Government special education's principals' perceptions about total quality management (TQM in education): A qualitative research

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Abstract

The service sector is a rapidly changing sector and this dynamic culture offers a challenge for the service companies to lead or to actually survive in this competitive environment. As the education sector is a part of the overall service industry, this raises the need for a strong framework to reach for high quality service in the education sector. Though, adoption of TQM in the educational institutions is of common practice in the Western world, however, the history of TQM adoption in the Pakistani educational institutions generally and in special education's institutions is still struggling to get its due status. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of special education's principals about TQM and its implementation along with other unexplored views about TQM. In doing so, this qualitative study was conducted in special education's institutes. 15 principals were interviewed. After collecting the data, standard qualitative data analysis procedure was applied to understand the perceptions of the principals about TQM. The results of this study show that in institutes of special education TQM is still a vague concept and there is still room for improvement that influences the level of TQM practices in these institutions.

1. Introduction

The service industry is a rapidly changing industry and this dynamic culture offers a challenge for the service companies to lead or to actually survive in this competitive environment. As the education sector is a part of the overall service industry where students are the customers; this particular factor raises the need for a solid base to be developed to reach for high quality service in the education sector. Hence, adaptation of Total Quality Management (TQM) tool can provide the needed quality which will enhance and strengthen service delivery in special education.

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According to Idrus (1995) adoption of TQM in the educational sectors is emphasized in the Western countries which adopted TQM with an aim to improve the overall quality to attract more students both from home and abroad. This strategy increased their revenues in the form of fees from the foreign students (Rampa, 2004). Thus, it is not unusual to observe the great potential of the education sector that has significantly contributed to the developed and the developing countries in terms of sizable economic advantages and benefits.

Though, there are many countries presently offering high quality education around the globe; however, Pakistan's acceptability as an international destination for general education in general and for special education in particular is yet to come. Thus, there is a need for investigating the principals' perception on the current level of TQM practices in Pakistani special education's institutions to identify the present barriers which have been overlooked by the academicians till date. Consequently, this study attempts to address the issue to introduce some important indicators of TQM practices currently exist in the special education's institutions of Pakistan. In addition, policy makers need to find the requirements for sustainable quality education in general and in special education particularly.

1.1.Literature review

The history of TQM is dated back in 1950's when Japanese manufacturing industry introduced the concept (Hashmi, 2007). When the Japanese realized that there is a need to introduce some special technique through which the overall operational process might improve, they gave birth to the concept of TQM (Deming, 1986). According to Brocka and Brocka (1992), TQM is a continuous management process where a whole lot of deliberation is needed in improving the performance of every level of operation by proper management of the both resources; human as well as capital. Töremen, Karakus and Yasan (2009) stated that, organizations are the places which have a defined set of aims and objectives to be achieved. As such, they cannot be thought of as separate from the outside world. To remain competitive, there is always a need to monitor every change that took place inside the organization. This helps in achieving better output for the overall organization. Hence, TQM has become the most vital tool that ensures the organization's goals are achieved and performances are improved (Günbayı&Cevik, 2004).

Furthermore, many studies in the literature developed and validated TQM critical factors or practices in both manufacturing and service fields. According to Waldman (1993), these are called "elements", whereas Dean and Helms (1996) described them as "practices", Hellsten and Kelfsjo (2000) named them as "techniques", Reed, Lemak and

Montgomery (1996) identified them as "processes" and Sitkin, Sutcliffe and Schroeder (1994) mentioned them as "principles".

1.2.Total quality management in education field

As a modern management approach, TQM can be used successfully in education field that are mainly focused on increasing the customer satisfaction (Munoz, 1999). Recent researches on TQM have brought a widely updated plan for educational reforms and modernization of educational organizations (Mutlu, 2001). The TQM principles have broad applications in educational organizations and have produced desirable outcomes (Munoz, 1999). With these applications, educational institution's improvement has become a continual process (Sallis, 2002). There is a considerable proximity between the principles of TQM and the principles of effective schools (Balcı,2002). The practice of TQM at schools has provided with a perspective to look at the handicaps facing effective schools and with a tool to remove the obstacles in the way of effective schools (Hamedoglu, 2002 and Sallis, 2002). In this aspect, the principles of TQM are appropriate for educational settings.

Rapid economic growth, global competition, downsizing, privatization, corporate mergers and the liberalization of global education have caused a surge in demand for TQM implementation in educational fields (Tay, 2001). It has become the most prestigious quality indicator for measuring the overall quality of an educational institution (Thiagarajan, 1996). As quality is a fundamental issue in education, the Government of Pakistan has also emphasized in improving the overall education quality for both public and private educational institutions and hgher education institutions with an aim to attract more foreign students (MOE, 2012). Moreover, the after the 18th amendment in the constitution of Pakistan Provinces are encouraged to ensure acquire quality in institutions irrespective of public or private educational institutions.

