

Leadership Strategies for School Improvement: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to identify the leadership strategies for school improvement as perceived by the teachers, head teachers and district school managers. The Executives District Officers Education (EDOs-E), District Education Officers (DEOs), head teachers and teachers working in secondary schools of Punjab province constituted the population for this study. Three EDOs, three DEOs, 12 head teachers and 24 teachers from three districts were selected as sample of the study using stratified random sampling technique. Qualitative data was collected using a semi structured interview protocol. Collected data was analyzed through thematic method of analysis. The main findings of the study revealed that majority of the participants suggested leadership strategies for school improvement such as: distribution of leadership responsibilities and powers; involvement of staff members in the process of decision making and school activities; classroom observation and monitoring; meetings with teachers and parents; parental and community involvement in school activities.

Keywords: Leadership, Leadership strategies, School improvement, Head teacher, Qualitative approach

1. Introduction

Effective leadership is widely accepted as being a key constituent in achieving school improvement. The evidence from the international literature demonstrates that effective leaders exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of students (Leithwood, Jantzi & Mascall, 1999).

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The quality of teaching strongly influences levels of pupil's motivation and achievement. It has been consistently argued that the quality of leadership matters in determining the motivation of teachers and the quality of teaching in the classroom (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001).

School effectiveness and school improvement research have constantly emphasised on the importance of leadership in producing good and better schools (Busher, Harris & Wise, 2000; Harris, 2002). There is a plethora of evidence to suggest that the quality of leadership positively enhances teaching and learning. Leadership has been shown to make a difference to the school's ability to improve by influencing the motivation of teachers and the quality of teaching which takes place in the classroom (Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2001). Hallinger (2011) states that, "the leadership can be an important catalyst and supporting factor for school improvement" (p. 133). Leithwood and Reil (2003) note that, "large scale studies of schooling conclude that the effects of leadership on student learning are small but educationally significant" (p. 3).

School improvement efforts characterized schools that strive to maintain standards and student intake. School improvement is defined an approach to educational change aiming at enhancing student achievement by focusing on teaching and learning and increasing school capacity to manage change (Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994). This requires "target setting" (Flecknoe, 2001) or determining for staff and students the expected outcomes. Preparing for accreditation is an example of a school undergoing improvement (Williams, 2001) based on evaluation of schools and students' strengths and weaknesses.

Reynolds, Hopkins and Stoll, (1993) stated that school improvement focuses on individual teachers or group of teachers. It concentrates on school processes and it is concerned with change in school exclusively. Its main focus is practitioner knowledge rather than research knowledge.

Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1994) regard school improvements as a distinct approach to educational change that enhances students' outcomes as well as strengthens the school's capacity for managing change. In this sense school improvement is about raising students' achievements through focusing on teaching-learning process and the conditions which support it.

School improvement researchers focus on the processes and strategies that schools undertake to sustain successful performance (Fullan, 1991). They aim to understand change processes that produce successful outcomes. Literature has identified different processes and strategies that a successful school leader can adopt to improve his/her school. Since, it is accepted fact that school head is the key player that plays a major role in the improvement of an institution. However, the question is that how can he or she improves his /her school. What strategies he/she should adopt for the improvement of school. Keeping in view these questions, this study has been designed to suggest some leadership strategies for school improvement as perceived by different stakeholders i.e. teachers, head teachers and district school managers.

2. Method and Procedure

The study was qualitative in its nature. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview protocol.

2.1. Selection of Sample

The population of the study was scattered all over the Punjab Province that comprising 36 districts. It was difficult to draw a random sample from the whole population and to collect data from such a scattered population. So one-third districts (in total) were selected from which sample of the study was drawn. Multistage stratified random sampling technique was used for the selection of sample. In the first stage, 36 districts of Punjab province were divided in to three geographical and socio-cultural zones. After that one district from each zone was selected randomly from which four secondary schools (2 male (1 urban + 1 rural) + 2 female (1 urban + 1 rural) from each district were selected as sample using simple random sampling technique.

