"Role of Leadership at the Head teachers' Level at Urban Primary Government Schools in Developed and Developing Countries: A Case of Schools in Coventry vs. Lahore"

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Abstract. The role of leadership in education has received increased attention in the recent past. A host of available scholarship tends to indicate leadership as an important factor that influences school development and school improvement. However, majority of available research studies have been undertaken in the west by researchers from developed countries. This small scale qualitative research study endeavours to explore urban primary government school Head teachers' understanding of leadership in Lahore and Coventry by employing qualitative methods of data collection, semi-structured interviews—of teachers, Head teachers and Local Authority Inspectors (LEA)/ equivalents—school and classroom observations and questionnaires to achieve its objectives. This study concludes that developing and developed countries influence understanding of leadership roles of primary school head teachers in different ways.

Keywords: Educational leadership, School Improvement and Development, Transformational Leadership

1. Introduction

This study aims to explore primary government school Head teachers' understanding of school leadership in Lahore and Coventry. Therefore three urban primary state schools, in each city, were selected through purposive sampling. Qualitative method of data collection was employed for the purpose of this research. The study suggests that primary urban Head teachers' understanding of leadership is different in developed and developing countries. The study aims to answer the following question:

- What is primary urban school head teachers' understanding of leadership in Lahore and Coventry?

It is important to be mindful of the schools' contexts, in terms of their continuous professional development (CPD), organizational structures and the challenges they face respectively, to be able to interpret the data.

2. Literature Review

2.2. Leadership and School Improvement

Though Leadership has received considerable attention over the past years its varying successive definitions have not provided a clear understanding of the concept (Day et al., 2003; Leithwood et al., 1999; Holly and Southworth, 1989; Bass, 1981; English, 2003; Bush and Glover, 2003).

A shift can be noticed in the definitions and the models of leadership, as they evolved and complemented the school improvement reform movement, from the introduction of scientific management approaches in 1980s to the restructuring of schools as independent learning organizations (Hallinger, 2003). Successive school reforms in the UK, were based on theories from disciplines other than education (Bottery, 2000) and

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it was thought to be beneficial to learn from other organizations however it was acknowledged that context plays a vital role in understanding the approach to leadership (Leithwood et al., 1999).

In a recent review of school leadership literature the available definitions have been broadly categorized as: *'Leadership as influence, values, vision and management'* respectively, each supported by empirical evidence (Bush and Glover, 2003 p: 1). Debate about leadership has focused mainly on two dominant paradigms--transactional and transformational leadership—that have dominated both policy and practice in developed countries (Leithwood et al., 1999 p: 15).

2.3. Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership *'focuses predominantly on the role of the school Principal in coordinating, controlling, supervising, and developing curriculum and instruction in the school'* (Hallinger, 2003 pp: 331-332).

Instructional leadership tends to be more effective in schools that face considerable challenges and is popular with leaders who are more inclined towards maintenance of management systems rather than development and innovation (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985). It tends to exist in rather stable environments, structures, and in those with a more predictable future (Day et al., 2003). This view with regard to school improvement and development claims that this form of leadership would be limited to promoting structural as opposed to cultural changes (ibid, 2003).

Instructional leadership has been criticized for positing a demanding role from its followers as it centralizes *'authority, expertise and power'* in formal positions in hierarchical structures while its practicality for sustained school improvement has been questioned (Bass, 1997). It has also been pointed that it ignores the existence of other sources of leadership in schools—teachers and district leadership (Barth, 2002). In addition the capacity and willingness of Principals in general to be prepared to rise up to this challenge has been questioned (ibid, 1990).

This model has been appreciated, as it allows the Principals' involvement with the individual pupils, but it has been contended that this impact may be limited to small-sized schools alone as it would be impracticable in secondary or large-sized schools (Hallinger, 2003). Also, it has been argued that in terms of secondary schools the teachers' expertise may supersede the principals' capability, in which case the expertise cannot be restricted to the formal hierarchical role (Hallinger, 2003).

However, in view of the changing environment and increased expectations of the Headship of today it has been suggested that context plays an important role in determining the suitable leadership style as per the requirements of a school (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 1999).

It has been noted that 'in countries where the systems of command and control are in place' Instructional leadership has been focused however 'In countries where decentralization has occurred, there has been renewed interest in transformational leadership and more democratic leadership approaches' (Leithwood et al., 1999 p: 15).