According to Saba(2009) quality maintenance is the main goal of every institution. Thus Higher education commission (HEC), in Pakistan has created Quality Assurance department which is concerned about maintaining Quality in the education sector to regulate them according to the criteria set by HEC. According to high education commission, Quality is achieving of standards and reaching the maximum outcome. Quality caters to all dimensions in higher education, from structuring of the program to the hiring of faculty. Thus to maintain a standard it is essential for the institution to create an appropriate environment in the institution. According to Higher Education Commission "The key factors influencing the quality of higher education is the quality of faculty, curriculum standards, technological infrastructure available, research environment, accreditation regime and the administrative policies and procedures implemented in institutions of higher learning". i. Quality has become an active unit;

therefore, Higher Education Commission has created the Quality Division, which clearly states the ordinance passed by the Government of Pakistan relating to the importance of quality in higher education. ii. In order to keep up with the global trends, the Higher Education Commission has established University Accreditation unit. It focuses on the establishment of new institution or degrees in Pakistan, arrangement on foreign collaboration with different universities worldwide, lastly the creation of Committees for updates on the education related issues. iii. The Higher Education Commission has also focused on the area of Plagiarism. They have clearly mentioned the after effects of committing the crime of plagiarism. The committee has also mentioned the name and papers of those people who have committed the crime of plagiarism. iv. Lastly, the establishment of a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 2005. The main purpose of this agency is to regulate the Quality Enhancement Cells (QEC) operated by different universities in Pakistan. They are majorly involved in the training of the faculty, development of the programs, creation of new policies and guidelines for setting the appropriate standards.

However, the current practices of TQM among the various educational institutions in Pakistan are not much satisfactory (Saba,2009). Hence, there is a need to upgrade the TQM practices in both special education's institutions and general education's institutes in Pakistan.

1.3.Attitude towards implementation of TQM in education

The absence of standards and attitudes in the implementation process creates differences in the way employees work, resulting in educational institution's maintainability problems (Newby, 1999). Poor documentation of the development process, in turn, makes educational institutions difficult to maintain and to improve (Bostan, 2005). In the education sector, the end product is the students as well as the employees' satisfaction (Mutlu, 2001). Past studies (Bonnie, 2011; Hashmi, 2007; Oakland & Oakland, 2001; Zhang, 2000) have found that difficulty in implementing TQM are the attitude, leadership commitment, lack of understanding and lack of resources. The literature informs that there is a significant relationship between Attitude to-wards Implementation and Principals' Perception towards TQM practices.

1.4.Leadership commitment to implement TQM in education

Strong leadership and their commitment towards the best practices are of vital importance for any organizations. Thus, there is a need to practice the TQM process in every level of the organizational functionality (Sisman & Turan, 2002). As a human focused approach, TQM can make important contributions to the increase of quality of education and the improvement of educational organizations (Hyde, 1992). As, both the

inputs and outputs of the educational organizations are human beings, and human beings are the main actors at all levels and in all processes of these organizations, without the satisfaction of human beings (both as customers and providers), it is very hard to en-sure the effectiveness of educational organizations (Hashmi, 2007). Therefore, quality issue at this basic level should matter, if management wants to attain a high quality education system (Lezotte, 1992). Therefore, top management should be committed towards their employees with an aim to improve the overall performance (Sisman & Turan, 2002). Thus the literature tells that there is a significant relationship between leadership commitment and principals' perception towards TQM practices through attitude towards implementation.

1.5. Employee Participation in Implementation of TQM in Education

According to Stevens (1993), employees are the vital part of the organization. They are the people who actually execute the tasks. Thus, they should be involved in the decision making process as they sometimes know better thing than the top management (Chapman & Al-Khawaldeh, 2002). As such, this will help the top management in avoiding the misunderstandings among the employees. Besides, the misunderstanding and change in design problems, there is an additional serious one which is the customers' increased expectations (Lam, 1996). This makes it really hard to meet the deadline and have a product with a quality high enough to impress the client (Boselie & Wiele, 2002). Hence, there is a need to understand the employees' requirements with an aim to increase productivity (Guimaraes, 1997). According to Dahlgaard and Dahlgaard (2006), in an organization's management, primarily senior management decided how the business should operate, including what the policies and objectives to be; how it should be organized; what jobs to be established; and how they should be done. In early days, it was an unquestioned axiom that if everyone did what the upper management required, the business would be successful. Literature has guided us that there is a significant relationship between employee participation and principals' perception towards TQM practices through attitude towards implementation.

