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January 2000

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Muhammad Memon

Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

Rana Nazir Ali

Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

Tim Simkins

School of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, England

Viv Garret

School of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, England

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Recommended Citation

Memon, M., Nazirali, R., Simkins, T., & Garret, V. (2000). Understanding the headteachers' role in Pakistan: Emerging role demands, constraints and choices. *International Studies in Educational Administration Journal*, 28(2), 48-56.

Understanding the Headteachers' Role in Pakistan: Emerging Role Demands, Constraints and Choices

MUHAMMAD MEMON AND RANA NAZIR ALI

The Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi.

& TIM SIMKINS AND VIV GARRETT

School of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, England.

Abstract: Little effort is made to study the role of headteachers in the eastern context, including Pakistan. This paper is based on the study conducted in the government and non-government schools in Pakistan in order to understand headteachers' role in terms of the emerging demands, constraints and choices. The study suggests that the government school headteachers seem to be less proactive and more interested in maintaining status quo because of the influence of the 'top-down management model'. The study also suggests that the government headteachers have limited choices and many constraints because of the influence of the bureaucratic system. Their counterparts in non-government schools seem to be more proactive in making the best use of available choices and in maintaining equilibrium between the role demands, choices and constraints. The research findings further reveal that the non-government headteachers tend to have a broader vision of managing schools effectively than their counterparts in the government schools.

INTRODUCTION

Literature in the area of educational management and leadership envisages a significant role of school leadership in improving the quality of education (see Leithwood et al. 1994a, Grace, 1995, Sergiovanni, 1998 and Memon, 1998). This indicates that the quality of education in any educational institute is heavily dependent on the quality of its leader and hence educational leadership is of vital importance. This highlights the significance of headteachers' role in school improvement. In the context of developed countries, Dalin (1993) mentions that headteachers as leaders play a crucial role in changing the school culture, but in developing countries including Pakistan, the role of headteachers is considered relatively insignificant (Simkins et al. 1995, and Memon, 1999). This may be because of the prevailing 'top-down management model' in Pakistan where all the policy decisions are made at the top level without involving the headteachers who are eventually responsible for translating the proposed new policy initiatives into practice. This reveals that the headteachers do not get their due recognition in conceiving any innovation, which affects their professional autonomy either in academic, or in professional matters. It further creates a sense of frustration among headteachers, particularly in the government schools. Given the situation, headteachers simply operate at a fairly low level and the main levers of changes are either the policy makers or planners who mainly rely on their intuitive knowledge and wisdom. These planners or policymakers mostly belong to the category of central or provincial superior civil services and serve as administrators in the education ministries / departments in Pakistan.

Substantive studies have been conducted to understand the role of headteachers in the context of the western world but little research has been undertaken in the eastern context generally and particularly in Pakistan. This study may be considered as the first attempt towards understanding the role of headteachers and how it varies across the school systems in Pakistan.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

In the public sector of Pakistan, the recruitment of government headteachers is done through two ways. Firstly, 75 per cent of headteachers are promoted from among the working teachers on seniority cum merit basis. Secondly, the remaining 25 per cent of headteachers are recruited from among the teachers through direct recruitment by the provincial public service commissions, although this is not a regular practice. The recruitment of non-government headteachers on the other hand, is done on a merit basis through a rigorous selection process which seems an encouraging trend that may help improve school management systems (see Memon, 1999).

The Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), Karachi launched its first two-year M.Ed. programme in teacher education in 1994 in order to improve the quality of education in government and non-government schools in developing countries generally and particularly in Pakistan. The programme is offered to only those schools, which are collaborating with AKU-IED for improving their quality of education. These schools are called 'cooperating schools'. After completion of their masters programme at AKU-IED, teachers work as professional development teachers (PDTs) with other teachers for their professional development in their respective schools. The purpose of the study was to understand the headteachers' role and examine the diversity of their role across the school systems in Pakistan.

Six headteachers voluntarily participated in the study because of their own interest and potential contribution in research. The profile of sample school headteachers is shown in Table 1. The researchers were cognizant of the fact that sample of schools was small and due to the nature of the study, they had no intention of generalizing the research findings, however, the small size of the sample provided a deep insight into the perspectives of the government and non-government school headteachers in relation to their job demands, constraints and choices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Ribbins (1994) mentions that headteachers' management practices and actions need to be understood in their specific context, otherwise, legitimate conclusions may not be drawn. The headteachers deal with the different aspirations, and expectations of the stakeholders who influence their daily management practices. The main assumption of this research is that the nature of the headteachers' role varies across the school systems in Pakistan and has its own impact on school management practices. Furthermore, Stewart's (1982) work provided a conceptual framework to guide this research. According to her, the manager's role is mostly influenced by the following three factors:

- a) demands- what anyone in the job has to do;
- b) constraints- the internal or external factors to the organization that limit what the job holder can do; and
- c) choices- the activities that the job holder can but does not have to do.