The respective head teachers of selected schools and two teachers (one elementary and one secondary) from each selected school were included in the sample. The respective EDOs-E and DEOs (SE) of selected districts were also included in the sample. The selected sample of each category can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected Sample for Interview of each Category of the Population

Sr. No.	Category of population	Selected sample				Total
		Urban		Rural		
		M	F	M	F	
1.	Executive District Officers (Education)	02	01	-	-	03
2.	District Education Officers (SE)	02	01	-	-	03
3.	Head Teachers of Secondary Schools	03	03	03	03	12
4.	Teachers of Secondary Schools	06	06	06	06	24
Total		13	11	09	09	42

2.2 Development of Interview Protocol

To collect the qualitative data from EDOs and DEOs; head teachers and teachers, a semi-structured interview protocol was used. After review of the related literature/ documents and discussion with the experts, the researchers prepared a semi-structured interview protocol. In first part of the interview protocol, respective participants were requested to provide some biographical information which included their name, academic and professional qualification; teaching and administrative experiences. In second part of the interview protocol, total 10 questions and some sub questions were included related to the planning of daily activities; school management, leadership and instruction; parental and community involvement in school activities and professional development of head teachers. They were also requested to give their suggestions that how a good head teacher can improve his/ her school performance.

2.3 Validation of Interview Protocols

To meet the purpose of this research, it was deemed that since the data sought was complex but to encompass the area of research about which the researchers already know a lot, an in-depth semi-structured interview protocol prepared in advance would be the best approach.

This would allow clear differences and similarities to emerge between respondents but would also be flexible enough to allow further probing, through the use of appropriate prompts, of interesting points or areas where information was difficult to elicit. The process of validation of interview protocol was as follow:

Self developed interview protocol for executives (EDOs and DEOs), head teachers and teachers was validated by experts' opinions. After development of interview protocol, it was presented to three relevant professionals for their expert opinions. They pointed out some ambiguities in the format, sequence and language of the items. These were discussed with experts and improved the instrument accordingly. After getting feedback on interview protocol and improving it accordingly, the final draft of interview protocol was piloted to six participants taken two from each category i.e. teachers, head teachers and executive. The pilot interview itself was done with the provisional schedule and it lasted for a span of time from 20-40 minutes. Keeping this the minimum time required was set about 30 minutes for each interview. Majority of the questions were clear except some of the probes for questions. This needed to be explained in different words and at some length to clarify exactly what was being asked.

This practice of interviewing the stakeholders helps the researchers not only to improve the instrument weaknesses but also ensured improvement in their confidence, competence and knowledge of interviewing. They learned how to do a successful probing and in-depth investigation into how to bring reality to the surface.

2.4 Interview Recording

All the interviews were recorded that include: three Executive District Officers (Education.); three District Education Officers (SE); 12 head teachers of secondary schools – six male and six female, and 24 teachers of secondary schools- 12 male and 12 female. The researchers visited the sampled participants one by one and recorded the interviews. Some general and ethical considerations were taken before conducting the interviews. General safeguards to the participants during the interview included the use of an informed consent form, sharing the interview agenda and timeframe, and the use of tape recorder to ensure accuracy of information. All agreements made with participants in the study were kept by the researchers. In addition, the identity of the participants was kept in confidence.

A formal letter to the interviewees was endorsed by the researchers before one to two weeks for the conduct of the interviews. The interviewees were asked to fix date and time as per their convenience and the researchers confirmed from them one or two days before the already fixed schedule.

The average duration of each interview was 30 minutes; however these ranged between 25-40 minutes from interviewee to interviewee.

3. Results and Discussion

Analysis of collected data was performed through thematic analysis method. Main themes were identified; tallies were marked for each of the theme in each question and then percentage for each response was calculated. These themes were made on the basis of different constructs and ideas. Percentages of tallies were taken as percentages of the respondents to have an empirical view of this qualitative data. In addition, direct quotations of the respondents' views were used to enhance credibility and authenticity of findings. Quotations from data also helped to retain the "voice" of the respondents.

Prior to discussing the analysis and description of different questions of the interview protocol, it would be appropriate to briefly see the demographic profile of the interviewees.