1.6. Change management and implementation of TQM

Both principals (Yigit & Bayrakdar, 2003) and managers (Yıl-dız,2006) are aware of their lack of knowledge and skills and the need for a change to implement TQM effectively. There are some psychological, educational, managerial, economic, cultural and systematic problems in the way of successful TQM applications (Hamedoglu, 2002). But the educational institutions have the necessary potential and determination to solve these problems (Aydın&Sentürk, 2007).

1.7. Objectives

Present study intended to:

•Investigate the perceptions of special education's principals about TQM in special education institutes

•Investigate the perceptions of special education's principals about the factors that influence the implementation of TQM in special education institutes

•Investigate the current level of TQM practices in special education institutes

1.8. Research questions

Specifically, it addresses three questions:

•What are the perceptions of special education's principals about TQM in special education institutions?

•What are the perceptions of special education's principals about the factors that influence the implementation of TQM in special education institutions?

•What are the perceptions of special education's principals about the current level of TQM practices in special education institutes?

2. Research methodology

To explore and understand what are the perceptions of the principals of special education principals about TQM in special needs educational institutes   how they understand and view TQM in the context of the changing role of special needs education in Pakistan, exploratory case study was appropriate because it provides in-depth information about the human side of an issue by maintaining a long-term interaction with the participants (Merriam, 1988, 2009). The qualitative research methodology was adopted to make sense of, or interpret to phenomena in terms of the meanings that people would bring to their world and work from their experiences (Creswell, 1998).

The main reason for selecting case study method was that it offers valuable ways to explore the unheard and unexplored qualitative world of individuals as well as institutions, which makes it an appropriate tool to explore the human world in ways that can inform researchers about and give greater appreciation for their research participants' (RPs) lived worlds (Bogdan & Biklen,1998; Creswell, 1998). Since this study focuses on those principals' perceptions about TQM in special needs educational institutes this research method was considered appropriate. Miles and Huberman (1994) define such bounded situations and individuals as 'cases' or 'unit' of analyses.

There are 259 special education institutes in 36 districts of Punjab and 259 principals are serving these institutes as heads. See table-1.

Sr.No		Degree Colleges	Training Colleges	Higher Secondary	High	Middle	Primary	Other	Total
1		-	3	-	-	-	-	-	**3**
2		2	-	-	-	-	-	-	**2**
3		-	-	-	-	-	-	2	**2**
4		-	-	6	23	7	-	-	**36**
5		-	-	-	9	4	2	-	**15**
6		-	-	-	1	8	1	-	**10**
7		-	-	-	1	1	-	-	**2**
8		-	-	-	3	99	31	-	**133**
9		-	-	-	-	-	-	20	**20**
10		-	-	-	-	-	36	-	**36**
	Total	**2**	**3**	**6**	**37**	**119**	**70**	**22**	**259**

Table 1. Source: Special Education Department Govt. Of The Punjab

The sample was identified from among the 259 principals of special needs education from selected institutes from all over Punjab. The sample was purposeful because I wanted: (a) representation of maximum participants from all districts of

Punjab; (b) those who were currently holding positions as principals and (c) both males and females. Altogether 15, principals were selected to   participate in the study.

This exploratory journey of research started with entry negotiations for data collection (Glesne, 2011; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). After getting the approval from all concerned, I started negotiating with the intended RPs for their voluntary and informed consent. I shared the information   the nature and purpose of the study along with a written voluntary consent form seeking their willingness to participate in the study, allowing audio recording of the interviews. After receiving their signed consent forms, I initiated the data collection.

I collected data through semi-structured interviews that lasted from an hour to one and half hours till the data were saturated. Due to various reasons, including the safety and security concerns in Pakistan and the budget constraints, on-site observations were not possible; therefore, I did not conduct observations or recorded videos although I am aware of the fact that the hallmark of case study research is the use of multiple data sources, which enhances data credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2005; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). Moreover, since I only needed their views about TQM as they understand it, I only relied on the interview data. In future, I may take a larger study where I can expand it to engage in some on-site observations, focus group discussions and document analysis.

Interviews were conducted bilingually; both in Urdu and English. I gave them the choice to use a language in which they could comfortably share their thoughts, without any shyness. I used the tape recorder to capture the data, which were later transcribed. Data analysis was being done using the interactive model, where data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing / verification were done in two ways; that is, (i) analyzing by coding it independently while the data were being collected by me and (ii) then comparing my analysis once all the data were collected for ensuring reliability and mutual agreement (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In order to organize the data in a systematic manner, I developed color codes for the emerging themes from the data to facilitate the whole process of analysis. Through careful data analysis, 06 major themes were identified for meaning making.

