

School Excellence: Principals' Perceptions

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Abstract

It was generally believed that the education system of Pakistan, in general, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in particular, was in shambles. Barring a few exceptions, the schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa direly needed improvement. Turning schools into Centres of Excellence required identification of factors that promoted effectiveness and excellence. The study was carried out to identify factors promoting excellence in schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The population of the study included all the boys' high Schools of Peshawar city. The sample comprised 30 principals/headmasters of boys' high schools (26 from private sector and 4 from public sector). The tool of the study was an opinionnaire, which was fielded to principals/headmasters of both sectors. The opinionnaire contained items and statements of multi-dimensional nature. The data analysis was given both quantitative and qualitative treatment. In order to be logical and scientific in approach the analysis was further made meaningful with the application of statistical measures. The outcome of the study revealed a number of factors that could help convert a school into a centre of excellence.

Keywords: Excellence, Effective, Public and private schools, Opinionnaire, Factors

Introduction

Education is regarded as an enterprise. Its two aspects of internal and external efficiency lead to excellence in schools. Its main purpose is to produce the number and type of students, who have the knowledge and skills required for actual work market. As such the outcome of the school system should commensurate with the investment of all types of resources in that enterprise.

Deteriorating quality of education is a matter of concern and anxiety to all. Needless to say that public, in general, students, teachers and parents, in particular, have social and moral responsibilities to recast education system in order to make it compatible to the growing needs of stakeholders. It is also important because the world's scenario of education is reshaping itself to meet the challenges and concerns of globalization.

It is believed that excellence is multi-dimensional in nature. It is not only the achievement of high scores but many other factors also contribute to effectiveness of schools. Apparently the important elements that usually contribute to excellence include, but are not restricted to, curriculum and instruction, assessment and evaluation system, physical infrastructure, academic facilities, learning and human resources, finance and management, research and scholarship, community links and outreach.

The National Education Policy (2009) documented that improvement could be brought about in the education system through well-trained, devoted and committed teachers, a curriculum that met the national and international standards, a proper assessment programme and an adequate learning environment. The most important element was the quality of teacher, on which there is scarce research in literature.

Excellence is identified with effective schools which, like other human enterprises, grow over a period of time, through persistent efforts for changing conditions; painstaking approaches for maintaining the complex processes and relationship within and outside the schools. A number of studies documented that attempting to improve the quality of personal relationships among stakeholders improved school climate, staff morale, and public confidence in schooling.

The Teaching and Learning Research Program Forum (2006) reported that the most important purpose of learning was to make a person able to unfold his internal qualities. On the other hand teachers were required to keep in mind previous knowledge of the learner. The study suggested that teachers should perform different activities in the class in order to make the environment of the class healthy by discussing and solving the students' social and emotional problems for effective learning process.

Daggett (2005) described excellence as something that prepared students for the global challenges. It enabled students to compete with students around the globe. His suggestions, in this regard, had surpassed the

U.S. education system that did not fulfill the needs of the students of the modern world. In spite of the great efforts by the educators, the U.S. education system did not prepare students to acquire knowledge about global issues. The syllabi and goals set by the system limited the students to the national interests only and deprived the students from the benefits, they really expected from the system. Though such students were good at some skills but a total failure at the global level. Daggett felt that the US education system did great injustice to its students by limiting them to the areas of national interest only. No doubt such students were skillful in that particular area and scored high marks also but those marks did not fetch them any success, when they competed with the students around the globe especially with someone from China or India.

The role of the principals as instructional supervisor has also received cognizance in literature and one of the important means for improving teaching learning process. Fink and Resnik (2001) argued that the core of instructional leadership was the solid knowledge of the processes that governed teaching and learning, supplemented by leadership skills such as recruiting the right teachers for the posts, creating a culture of learning, which included all members of the school community.

The nature of relationship among the adults who inhabited educational institutions had more to do with quality, character-building of students, achievement of the educational programmes and the professionalism of the teachers than did any other factor in public education system. The success of a school depended on the effective and positive interaction between the principal and staff, between teacher and teacher, between teachers and parents, and also among the students themselves. To prioritize these interactions, the principal was considered key person and, of course, in better position to influence those different relationships. It was through better collegial and professional relationships of teachers that schools were considered better places for learning and the principals could convert adversarial relationships into collegial among teachers with the help of leadership skills.

Taylor and Ryan (2004) quoted Atkinson, Sir Dexter Hutt, Hayden Evans, Tony Broody had listed some of the following ways in which the school principals sought to turn the school into calm and orderly center of learning:

- Have clear sanctions
- Be visible
- Bring back to the school uniform
- Don't tolerate truancy
- Be firm on substance abuse
- Get the basics right
- Make the curriculum relevant
- Use sports to improve behaviour
- Bin it don't drop it
- Win the support of parents

Research Questions

The following key questions were examined by the study:

1. What factors promoted excellence in boys' high schools both in public and private sectors?
2. What, in global and local perspective, were parameters for attaining excellence in schools?
3. What were the factors that contributed to promote excellence in high schools?

Methodology

It was a descriptive study that attempted to explore factors that promoted excellence in 30 boys' high schools both in public and private sectors. The following tools were used in the study.