3.1 Demographic Profile of Interviewees

The first part of the interview protocol was about demographic information about the interviewees. Four aspects were taken into account in this respect: academic and professional qualifications; teaching and administrative experience. In this regard, findings of the study reveal that of the total 42 executives, head teachers and teachers who were interviewed: only six interviewees held M. Phil qualification. Twenty six had Master degree in any discipline. The educational qualification of the other 12 interviewees was BA/BSc. It is interesting that not a single interviewee had a Ph.D degree in any discipline. With regard to professional qualification of the interviewees, analysis indicates that of the total 42 interviewees, about two-third of the interviewees held M.Ed/M.S.Ed or M.A. Education as professional qualifications while other one-third had earned B.Ed or B.S.Ed degree.

With regard to teaching experience of the interviewees, analysis indicates that all of the interviewees of three categories had some teaching experience at any level. Three of the six executives had teaching experience in the range of 1-5 years while other three were in the range of 6-10 years.

A little less than two-third of the head teachers had teaching experience more than five years while other were in the range of 1-5 years. Similarly a little less than two- third of the teachers (64.3%) held the experience more than 10 years while other 35.7% were in the range of 1-10 years.

With regard to administrative experiences, it displays that all the executives held the administrative experience more than five years. Three of the six executives were in the range of 6-10 years while other three were in the range of 11-20 years. Similarly a great majority of the head teachers (89%) held the administrative experience more than five years; 50% were in the range of 6-10 years and 50% in the range of 11-20 years. With regard to teachers' interviewees, 50% of the teachers did not have any administrative experience; one-third was in the range of 1-5 years and other seven had the administrative experience in the range of 6-10 years. Overall, about half of the interviewees held administrative experience more than five years as head of a secondary or higher secondary school or DEO/Dy.DEO/EDO etc.

3.2 Leadership Strategies for School Improvement

The second part of the interview protocol contained ten key questions and some additional questions under few major questions. In response to different questions asked to the interviewees, they suggested different strategies for head teachers to improve the performance of their schools which can summarized as follows:

3.2.1 Delegation of Powers

A main question asked to the interviewees was: should a head teacher delegate his/her powers to teachers according to the need of the institution? If yes, what kind of powers he/she should delegate?

In response to the main question, overall majority (72%) of the interviewees agreed that leadership should be a distributed activity. But head teachers were least agreed as compare to teachers and executives.

Overall, they suggested that head teacher must distribute the responsibilities and powers widely throughout the school according to the need of the institution.

They stated that leadership should be embedded in various organisational contexts within school communities, not centrally vested in a person or an office. One of the interviewee asserted his opinion in these words:

'Yes' head teacher must distribute the authority and power within staff members. Because school improvement may be more likely to occur when leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community and where teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them.

It shows that majority of the respondents were of the view that head teacher should delegate the responsibilities and powers related to school functions. They thought that school improvement may be more likely to occur when leadership is distributed and when teachers have a vested interest in the development of the school. Sharing leadership responsibilities with staff members is a common theme in the literature of school effectiveness and improvement. Leithwood and Mascall (2008) found that the distribution of power to those lower in the organizational hierarchy leads to a greater sense of responsibility and motivation to implement organizational goals. The shared goals and values at the core of teacher leadership is also an important influential factor in generating effective schools (Teddle & Reynolds, 2000).

In response to the sub-question of the major question, i.e. what kind of powers he/she should delegate? Mixed answers were received as some of the interviewees suggested that head teacher can delegate powers related to instructional supervision and students' discipline. Some suggested regarding financial aspects of school and leaves of the staff while some interviewees stated that head teacher can distribute responsibilities related to academic work plan, conduct of exams and co-curricular activities and community affairs.

3.2.2 Involvement of Teachers and other Stakeholders in School Activities

Findings of the study reveal that in response of a question that was asked to the interviewees, a remarkable majority (87%) of the participants suggested that head teacher must involve staff members in the process of decision making.