The participants' confidentiality was ensured; their identity was masked using interview transcription numbers instead of using pseudo names and male and female identities. The data were collected at a time and place convenient for the RPs.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by the main research questions, i.e.

- What are the perceptions of special education's principals about TQM in special education institutes?

- What are the perceptions of special education's principals about the factors that influence the implementation of TQM in special education institutes?

- What are the perceptions of special education principals about the current level of TQM practices in special education institutes?

  The following subsidiary interview questions were asked:

- What are your perceptions about total quality management?

- What are current level of practices of TQM in special need education?

- What are the barriers in the way of implementation of total quality management?

- What are your perceptions about the effects of total quality management on teaching and learning activities in your schools?

- What are your views that how can you improve total quality management process in their schools?

- How much you are committed to implement TQM in your school?

- What is the attitude of your teaching, non-teaching and supporting staff toward TQM and its implementation?

- What are your perceptions about TQM as a philosophy or methodology to empower your employees and whole system?

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Clarity of school principles

According to the participants in order to increase the work efficiency, management should clarify the rules and regulations set by the state and institute in such a way that all the employees do not feel much pressure which in turn will increase the work efficiency and will ease the TQM practices among the employees.

"I believe that if the school, principal and all teaching and non-teaching staff are clear about the view that the student is the most important customer, it is an effective school…"(P-1)

"I always regard my students most important because students are the real beneficiaries of the whole system, if they are ignored you cannot claim quality…" (P-2)

"I have ensured in my school that including me all of my colleagues must make efforts to make all staff interact for the purpose of improving quality……" (P-3)

"I weekly call for a meeting in which I give directions to all of my colleagues to improve quality by cooperating students…" (P-4)

"I do not take decisions alone. I always request all stakeholders to participate in the decision making process which is vital to quality management…" (P-5)

"I have arranged to make the vision statement of my school visible to all who visit this school. Further I have clearly given directions to my staff that they must know the vision of this school…" (P-6)

"The vision of my school is clear to all of teachers and supporting staff…."

The vision of my school is a basis for my strategic planning and decision making…" (P-7)

"My vision is student focused…. Students are my customers, clients and I have clear vision that they should be satisfied…" (P-8)

3.2. School management

All participants of this study believed that by quality they generally mean the continuous refinement of products and services in a school, it is about whatever can be done by the school management using all the modern methods of administration in order to achieve quality. They all regarded TQM as a philosophy which could guide their line of action as educational managers. They perceived that by setting definite standards and having strong management among the work processes will ease the level of TQM practices among the employees.

"I always believe that nothing is perfect; you should provide services to your students with a continuous effort of improvement…" (P-1)

"I think quality management is to provide a quality leadership which works to eliminate barriers for stakeholders to work with cooperation, efficiently and confidently…" (P-2)

"I regard total quality management as a philosophy and methodology because it assists me to manage change and to set goals for dealing with diverse new internal and external pressures…" (P-3)

"I provide my teaching staff a role of instructional leader and believe that quality can be insured with continuous instructional guidance and counseling…" (P-10)

"I believe that the employees are a valuable and long term human resources…" (P-12)

3.3 School improvement

The participants of this study perceived that TQM and school improvement are indispensable for each other. A school is called an effective school if the heads of school

are concerned with the standards of quality. A school can achieve improvement with the help of quality standards.

"I believe that school needs a continuous improvement process and to achieve this continuum I make efforts to empower stake holders so that they may participate with their full potential to improve the quality of school, teaching and learning etc…" (P-4)

"Communication between all stakeholders ensures quality and for this I try to make a constant effort to communicate with stakeholders to motivate them to participate in the process of quality improvement…" (P-8)

"For school improvement right and positive attitudes of stakeholders contribute to the development of school culture of continuous improvement…" (P-11)

"I believe in team work because effective teams ensure commitment of all stake holders…" (P-6)

"I stress upon my employees of my school to the realization that the real reason of our existence is to offer educational services to the learners, parents, society, and other stakeholders…" (P-7)

"In my school I alaways emphasize on the development of analytical and synthetic thought development of the learners, to enhance their critical ability is my target…" (P-10)

"I believe that the best services are based on the enhancement of innovation and creativity among students…" (P-15)

3.4. Quality of school life

Atmosphere of respect, cooperation, trust shared decision and mutual understanding enhances the quality of school life. The participants of this perceived attractive, suitable, appropriate and conducive physical conditions very critical to school life. Thus all of the participants believed that TQM and quality of school life are similar.

