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Teacher Leaders: Experiences of Pakistani Teachers in leading School Improvement Activities

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore the experiences of these teacher leaders who were a mix of: (a) 'formal leaders' in the traditional sense of the word, that is, having a specifically defined position with a set of responsibilities (Ash & Ersall, 2000; Gehrke, 1991), like learning area coordinators (subject specialists), head-teacher and education officers, and (b) 'informal leaders' with mainly classroom teaching and related tasks (Harris, 2003).

The findings indicate that stakeholders' beliefs, school structures, school policies and practices are among the factors that would promote teacher leaders by facilitating their involvement in planning.

The data also shows that no factor was facilitative or hindering per se but it was the stakeholders' way of using different policies and structures that turned a particular factor in that direction. The research also indicates that teacher leaders were involved in, what Williams quoted in Abdalla (2004) has identified, the 'operational level' of leadership. The decisions made at this level are not strategic but deal with daily routine activities (Abdalla, 2004).

Despite the limited extent of their leadership, the findings indicate that the experiences of carrying out leadership tasks through their involvement in the process of planning and designing/ developing different activities for school improvement had positive impact on teachers. Stakeholders reported that the teachers' classroom practices had improved. Not only the teachers displayed higher motivation towards work but their relationship with other school stakeholders also got better.

“The fact that schools rely on a clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities presents a major barrier to the idea of teachers as leaders” (Harris, 2002:313). However, literature suggests that it is important to involve teachers in the planning and development of school initiatives. Traditionally speaking, planning and development are considered to be leaders' roles and the role of teachers, in

most school improvement initiatives, is that of the ‘implementers’. Thus by implication, teachers’ involvement in the planning process of school development initiatives is a pre-requisites for “Teachers-led School Improvement” (Frost and Durrant, 2000) as it allows them to view themselves as actively leading the change. Not only does the involvement of teachers in the planning and development of school initiatives enhance their level of commitment and motivation; but it also ensures better implementation of plans by building teachers confidence.

In Pakistan many large network of private schools have adopted the idea of involving teachers in different decisions about school curriculum and related activities. However, no research has been done on the outcomes of these practices. The present research was conducted in one such school, which is part of a large network of schools. The intention was to explore the perceptions of the stakeholders about their experiences. Our sample was a mix of ‘formal leaders’ who are traditionally defined as having a specifically designated position with a set of responsibilities like Learning Area Coordinators (subject specialists), head-teacher and education officers; and ‘informal leaders’ with mainly classroom teaching and related tasks (Harris 2003).

The focus of our research was on the stakeholders’ perceptions of the processes of involving teachers in the planning of school development initiatives and its influences on their practices. Drawn from the literature on teachers’ leadership, a set of theoretical assumptions guided our research (York-Barr and Duke, 2004; Frost and Harris, 2003; Gonzalas and Lambert, 2001). We believe that when teachers are involved in the process of planning for school improvement, they ‘feel’ empowered. This sense of empowerment not only leads to better implementation of school improvement initiatives, but also enhances their self esteem and motivation levels. The findings from our field work lended further support to these assumptions. A set of guiding questions that helped us test these assumptions included: how did our research participants view themselves in their ‘new’ positions, while working with their colleagues and administration? What was the perception of the participants and other stakeholders’ with respect to the influences of their roles as leaders and on their own practices as teachers? How did school and the school system facilitate and /or hinder the enactment of their new roles?

The intent of all these questions was to explore the perceptions of the stakeholders about the new roles of teachers as leaders. Teachers’ involvement in the process of planning for school improvement, which was seen as a vehicle for their empowerment was unpacked through two sub-themes; a) helping factors

that were perceived to be facilitating teachers' leadership roles and; b) inhibiting factors that were perceived to be hindering teachers' leadership roles. We found out that the division was not bi-polar but more like two sides of the same coin. Not only these factors were interrelated but they reinforced each other.

All stakeholders who had the experience of being involved in the process of planning for the school development initiatives felt that factors like stakeholders' beliefs, school structures, school policies and practices, were amongst the factors that would promote teacher leaders by facilitating their involvement in planning. At the forefront were the stakeholders' beliefs. If the stakeholders, including teachers, believe that teacher leaders have a positive role in the process of school improvement, they would lay down the structures and policies to support teacher leaders. Similarly, if they believe in the leadership of teachers, then their use of the policies and structures will facilitate the teacher-led school improvement activities. Although all these factors are interrelated, the findings bring stakeholders' beliefs to the forefront because the process of involvement in planning and development is a pre-requisite for implementing better school initiatives. The latter needs supportive school structures and policies, which are created by school stakeholders who are driven by their own beliefs.

Another perception about stakeholders' beliefs was that while it is necessary to have a positive attitude towards having school structures and policies in place, the said is not sufficient. The teachers, in particular, felt that no factor was facilitative or hindering per se; but it was the stakeholders' way of using different practices of involvement in the school that turned a particular factor in a certain direction. For example, the formal leadership position of subject specialists was paradoxical— their position title is Learning Area Coordinators or LAC for short. On the one hand, they played a facilitative or what Harris (2002) calls an *affiliation role* of teacher leaders, which entails close and positive relationship with teachers in line with their other roles of guiding, mediating and brokering the process of teachers' led initiatives; while on the other hand, their personal prejudices and authoritative attitudes blocked the very process of involvement, despite the presence of supporting structures and policies. If the policies and structures are in conflict with the personal beliefs of LACs, then there will be no difference between the authoritative attitude of the previous heads of departments, and the negative attitude of the present LACs..