2.4. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership theory in education management literature was imported from the business world and well received in the educational community (Bottery, 2000). Transformational leadership served as a modus operandi for effective leaders to instigate change in their followers' approach to change and their behaviours. It was also believed that transformational leaders influenced their followers, and that the process included charismatic leadership, intellectual simulation and individualized consideration (Bass, 1997).

This change occurred partly due to a reaction against the school improvement initiatives contingent on the top-down educational reforms in the 1980s and increased criticism of the instructional leadership model (Hallinger, The importance of Head teachers' roles in implementing change while the need for a more culturally and politically contextualized approach to leadership models has been highlighted (ibid, 2001).

The most comprehensive model of transformational leadership encompasses seven dimensions: '*building school vision, establishing school goals, providing intellectual stimulation; offering individualized support; modelling best practices and important organizational values; demonstrating high performance expectations; creating a productive school culture; and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions*' (Leithwood et al., 1999 p: 9). Transformational leadership was embedded in the ideas of empowerment,

shared leadership, organizational learning and increased involvement of its followers and these concepts corresponded to the educational reforms initiated in the 1990s (Hallinger, 2003; Hargreaves, 1994; Leithwood et al., 1999). Therefore the role of transformational leaders extends to establishing a shared vision to ensure the commitment of stakeholders and to building the organizational capacity to support and implement change for the improvement of teaching and learning practices by evolving collaborative professional cultures in schools (Hallinger, 2003; Hargreaves, 1994; Leithwood et al., 1999; Bottery, 2000).

Research suggests that transformational approaches have a positive impact on teachers' motivation, on their attitudes towards school improvement initiatives and on altered instructional practice (Hargreaves, 1994; Fullan, 1993; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, 1994). Shared decision making stimulates feelings of strong commitment, which in turn enables the internalization of a set of goals for professional development (Leithwood et al., 1991; Leithwood and Jantzi, 1991).

Though transformational leadership focuses on increasing the organizational capacity as an ongoing process and has a significant positive impact on outcomes (Day, 2003; Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach 1999) the approach has been criticised for lack of focus on students' learning (ibid).

3. Theoretical Framework, Design and Research Strategy

The research design is *'governed by the fitness of purpose'* (Cohen et al., 2000 p: 73). Phenomenological research with mixed methodology was used for the purpose of this research and its data was qualitatively analyzed (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000). The focus of this research was description and analysis of the contextual meaning and understanding rather than any potential generalisability (ibid).

Important aspects related to operationalisation of this study were taken into account (Cohen et al., 2000). The selection of methods for data collection needs to complement the research questions (ibid, 2000). Guided by reading of leadership literature the researcher opted for in-depth interviews, questionnaires and observations for data collection (Cohen et al., 2000). Open-ended questions were used in the questionnaire to encourage '*honest comments'*, *'richness, depth of'* responses (Cohen et al., 2000 p: 255). The questionnaire and interview questions were peer-reviewed, pilot tested and fine-tuned thereafter. The Urdu translations of the questionnaire and interview questions were pilot-tested in Lahore by the researcher's colleague and checked when posted to the researcher.

In addition, semi-structured observations facilitated understanding the phenomenon within its context (Cohen et al., 2000). The population of this study comprised of urban state primary schools in Lahore and Coventry, each of 200-400 pupils. Three schools in each city were selected on the basis of a purposive sampling technique against the predetermined criteria (ibid, 2000). The main criteria for selection of these schools were: primary government schools; led by a Head teacher; located in urban areas; school size in terms of their pupils (200- 400).

It was acknowledged that some of the variable would not be covered within the scope of this research, including the following: the hierarchical structure of schools, pupil-teacher ratio, pupils' socio-economic backgrounds, Head teachers' gender, available resources and physical settings. These variables may have their respective impacts on this study.

4. Data Collection

The purpose of the study was explained and consent was sought from the concerned authorities in Lahore and Coventry.in person; the Head teachers in Coventry were approached telephonically to proceed with the research; and a commitment of anonymity and confidentiality was ensured and all queries were responded to in each city (Cohen et al., 2000).

In both locations, three self-addressed envelopes, each containing a covering letter, a questionnaire, beginning with a preamble, leading to thirteen questions based on transformational leadership, in participants' native language, were given to each Head teacher for later collection. 100% fully answered questionnaires were received in Lahore while seven out of nine sparsely filled out questionnaires were received from the teachers in Coventry.

In Lahore, the researcher spent four hours in each school and met with staffs and Head teachers in their offices, where the nature of the relationship within the staffs and with their Head teachers was observed after classroom observations.