"In my school I want to ensure an atmosphere of respect, cooperation and trust which, I believe that motivates students, stakeholders and employees…" (P-2)

"I believe in shared decision making and all the stakeholders of my school are recognized as contributors in the shared decision making process…" (P-3)

"In a school physical environment is helpful for ensuring quality so I believe that there are such physical conditions that motivate my employees. I provide them neat and clean, healthy and friendly physical conditions to work in…" (P-5)

"I always treat my employees, staff and learners with respect and dignity…" (P-6)

"I think the environmental conditions as; temperature, ventilation, noise, neatness, painting, furniture layout and physical lighting attracts clients/customers…i.e., learners, parents and society…" (P-7)

3.5. Change management

All participants perceived change necessary for TQM. According to them it is the need of change which makes it unavoidable. Change consequently brings fear among the employees and they all use different but constructive strategies to minimize resistance in their organizations. They perceived change also necessary for TQM. They all perceived that employee's participation in the decision making process is very important for managing change and to influence the level of TQM practices.

"I always make efforts to educate my employees about the need of change…" (P-1)

"I believe that you can eliminate fear of change among your employees with the help of shared goals, visions and decision making processes…" (P-2)

"I think employees always resist change but an effective head has a lot of strategies to eliminate this resistance. I as head invite all of my employees to participate in the decision making processes to reduce the possibilities of resistance…" (P-6)

"I share the vision behind the change to reduce or eliminate resistance from the side of my employees…" (P-7)

"I am proactive and start persuading my employees for change well-on time…" (P-8)

"I believe that if there is a good and open relationship among employees you can easily implement change…" (P-9)

3.6. Adoption of TQM

Participants perceived that increasing the practice of empowerment among the faculty members will increase the adoption of TQM. They believed that employees should be empowered to participate in quality improvement process which will ensure effective and constant communication to motivate faculty members so that they may be helpful and useful in the adaptation of TQM. According to Sallis, (2009), total quality management" (TQM) is a philosophy and a methodology that is widely used in business, and increasingly in education, to manage change or other processes. Most of the participants of the study perceived TQM as a philosophy which could be used to guide change, improvement and employees' empowerment in schools.

"I educate my employees to understand why our school, curriculum and evaluation need change…" (P-1)

"I know if I follow the standards of quality it will be pride and passion for my school…" (P-2)

"When I make planning for my school I consider the standards of quality as a guide under which light I decide the whole process of my school planning…" (P-3)

"I believe that school as an organization should always strive to develop the skills and abilities of personnel to improve facilities so that we may satisfy our learners…" (P-5)

"I always remain in contact with stakeholders and inform or keep them updated about the activities we are doing for the learners, what services we are providing to the learners and how we are meeting our goals. I use letters, internet and other sources of communication and information to keep all stakeholders aware of our actions…" (P-9)

4. Conclusions and recommendations

In special education institutes of Pakistan TQM is perceived as a good practice which can enhance the standards of the services for the special needs learners. In the present study all participants stressed upon the effective delivery of services and effectiveness of teaching and learning environment for the enhancement of TQM. According to the participants if a visionary leadership invites all the stakeholders to participate in the process of decision making, provision of services and implementation of TQM, no barriers are there for change. The whole study shows a very optimistic picture of TQM. The participants who were all principals had strong and deep awareness of standards of quality in their schools. Findings indicate that the door of change and improvement can be shut so there is still room for improvement that affects the level of TQM practices in the special education institutes, according to all participants. Therefore, there is a need to clarify the TQM policies that can significantly improve the TQM practices among the employees. Furthermore, determining the problems and the obstacles in the way of successful TQM implementations and to take necessary measures to remove these obstacles are important factors for the effective and smooth working of special education institutes and in general for the whole education system. For this, it is necessary to continually check the quality process and control the success of practices which involves change management.

This study significantly contributed to the theoretical enhancement of the current level of knowledge that studied the unique factors in the education sector that increase the applicability of TQM. Moreover, practically, the study findings will help both the academicians and the managements involved in the education sectors to get more knowledge in increasing the overall level of performance of special education institutes of Pakistan. Hence, in this arena of the globalization of education, Pakistan is still in dire need to develop a competitive edge in international education before it can emerge as a key player in the education business.

This study opens an area for further investigation on the TQM implementation into the Pakistani educational institutions. Hence, future studies should also be conducted from the students' point of view as students are the customers in this service industry.

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