In addition to the presence of supporting school structures and policies, the culture of collaboration was one of the school practices perceived to be among the supportive factors by all stakeholders with certain qualification. If the discussions or meetings for involving teachers in organizing and designing

curriculum or other related activities, and getting their ideas via discussions and negotiations by sitting together were not based on sharing and collaboration, and every one being given equal chance to contribute, the practice of sitting together with teachers would not be facilitative. When teachers' ideas are not valued and taken into account, the teachers will no longer be a part of the school improvement planning, because it is through their ideas that their presence in the designing bodies is fully recognized. Moreover, the culture of cooperation also provides a background for the enactment of different activities facilitated by the school policies. Hence all the factors are interconnected and reinforce each other.

It was also felt that school policies perceived to be supportive were positive only when they were enacted with positive intensions towards teacher leadership. Here again it was the belief in, and the perception of these policies, which made stakeholders apply these policies and practices fairly. If the perception is positive towards participation, then the use of school policies would facilitate the involvement of teachers in school improvement activities; otherwise these would hinder teachers in enacting their 'new' leadership roles.

One of our findings was that despite the facilitative structures, policies and practices in which the teachers were involved through middle managers, put their involvement at the level of consultation, which is not only the lowest form of involvement, but also ranks lowest among the cadre of leaders (Abdullah, 2004). Teacher leaders need to be above this level. Although setting up of structures and policies to consult teachers and involve them is important it does not automatically assure it. The change of policies should be inline with efforts to change the school culture from isolation to socially responsible (Clement and Vandenberghe, 2001). We agree with Fidler, Edwards, Evans, Mann and Thomas, (1996) that for teacher-led school improvement teachers need to fully participate in the process. Therefore, the school should consider developing ways and means by which full participation of teachers in the designing bodies can be ensured.

Another way of ensuring full participation of teachers in the designing bodies is to create a balance between the formal and informal teacher leadership. It implies that there should be equal emphasis on structure and culture to support the process of effective involvement for school improvement. In this connection the head-teachers role is very important in making use of both structure and the culture of collaboration, and using the said to emphasize and facilitate the process of involvement of teachers in designing the different activities for achieving school goals.

Formal school leaders also need to pay attention not only to facilitating those teachers who are interested in participation, but also in helping those who are not interested or do not express their desire for leadership roles. Professional development activities for teachers and LACs should focus on their attitudes towards, and beliefs about teacher leadership, along-with academics; because attitudes and the resulting relationships are important for school improvement. This is inline with Barth (1990)'s suggestion that, "school improvement is much more than raising test scores or increasing grades. Its essence lies in building school communities that are collaborative, inclusive and ultimately empowering ... it is only within such communities that the potential of both students and teachers will be fully realized". (Barth, 1990:158 cited in Harris, 2002: 119). As the success of the involvement process depends upon the roles of different stakeholders and the way these roles are enacted, therefore the schools need to adopt multiple as well as parallel leadership relations, for instance between, head-teachers and LACs; LACs and teachers; and finally between teachers and students, because as Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson and Hann (2002) have suggested, "different working relationship needs to be established between teachers and administrators in order for any new leadership role to make a positive and lasting contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 36).

Our research indicates that the very basic kind of leadership role that our teacher leaders were allowed to play, did increase the level of efficiency with which teachers implemented different strategies, introduced different activities and developed learning standards. However, it did not empower teachers to be able to 'lead' change activities. Even the LACs who were performing the role of middle managers, were involved at what Williams quoted in Abdalla (2004) has identified the 'operational level' of leadership. The decisions made at this level are not strategic, but rather deal with day to day routine activities. Although the consultation level of involvement of teachers indicates that the research context is at the first stage of the process of encouraging 'teacher leaders' by involving them in planning and development for school improvement, the management needs to focus on the future directions and plans for their full participation in the process of designing activities for school improvement, which would lead to 'empowerment.' It is also important for the administrators to help teachers understand the roles and responsibilities of the Learning Area Coordinators, which is again a new, formal leadership position for classroom teachers. It is important that their roles and responsibilities as well as the mutual obligations (teachers and LACs) be spelt out clearly in order to reduce role ambiguity and the related confusions.

The foregoing discussion establishes that teacher leaders were not empowered as they were involved at the lowest level of decision making- through consultation. However, the stakeholders felt that the experience of teachers' involvement in the process of planning and developing different activities for school improvement, had a positive impact on their classroom practices, motivation towards work and relationships with other stakeholders, despite the limited extent of the teachers' leadership roles. The classroom practices of the participating teachers reflected a more conducive and friendly relationships between them and their students, which is one of the key facilitators of student learning (Bezzina, 2004). Children learn better in an environment that is free of fear and tension. Provision for such an environment, thus becomes a key factor in the lifelong learning of students, as teaching and learning in a classroom is not a preparation for life but rather becomes life itself. The applications of effective teaching practices such as group work and enriching the curriculum by working with current issues (tsunami at that time) were some of the steps in making classrooms into a place where students learn to live and live to learn.

Motivation towards work was another positive influence of the experiences of teachers' involvement in the process of planning for school improvement. These experiences of teachers had also influenced their personal skills, as well as interpersonal relations. It increased teachers' confidence and learning. Their interactions with each other and with the LACs facilitated learning community practices, which are the basic aim of school improvement.

Conclusion

Recognizing the teachers' potential as leaders is at the heart of school improvement initiatives. The research study has shown that teachers were involved in carrying out leadership tasks, such as planning and developing school improvement initiatives, through middle managers, and this put their involvement at the level of consultation. This level of involvement in decision making does not automatically guarantee empowerment which is the key ingredient for leadership.

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