He/she should encourage participants to share their views on different matters and respect their views and ideas. Some participants stated that shared goals and values are an important influential factor in generating effective schools. They suggested that schools need to move from a hierarchical, top-down structure towards a more democratic model, in which teachers can directly influence development and school improvement process (Katzenmeyer & Moller 2001). In their view teachers' participation in decision making may be positively related to school effectiveness and improvement, as a female teacher commented:

I feel leadership should be a shared responsibility of teachers and head teacher. Teachers generally felt that leadership is more effective where teachers are more strongly involved in decision making process.

Another participant (EDO) gave his suggestions as:

A good leader always involves his subordinates in decision-making process. Therefore, I feel that head teacher should ensure fully involvement of staff members in the school planning. He/she should spread leadership responsibility school-wide by building teams throughout the staff of the school.

Previous research (Taylor & Bogotch, 1994) also indicates that teachers' involvement in decision making was positively related to school effectiveness. Awan, Zaidi and Bigger (2008) found that subordinates are more motivated in cases where they work with a participative leader and have high perception about their ability. High participative leadership had a positive effect on subordinates' job expectancies, with high need for achievement.

The subsequent part of the main question was 'generally in what kinds of matters teachers should be involved'? Varied responses were given by the interviewees in response to this question. Majority of the interviewees suggested that staff members should be involved in all decisions regarding school improvement i.e. targets setting, achievement of targets, academic work plan, conduct of curricular and co-curricular activities, celebration of special days and other matters of schools. A few of the interviewees were of the view that although staff members should be involved in decision-making process but they should not be involved in all decisions. They should only be involved in limited decisions.

Concluding the opinions and suggestions of the interviewees in regard to this question, it is clear that: except of few, all were in favour of involving staff members in all process of decision making regarding school improvement.

With regard to the involvement of other stakeholders in school activities, majority of the interviewees recommended that head teacher can enhance the performance of school through participation of parents and local community in the activities of school. In their opinion, the involvement of parents and local community in school activities may be benefit for school improvement. In this regard a male teacher remarked that:

I think that head teacher must identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school and focus on what needs to be accomplished. It is also considered important to consult others in the community in order to determine the school's priorities and precise needs.

3.2.3 Classroom Observation and Monitoring

Participants were also requested to give their opinions and suggestions about classroom observation and monitoring by the head teacher. Analysis indicates that by and large all the interviewees were of the opinion that head teacher must visit classroom and observe and monitor the classroom teaching. He/she should provide academic guidance to teachers and help them in improving their teaching. He/she should take notes, point out strengths and weaknesses and talk with teachers (conferencing) after teaching. He/she should present model lessons for teachers to improve teaching and learning. A female head teacher commented in this regard as:

I always provide time for teachers to discuss their problems and issues regarding teaching. I also observe classroom teaching and guide them. In order to raise standards of teaching and students' achievement, I suggest that head teacher should monitor and observe classroom teaching and provide support and guidance to them.

It is pertinent to mention here that previous research also highlighted the importance of monitoring and evaluation of teaching (Franey, 2002; Sanders, 1999).

Harris (2002) indicated in her study of seconded leaders that poor teaching was not ignored or tolerated – individuals experiencing difficulty were monitored, supported and offered a development programme to address the problem. Agezo (2010) found that effective principals made it clear that student development and the provision of a well-rounded academic program are the primary goals of effective schools. The principals of effective schools effectively monitored student progress and provided the needed feedback to enhance effectiveness.

With regard to the subsequent question i.e. 'how frequently he/she observes the class room teaching'? Mixed responses were given by the interviewees. Nine of the interviewees suggested that head teacher should observe classroom teaching biweekly; one-quarter (11) interviewees stated that head teacher should observe the classroom teaching weekly; one-third (14) of the interviewees suggested fortnightly while other participants recommended for classroom observation after one month. As a participant stated that:

I suggest that due to overload of administrative work, head teacher should assign this responsibility to a senior and qualified staff member who observe classroom teaching regularly after a specific interval and guide and help teachers in improving their teaching.