Table 1: Profile of Sample of School Headteachers

<i>School System</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Headteachers' attributes</i>
Government Secondary School Imparts education through Urdu medium Serves lower socio-economic classes	Boys' school	Male, M.A., B.Ed. 15 years teaching experience 7 years in administration Promoted on seniority basis
Government Secondary School Imparts education through Urdu medium Serves lower socio-economic classes	Boys' school	Female, M.A., B.Ed. 20 years teaching experience 8 years in administration Promoted on seniority basis
Non-government secondary school Imparts education through English medium Serves middle socio-economic classes	Girls' school	Female, M.A., B.Ed. 25 years teaching experience 8 years in school administration Inducted on merit basis
Non-government secondary school Imparts education through English medium Serves middle socio-economic classes	Girls' school	Female, B.A., B.Ed. 15 years teaching experience 15 years in school administration Inducted on merit basis
Non-government secondary school Imparts education through English medium Serves middle/low socio-economic classes	Boys' school	Male, B.A., B.Ed. 10 years teaching experience 8 years in school administration Inducted on merit basis

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses the following research questions:

- i) What factors in their context and system do headteachers see as significant sources of demands and constraints and why?
- ii) What kinds of actions do the headteachers feel are required of them as a result of the demands and constraints as they see them?
- iii) How much freedom of action, in what areas, do the headteachers feel that they have, and how do they choose to use this?
- iv) Do the headteachers feel they can influence any of the demands and constraints and, if so, how?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The nature of research usually dictates its methodology, therefore, a naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln, and Guba, 1985) was chosen as an appropriate paradigm to conduct study which enabled the researchers to collect information related to the complexity of factors such as demands, constraints and choices that affect the role of headteachers. Ribbins (1994) and Ribbins and Marland (1995) mention that the accounts of headteachers need to be considered in their specific context in three ways. Firstly, the views and actions of headteachers must be examined across a representative range of issues and events to reflect the complexity of their workplaces. Secondly, the views of others should be taken into account, not just those of headteachers themselves, since roles are enacted within a context of interaction which generates a variety of perspectives. Thirdly, headteachers must be observed in action in order to determine any discrepancy between what they 'say' and what they 'do'. Mintzberg (1973) and Stewart (1988) suggest a number of ways of researching the nature of management roles. However, in this study three main methods were used i.e. semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation and daily diaries.

Prior to conducting research in Karachi a cosmopolitan city of Pakistan, the headteachers of AKU-IED's cooperating schools were sent letters followed by researchers' visits so as to share the purpose of study and elicit their consent for becoming research participants. Since the headteachers asked for more time to decide about their participation in the study, they were told that the researchers would follow-up by phone. After two weeks, six headteachers agreed to participate in the study because of their personal interest and availability. The personal visits and the initial semi-structured interviews with the headteachers helped in establishing a quick rapport that allowed them to raise as many questions as they desired before in-depth interviews were conducted. The initial interview with headteachers, which lasted for 45 minutes, covered general aspects of headteachers' role. The in-depth interview lasted for more than 90 minutes, and focused on the questions related to headteachers' role demands, constraints and choices. Questions were asked such as; a) what aspects do headteachers consider most important and why?; b) what do headteachers see as their main areas of freedom and constraints?; and c) what problems and dilemmas do they see in performing their role?; The headteachers also maintained their daily diaries, which provided very useful information about their daily management practices (see Simkins et al 1998). Since each method had its advantages and disadvantages, a 'triangulation approach' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was used to cross-check the relevant information in order to avoid any problems of reliability and validity.

EMERGING DEMANDS, CONSTRAINTS AND CHOICES

Many researchers including Dadey and Harber (1991), Harber and Dadey (1993), Chapman and Burchfield (1994) and Leithwood et al. (1994b), have preferred to classify and categorise similar data which, in our view, forms a 'forced classification' that might not help us to highlight and portray the emerging demands, constraints, and choices related to headteachers' role. Therefore, we have deliberately avoided the classification of data, and have preferred to use a 'thematic approach' to report the emerging issues related to headteachers' role in terms of demands, constraints and choices. This paper discusses a few professional and managerial issues related to headteachers' role, however, more issues have been discussed elsewhere (see Simkins et al., 1998).

