school
- the challenges faced by school leadership and
- the relationship between school leadership practices and teachers performance

Research Method

The context where this study was carried out is a rural and mountainous district in the north of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan. Till late 80s, government sector was the major education provider in this context though a number of Aga Khan Schools had also been functioning especially in remote areas where government schools had no existence. Since early 90s, there has been a sudden and then very rapid promotion of private schools in this context. In contrast to government and Aga Khan Schools, the private schools have English medium of instruction which has been a central attraction for parents who want to educate their children in English medium schools. This study was conducted in one of such private schools which has completed three years of its establishment.

Keeping in view the purpose of the study, case study approach which enables in-depth analysis of particular case (Bogdan & Biklen, 1999) was adopted as research method. A school was selected based on its accessibility and the willingness of the principal. This is a higher secondary school where there are nine teaching staff (five females and four males). The owner of the school works as the principal of this school. The principal and six other teachers have professional qualifications such as M.Ed[1], B.Ed[2] and CT[3] acquired from different universities and elementary colleges while the other four teachers are fresh graduates. The school principal and four other teachers selected based on their experience and professional backgrounds were the respondents. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews. The principal was interviewed individually while the teachers were involved in focused group discussions. Moreover, the researcher also closely observed the leadership and school practices as well as the relationship of the principal with the teachers. The collected data were analyzed on ongoing basis to be conscious to the newly emerging themes. The results are presented and discussed below.

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[1] Master of Education
[2] Bachelor of Education
[3] Certificate in Teaching

Discussion of the Results

Based on the ongoing analysis of the collected data, the results are presented and discussed under five themes namely perception of the principal about school leadership, the expectations of the principal from the teachers, setting directions for the school, professional development opportunities and motivation of the teachers.

Perception of the Principal about School Leadership

As a starting point, the understanding of the interviewed principal regarding school leadership is briefly highlighted because it is his perception of leadership which determines and influences his leadership practices. For this principal, 'school leadership is the central figure in school who is connected to all the school sections and elements and this figure heads all the change and improvement initiatives and works in frontline being a role model'. Though we could not discard any definition of leadership as literature contains a huge number of definitions regarding school leadership, still there are certain elements on which there seems consensus. Such elements include 'leadership as a process', 'influence', 'values' and 'vision' as combined by Bush and Glover (2003) who assert that, "Leadership can be understood as a process of influence based on clear values and beliefs and leading to a 'vision' for the school" (p.31).

A close analysis of the definition given by the interviewed principal vis-à-vis the definition taken from literature reveals that for this principal, leadership is more like a position not a process. According to his definition of school leadership, leadership is the act of a person (central figure) who supervises (heads) school activities being always ahead (in frontline) whom others have to imitate (a role model). When leadership is related to a central figure, then it seems refereeing to a position. Moreover, if the same central figure heads all the change and improvement initiatives, there seems reduced possibility of shared or distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006).

The Expectations of the Principal from the Teachers

With this perception of leadership, the principal aims at the holistic development of learners who attend this school. In order to achieve this aim, the principal expects proper and systematic planning from teachers including lesson plans and scheme of work. Moreover, the principal expects interactive teaching and full involvement of the students in the teaching learning processes. Similarly, he also expects that the teachers should take extra responsibilities and leadership roles. He conveys these expectations to teachers through staff meeting, individual meetings and planning sessions, if any.

However, as the principal revealed, there are some gaps between his expectations and the actual practices of the teachers. The teachers go to classroom without any written lesson plans and even the school has not been able to design proper scheme of work. The teaching practices are teacher centered who hardly involve students in interactive activities. The principal further intimated that teachers avoid taking any risk or initiatives being limited to routine teaching without bringing any innovation and trying anything different. Moreover, the principal has given some extra responsibilities to the teachers such as library management, managing assembly activities and other academic matters. However, as the principal opines, there are deficiencies in the performance of teachers with regard to the extra responsibilities. The teacher responsible for assembly usually arrives late.

The brief data discussed above reveal that there are contradictions between the expectations of the principal and the practices and attitude of the teachers. Contradictions are sources of learning provided they are realized and resolved (Engestrom, 2001). In order to resolve contradictions and to develop shared understanding, there should be such structures and culture where the school vision and other expectations are developed involving all the stakeholders. Similarly, the teachers should have the capabilities to perform the expected roles. Otherwise, school has to create opportunities to develop the required capabilities of the teachers. Coupled with the required capabilities, the teachers should also be motivated and committed to perform the assigned roles effectively. It leads us to another important point i.e. why has the principal not been able to make teachers perform according to his expectations?

Setting Directions for the School

Through in-depth probing, it was found that the vision of the school was developed involving a few professionals who supported the principal in the establishment of this school. Thus, the school has a written vision but the present teaching staff has hardly any access to the school vision as it has not been displayed anywhere in the school or communicated to them. A teacher showed his ignorance about the vision of the school saying, "I haven't been told about any vision and even I haven't seen some in written anywhere in the school". Besides, being a private school, the process of teachers' induction and termination is an ongoing event whereas the newly inducted teachers do not have any proper orientation about the school vision, values and practices. "When I came to this school, I was just told to attend the classes and no more information about the school was shared", a teacher reported.

An effective way to convey expectations to the teachers would be the development of job description which the teacher keep with them as a record and their performance could be monitored and evaluated based on the given job description. Since no job descriptions are given to the teachers at the time of their induction, they do not know exactly how differently they have to perform in this school. The verbal instructions do not have that much impact upon the teachers. Similarly, the teachers may perform according to the expectations of the principal if there is a proper planning involving all the teaching staff and deciding on the activities to come and the responsibilities to be performed. The school does not have any written plan, scheme of work or year planner which could tell the teachers about the expectations of the school from them during the year. The principal told that twice he tried to call the teachers to come to school during vacation to plan the year activities but only two teachers attended this so-called planning session. During the interviews with the teachers, it was found that the teachers were not willing to attend any sessions during vacation. It suggests that the principal has to schedule such activities in consultation with the teachers to ensure their participation.