Analysing the opinions and suggestions of the interviewees, it can be concluded that all the interviewees were in the favour of head teacher's classroom observation but there was a little difference with regard to interval of observation. A little less than two-thirds of the interviewees were in favour of weekly or fortnightly classroom observation.

3.2.4 Improving Quality of Teaching and Learning

Findings of the study reveal that majority of the participants also suggested that the focus of the head teacher should be on improving quality of teaching and learning. He/she should use several strategies to improve instruction, as a female head teacher suggested that:

Head teacher should improve the quality of teaching and learning in the school. In order to improve teaching, effective school leaders can make use of a number of strategies including: setting high standards, providing time for professional development and monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching.

3.2.5 Meetings with Teachers and Parents

With regard to the meetings of head teacher with teachers and parents, analysis shows that by and large all the interviewees were of the opinion that head teacher must arrange meetings with teachers and parents to know the problems of teachers and students and to discuss other matters of school. But with regard to the interval of the meetings there was variation among the responses of the interviewees. For example, a few (5) of the interviewees suggested that head teacher should arrange meetings with teaching staff and parents on every week-end. About two of the ten interviewees stated that head teacher should arrange meetings with teachers and parents fortnightly while about one-thirds (14) of the participants recommended for teachers and head teachers meetings after one month. Other interviewees stated that it should not be fixed but this can be arranged as and when it is needed. Analysing opinions and suggestions of the interviewees, it can be concluded that majority of the interviewees were of the opinion that head teacher's meeting with teachers and parents should be arranged regularly after one month or according to need of the situation.

3.2.6 Professional Development of head Teachers and Staff

With regard to the professional development of the head teacher and staff members, majority of the interviewees suggested continuous professional development of head teacher and staff members as an important element for school improvement. They thought that continuous professional development of head teacher and staff members can contribute effectively towards school improvement, as commented an EDO:

I think professional development improves teachers' performance within the subject areas. Therefore, I suggest head teacher must emphasis on professional development of teachers as well as himself..

Another participant asserts his views in these words:

Continuous professional development plays an important role in the process of school improvement. Therefore, I think continuous professional development of head teachers must be essential part of theirs' job. Every head teacher must undergo short duration training after one or two years during his/her entire service.

It is interesting that previous research studies (Englefield, 2001; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Hopkins, 2001) also emphasised the importance of professional development of head teachers. In this regard, researchers found that the head teachers of successful schools emphasized on the personal professional development. They thought that professional development of head teacher can effectively contribute towards school improvement (Mulford & Edmunds, 2009; Mulford, Johns, & Edmunds, 2009; Salfi, 2011). Nawab (2011) states that the focus of the school leadership and change agents should be on the professional development of school leadership. If they have knowledge and skills required according to their roles, they could be able to develop better learning environment in schools.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Opinions and suggestions for school improvement given by the interviewees of three categories may be summarized as: sharing decision making power and responsibility with staff; ensuring adequate involvement of staff in decision making process; taking staff's opinion into account; ensuring effective group problem solving during the meetings with staff; creating a shared vision for school; identifying strengths and weaknesses of school; fostering the leadership capabilities of staff; providing autonomy for teachers; modelling best practices and important organisational values; demonstrating high performance expectations; creating a productive school culture; developing structures to foster participation in school decisions; managing the instructional programme and promoting school climate; talking with teachers (conferencing); creating opportunities and promoting teachers' professional growth; fostering teacher reflection; monitoring and evaluation of teaching; improving students' behaviour and attitudes; involving parents and community in school improvement .

On the basis of the opinions and suggestions given by the interviewees in this regard, it is suggested that head teacher may make decision that motivate both staff and students and emphasize on the improvement of quality of teaching and learning. He/she may use a number of strategies for bringing out the best in staff e.g. the power of praise; involving others in decision making and giving professional autonomy. His/her emphasis may be on the continuing development of their staff whether through in-service training, visits to other schools, or peer support scheme. He/she may place a particular emphasis upon generating positive relationships with parents and fostering a view of the school as being part of rather than apart from the community. He/she may place an emphasis upon people rather than systems and invite others to lead. He/she may create a climate of collaboration and there may be a commitment to work together.

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