MANAGING CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

The data suggests that the government headteachers did not seem to have any role in improving /enriching the existing curriculum since it is prescribed by the federal ministry of education in Pakistan. They thought their immediate task was to complete the syllabi and get students through the national examination with good grades. They also thought they did not have much choice to update the prescribed curriculum. This indicates that government headteachers are not allowed to enrich the prescribed national curriculum. For example, one government headteacher said, “I consider myself only as a chowkidar (watchman) and I can’t do any thing related to curriculum.” Another headteacher said, “I’m not the curriculum planner and why should I be involved in such hassle. My role is to implement the intended curriculum through teachers.” It was found that both government headteachers seemed to have a shallow understanding of curriculum and instructional issues and did not seem to have encouraged their teachers to enrich the existing curriculum, which had implications for the quality of education. This reveals that they seemed to be dependent on the government’s prescribed curriculum embedded in the philosophy of ‘official knowledge’ (Apple, 1982).

On the contrary, the non-government headteachers tended to have a deeper understanding of the curriculum and instructional issues. In spite of the pressure from the government for the adoption of a prescribed national curriculum, they intelligently maneuvered the national curriculum and enriched it as and when required. Therefore, they considered their role as challenging and demanding. As one of the non-government headteachers said: “My role demands that I should work with teachers and help them in enriching the existing curriculum. Otherwise, I can’t see the importance of my role.” While comparing the role of headteachers of both systems, it appears that the government headteachers seemed to be accountable to the prescribed national curriculum. It also suggests they do not have the choice of updating the existing curriculum whereas the non-government headteachers create a situation and update curriculum in order to make it relevant to students needs.

This suggests that the government headteachers’ role is influenced by the perceptual and procedural constraints and they do not seem to be proactive in the managing role related to curriculum and instruction matters. On the other hand, the non-government headteachers seemed to be proactive in managing their role related to curriculum and instruction.

MANAGING TEACHERS / STAFF

Managing teachers / staff was found to be a common concern for the government and non-government headteachers. It was found that government headteachers had enough choices but because of bureaucratic management system, they had difficulty in making the best use of choices. Their lack of broader vision also affected their role. The non-government headteachers seem to have benefited from the choices such as hiring and firing teachers and staff etc. However, the headteachers in both systems shared their common concern that they do not get efficient and motivated teachers. The non-government headteachers thought that “the quality is failing...the young teachers are not committed”. The government headteachers felt that their teachers were “lazy and not dutiful”. As one of them said, “I can’t change teachers who are performing fairly poor.” On this issue another government headteachers said, “I sometimes issue warning, sometimes do checking, sometimes write to the school governance.” However, some similarities were found in the ways in which the headteachers of both systems manage their teaching staff.

All have supervisory processes such as classroom visits and checking students' note books etc. It was found that the government headteachers tended to do things themselves whereas the non-government headteachers delegated tasks to teachers. The non-government school headteachers also seemed more expressive about a set of positive values in relation to the management of teachers. For example; one of the non-government headteachers said, "I have created a collegial atmosphere. I delegate work and give it to those people whom I trust... what we have all decided together."

An image of "control" underpinning the top-down management approach was found to be a common practice in the government headteachers. As one of the government headteachers said, "If I feel there is something lacking in the teacher... then I become strict with the teacher not with the students." The non-government headteachers seemed to be democratic in their actions and decisions. They also seemed to have a broader vision in making the best use of choices. There was strong evidence that government headteachers did not seem to have made an attempt to establish collegial relationships which reflects the bureaucratic management styles of the government school headteachers. On the whole, the government headteachers considered the management of teachers and staff as the most significant constraint because they did not have any power of hiring or firing. Whereas their counterparts in non-government schools, did not experience any such constraint.

MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

The research findings suggest the different nature of the relationship of headteachers of both systems with their management. One government headteacher recognized that she may have some influence over school policy decisions, which contributed to her school improvement, although the degree of this influence depends very much on the extent of the choice available to her. Another headteacher felt he did not have any choice to be able to influence their school governance. Although it was found that all the management of non-government schools in the sample tended to give their headteachers a good deal of freedom, they did exert pressures on such things as academic matters. Each headteacher manages the relationship with his / her governors in a unique way which reflects his / her personal attributes, competence and styles. The government headteachers perceived themselves as "yes persons" which they thought was a necessary condition for their survival. One government headteacher seemed reluctant to compromise on principles with his school governance, therefore he sees his relationships as one of constraints and potential conflicts. He mentioned that "in our system the teachers are not fired; the headteacher is fired for everything". Another government headteacher seems primarily concerned with keeping the books straight because she is near retirement and any financial mismanagement could affect her pension: "I see my role more as an accountant rather than administrator or academic."