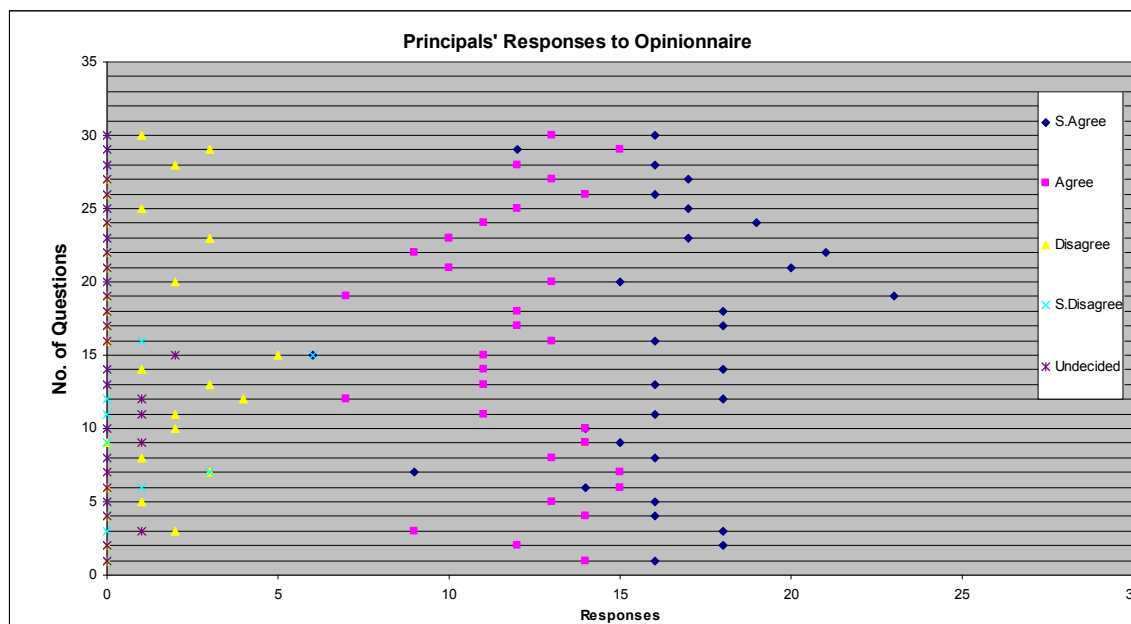
- Opinionnaire for principals/headmasters of sampled 30 schools.
- Literature review.

Research Design

The primary data were based on information obtained from principals/headmasters through opinionnaires. Secondary data were obtained from study of documents as well as review of relevant literature. An opinionnaire containing 60 items/statements was fielded to 30 principals/headmasters. Their responses were obtained which were graphically presented with discussion on each item. The data were quantified converted into percentages and presented with the help of graphs for drawing inferences and results.

The responses obtained from 30 principals on the basis of opinionnaire regarding factors promoting excellence in schools were subjected to statistical analysis by using a non-parametric test, i-e- Krushkal Wallis test, through minitab to test the similarities in the principals responses. The numbers of subjects were 60 with five choices and these responses were obtained on the traditional scale of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. The research questions formulated for the study was statistically proved equally important. The conclusion was that the responses of all principals were the same, at the average as shown in Figure-1.

Figure-1



Outcome of the Study

The outcome of the study was based on principals' perceptions which indicated the following factors that could take a school to the apex of excellence:

- School excellence was not owing to a single factor or high morale or students' high achievement or high pass percentages rather it was the net result, many other inputs, which included, among others, proper curricula and well-trained teachers.
- Better relationships among stakeholders improved school climate, staff morale, and public confidence in schooling.
- Curricular and co-curricular programmes of school promoted sustainable commitment to educational outcomes.
- Principals' interventions did make difference in school improvement efforts. Those efforts included proper monitoring of progress of students and feedback given to them.
- School improvement largely owed itself to the leadership skills of principals. Those included clear visions of what they wanted their schools to become, visions that focused on students and their needs, and their translation into goals for their faculty. The principals met expectations who for the teachers, students and administration.
- Effective principals knew fully what teachers were doing in the class and were able to evaluate the teachers' performance logically.
- Principals' promoted school culture that included values, symbols, beliefs and shared meaning of parents, students, teachers and community. Through their leadership qualities they could secure full cooperation of all teachers for school improvement.
- Teachers used all possible instructional strategies for effective teaching-learning process for which all necessary equipment and materials were to be provided to them.
- Principals were expected to resolve inter-teacher conflicts by promoting collegiality and discouraging adversarial relationships among teachers.
- Effective schools met the high expectations of the society by their best accomplishments, focus on teaching and learning process, and commitment to school goals.

- In excellent schools work had significance and meaning for all those in the school.
- Effective principals knew specific details about the performance of their teachers and extended support to solve their problems.
- Effective principals discussed with the teachers on the areas that needed improvement and how much improvement might come about.
- Effective principals identified administrative problems and took necessary corrective measures.

Results

Based on principals' responses the study provided clue to some important factors which, when available, could convert the school into a centre of excellence. Those included relevant curricula, well-trained teachers, implementation of co-curricular activities, use of appropriate instructional strategies, effective principals, support and collegiality of teachers and the needed infrastructure, the principals' interventional role in supervision as well as instructional support were also important factors for leading the schools to the apex of excellence.

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