In Coventry, respective Head teachers gave an observatory tour of each school and allowed meeting with their staff for half an hour in the staffroom. To secure maximum details about the sample schools the observation accounts were recorded on the same day and acknowledged that the researcher's presence and the Head teacher may have had its impact on the setting and the nature of interactions (Cohen et al., 2000).

A questionnaire based on Transformational leadership theory was designed that was pilot tested, and the same set of sequential questions was used in the interviews with the Head teachers and inspectors respectively to enhance construct and content validity and reduce subjectivity of this research. The verification to of the participants' responses was ensured to enhance reliability of this research. In addition, triangulation was accounted for by careful selection of sources and methods to strengthen validity (Cohen et al., 2000).

This small-scale research project is not generalisable but provides valuable insights into understanding of leadership in developed and developing countries. However, variables, such as Head teacher's gender, age or qualifications, the resources available to schools, the extent of decentralization, and the degree of support from superiors could not be included in this study. In addition, the impact of Education department and the researcher's presence on the routine of the schools was accounted for.

5. Methods of Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The interview and questionnaire accounts obtained from Lahore were translated into English and cross-referenced by a lecturer from the Lahore University of Management Sciences, Lahore. All transcriptions were then coded into themes and categorized on the basis of the research questions and their objectives. The analysis was interpreted by the content analysis technique (Cohen et al., 2000). The data was presented in a word-account the analysis of responses received through the questionnaires was undertaken in three stages, which involved: editing, data reduction and post-coding (ibid, 2000).

The observation accounts were coded and interpreted according to cross-references with the data collected by other instruments and reviewed prior to presentation of explanation of the observed phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2000). The main limitations of the study included firstly lack of accessibility to obtain a random sample in both cities; secondly, the researcher could not access the schools independently; thirdly, lack of access to the parents in both locations; fourthly, the participants' understanding may have been subject to their levels of awareness, qualifications, service structure, decentralization, and CPD provided in each country.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This research has been grounded in the transformational theory of leadership. The following themes emerged from the process of data analysis:

Control: The Head teachers in Lahore associated leadership with an authority figure who shepherds the staff rather than collaborates and creates teams.

Management: The Head teachers and teachers in Lahore understood leadership and management to be synonymous and linked with *'the smooth functioning of schools'* whereas in Coventry a clear understanding of the differences in the definitions of leadership and management exists.

Problem solving: Problem solving was understood as Head teachers' sole responsibility in Lahore whereas in Coventry the teachers as well as the Head teachers viewed it as a shared activity. One of the unintended findings included that the Head teachers do not have the autonomy to solve problems pertaining to teachers' performance, as they are not entitled to recruit or dismiss them in Lahore. This issue poses problems for the Head teachers in creating effective teams, leading them and improving their schools.

Role model: Head teachers' were considered to be role models in both locations. As per transformational theory role modelling best practices and high performance expectations is associated with the role of leadership.

Influence: Influence according to the data was also associated with the Head teachers' role in both locations and it was understood that effective leaders tend to have a positive affect on management, teachers and students' learning.

Unitary role: Majority of the Head teachers in Lahore believed to have a unitary role and sole responsibility to manage and improve the schools and viewed teachers as implementers of decisions whereas this role was associated with the whole team in the schools in Coventry to achieve school improvement.

Guidance/Direction/Vision: Guidance was unanimously thought to be Head teachers' responsibility though the flexibility available to Head teachers in Coventry to create a vision is absent in Lahore.

Decision-making: The teachers in Lahore viewed decision-making as Headteachers' duty while the representative from the Education department and the Head teachers viewed their role as of implementer of Education department's directives. However, the process was understood as a shared process in Coventry.

In conclusion, understanding of leadership differs in two locations. Transformational leadership theory is applicable in developed countries where education systems facilitate and promote transformational leadership. In developing countries where the education systems are reliant on formal hierarchical systems, the concept is yet to be developed fully. The theory itself does not take into account the challenges faced by the Head teachers in developing countries that is open ground for further research. The study also recommends Head teachers' capacity-building to expedite the process of school improvement in Lahore.

This study was framed to obtain the managements' understanding in Coventry and Lahore and was analysed in the light of teachers' understanding and the researcher's observations. Exploration of parents' and pupils' leadership perspectives will allow an insight to the beneficiaries' points of view. In addition, the participant Head teachers in Lahore highlighted lack of empowerment and the quality of followership. Therefore, the impact of these variables is open grounds for future research.

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