It was found that the headteacher in the public sector with a strong personality can challenge these constraints and take decisions in the interest of the school, for example, refusing to release a teacher or getting more teachers. However, the general perceptions of government headteachers are that they see their boss as an inspector, unfriendly and over critical. They generally feel that their superiors 'work against' them rather than 'work with' them. The non-government schools saw their superiors as 'friendly', 'caring', 'understanding' and 'supportive' who allowed them to enjoy their professional autonomy in their daily management practices. It was clear from the

interviews that the management of non-government schools tend to give their headteachers freedom in academic and curriculum matters; however, for policy matters they were required to consult them. The non-government headteachers have relatively easy access to their management systems whereas the government headteachers have to go through bureaucratic channels. As one of the government headteachers said, “I am more concerned about how to get an access to my superiors. Sometimes it takes a week to approach my immediate boss. If my boss is unhappy then I might be transferred.” This shows the lack of trust among the government headteachers and the superiors and reflects their relationship with their school managers. On the contrary, the non-government headteachers seemed to have a sense of empowerment and ownership.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS-COMMUNITY

The relationship of school headteachers with parents tended to vary between and within the government and non-government schools. For example, the government headteachers found parents' involvement in school management matters as ‘interference’, which can be exemplified from the quote “the parents have their vested interests and they want to politicize the school environment and as a head of school it is eventually problematic for me”. Another government headteacher mentioned that “I respect the parents' opinions and views but they demand too much from the school without providing any financial or moral support which I and my teachers don't like”. This reflects lack of positive relationship between the government headteachers and parents / community. On the other hand, the non-government headteachers seemed positive and appreciative of their parents' interest and contribution. The non-government headteacher mentioned that “I welcome parents' suggestions and involve them as much as I can...they have helped us in establishing a computer lab which is not an easy job...parents' contribution helps us to understand each others' problems...”. Another headteacher said, “parents are our great asset, they guide us in many ways and they give us constructive feedback that helps us to correct our way of actions... Our whole effort is aiming at meeting expectations of the parents and children...” This reveals that the non-government headteachers enjoy positive relationship with parents / community. The research conducted in this area shows that school performance has improved where parents have participated in the affairs of schools (Stoll and Fink, 1996).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As mentioned earlier, this study does not intend to generalize the situation across Pakistan because of the nature of study and small size of sample. Research findings suggest a great variation in the headteachers' role across the school systems. The government and non-government headteachers tended to behave in their own preferred way keeping in view their emerging demands, constraints and choices. It can be concluded that there are some important differences among the school systems in their ‘regulatory frameworks’, resources, leadership vision and management styles and undoubtedly these have implications for the ways in which headteachers carry out their roles. These differences have influenced the headteachers' perceptions of the demands and constraints under which they work. The government headteachers felt they had no room for exercising their choices to initiate any personal plan because it has to be approved by their superiors. Dalin (1993) has rightly mentioned that school leaders (in the government sector) act as ‘civil servants’ rather than as ‘managers’ and they have difficulty in finding room for maneuver. On the other hand, the non-government headteachers were encouraged by their school

governance to take a leading role as 'school managers'. However, they found their jobs too challenging and demanding. It can, therefore, be seen that while the government headteachers feel limited in their areas of choice by perceived constraints imposed on them by their school management system, the non-government headteachers feel that the demands of their jobs can limit their choices. Literature on education management and leadership suggests that the headteachers have to serve as 'levers of change' by broadening their vision, improving professional and technical competence to improve the quality of education. This has implications for the intensive and practical professional development programme for headteachers to meet changing demands of the new millennium.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors wish to thank the British Council, Karachi for providing financial assistance for the Academic Link which supported this research work. The authors are also indebted to the support from their organisations i.e. The Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi, Pakistan and Sheffield Hallam University, School of Education, England.

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AUTHORS

Muhammad Memon is currently working as an associate professor in the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development, Karachi, Pakistan. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Surrey, England. His areas of interest are teacher education, school management, and curriculum studies. He has widely published his work in the local as well as in the overseas journals.

Rana Nazir Ali is currently working as a senior instructor in the Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi, Pakistan. She did her masters from the University of Toronto, Canada. Her areas of interest are school management and school improvement.

Tim Simkins is currently the head of The Centre for Continuing Professional Development, Sheffield Hallam University, England. His areas of interest are educational management, administration and school financing. He has served as a consultant to many developing countries. He is an author of many publications.

Viv Garrett is currently a senior faculty member of the Centre for Continuing Professional Development, Sheffield Hallam University, England. Her areas of interest are school management and improvement. She has served as a consultant to several developing countries. She is an author of many publications.