Professional Development of Teachers

The professional background of teachers highly influences the practices and attitude of the teachers. A teacher could not be able to develop lesson plan and to teach in interactive way if s/he lacks pedagogical knowledge in these areas. Though some of the teachers in this school have pre-service professional qualifications such as M.Ed, B.Ed and CT, they have not developed their required pedagogical skills due to some deficiencies in the curriculum and assessment procedure of the institutions offering these courses. Though, some NGOs are working in the context who provide practical knowledge and skills relevant to the teachers' classroom requirements, the general trend in private schools of this context is that school leaderships avoid sending their teachers to such in-service

programs. Since teachers do not stay in private schools for longer period, the principal believes that sending teachers to such courses is wastage of school time.

Whereas teachers lack updated professional knowledge, school based teacher development activities provide best opportunity for teachers to develop themselves professionally. It happens when there is proper structure and culture for teachers' interactions. While talking about the nature of teachers' collaboration and learning from one another, the principal said that they have tried to develop such culture to some extent. The principal also expects that teachers should collaborate with one another and consult the principal if they have such teaching learning issues. The staff meetings, some planning sessions, and sharing expertise at classroom level were the examples of in-house teacher development activities and collaboration given by the principal. The principal opined that teachers do not actively take part if in-house professional development activities are planned to improve their pedagogical skills. The teachers were of the view that their workload did not allow them to spare time for such activities.

Motivation of Teachers

The principal is of the view that teachers are not satisfied with the incentives given to them. They always look for opportunities to join any government or NGO sector where they expect better incentives. The school does not have that much capacity to provide sufficient incentives to satisfy the teachers. One teacher showed his dissatisfaction saying, "Private school owners know that we have less job options, so they exploit us with very fewer incentives". Thus, they do not give proper attention upon their responsibilities and in this way, the expectations of the principal remain unfulfilled.

Along with financial benefits and opportunities to grow, one other factor to enhance teachers' motivation is involving them in decision making processes. According to the principal, he takes most of the decisions in consultation with the teachers. Usually, such decisions are related to school vacations, examinations, distributing classes to the teachers and other academic matters. However, the teachers hardly shared any example where they had been involved in any decision making process. The principal believes that teachers hardly provide any meaningful input on such occasions. Therefore, he has to depend upon his own discretion. Moreover, there are certain decisions where the principal does not consult teachers. In the current year, due to financial factors, the principal reduced the number of teaching staff. While deciding about the termination of teachers, he depended only on his own observation and experience of working with the teachers. Here, mostly those teachers were terminated who were not performing according to his expectations. Similarly, when the teachers become absent without intimating the principal, he deducts their salary without taking them into confidence. All these examples reveal that the principal uses autocratic approach to lead and manage the school activities.

Conclusion

The data discussed above suggest that the school leadership has to focus upon systematic planning and to design strategies to improve the school through involving and motivating the teaching staff. It necessitates proactive measures and strategic planning which needs culture of using new and wider boundaries for thinking, doing and evaluating (Kaufman, 1995). If the principal reflects upon his practices, he could find better solutions. Financial factors may be one reason of teachers' motivation and if it is beyond the capacity of the school principal, he could think of other alternatives to motivate the teachers and to improve their performance. If teachers are not able to teach through interactive ways and to perform the leadership roles, they might not have that much capacity. Teachers could

perform well if they are developed, trusted and respected (Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1991, Harris, 2002 & MacBeath, 2005). The practices of termination based on self-discretion, taking decisions individually and deducting the salaries of teachers could have further adverse impact upon the motivation of teachers. However, the principal may not be blamed for such actions as his perceptions are rooted into his professional background and contextual dynamics where leadership is portrayed as a controlling figure using any source of power to get the work done.

In order to improve the school, coupled with the motivation of teachers, both the principal and the teachers need further professional and pedagogical skills to perform their expected roles more effectively. The teachers lack update pedagogical skills and attitude which are required for an effective teacher. They lack in-service and in-house professional development opportunities to develop themselves professionally. There has not been any serious effort from the principal to make in-house teacher development activities part of school structure and culture. Teachers' lack of motivation hinders such initiatives even if the principal thinks of such opportunities. If the school leadership is fully aware of latest leadership skills and teacher development models, he could use a number of strategies to motivate the teachers.

To conclude, the context where the leadership is exercised tremendously influences the leadership practices (Simkins, Sisum & Memon, 2003). In the studied context, there are such challenges which may not be prevailing in developed context. When teachers are not satisfied financially and when the given incentives are not enough to fulfill their basic needs, they should constantly be looking for other opportunities. This situation diverts their attention and they are not able to concentrate on the school activities. This is a big challenge faced by school leadership in developing context.

Thus, the focus of the school leadership and change agents should be on the professional development of school leadership as well as the teachers. If they have knowledge and skills required according to their roles, they could be able to develop better learning environment in schools. Moreover, private schools have to provide better incentives to teachers to motivate and retain them for longer periods. Once these elements are sustained inside schools, we may practice different leadership concepts, types and styles in this context. The adaptation, implementation and impact of any imported concept totally depend upon the contextual and ground realities of the particular region. Therefore, while discussing or implementing any imported theory, first we should thoroughly understand the contextual realities.

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