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THE ROLE PERCEPTIONS OF DEOS IN PAKISTAN: TOOTHLESS TIGERS OR SELFLESS SERVANTS?

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Abstract

The study of educational leadership and management in Pakistan is relatively a new territory – a road less travelled. This is truer when it comes to the study of District Education Officials' (DEOs) ways of managing education. These officials actually bridge the government higher functionaries and policies in terms of policy implementation, monitoring and supervision of the schools in their respective districts. These officials theoretically should exercise significant control over the functioning of schools in their jurisdiction. Though on paper they have heavy responsibilities but actually they have limited arena to exercise; their power due largely to complex web of power centres in their respective provinces.

A small-scale exploratory case study was undertaken in qualitative research paradigm to investigate the perceptions and practices of the district educational officials in Pakistan. The sample of the study was drawn from the eleven districts of Baluchistan, eleven districts of Sindh, and ten officials from Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) who were selected for their professional development at AKU-IED under an USAID/ED-LINKS Project during 2008-2010.

The study investigated these DEOs' self-perceived roles and responsibilities through mainly interviews. Some head teachers were also interviewed to see how they view the roles and responsibilities of these senior officials. As well, the headteachers, who were also participating in the same course, were asked to comment about the DEOs' role and what that means to their schools. Moreover, the DEOs were also asked to comment on their learnings during their certificate course programme.

The findings of the study reveal that DEOs perceive their roles as more administrative, at best management and hardly leadership. Reportedly, they do this work very often in trying circumstances, pressurized by political influences, local traditions, tribal dynamics, and uncertain law and order situations. They feel almost besieged with debilitating rather than enabling circumstances. Despite these limitations, they try their best to do at least the minimum they are required; but find it difficult to go beyond. Self-efficacy in this case is in short supply; though some do claim that they are able to accomplish what they can; in the given circumstances. Though good intentions are in abundance but materializing them is a herculean task for them. They appear to be the toothless tigers; as they appear to be senior government officials but their actual influence on their area of operation appears too little; they cannot account even their humblest employees due to many reasons, including political interference.

Note: For the same of meeting the word limit, this paper presents very, very brief report of the findings which will be converted into a full-fledged article(s) later on.

Key words: District education officials; Middle management in education; educational management; educational management in Pakistan, district education management in Pakistan; educational leadership and management.

Introduction

This small scale exploratory qualitative study was undertaken to investigate the perceptions and practices of the district educational officials in Pakistan. The study investigated these DEOs' self-perceived roles and responsibilities in their respective districts through mainly interviews. As well, some headteachers were interviewed to see how they view the roles and responsibilities of these officials as they interact with these officials on a daily basis for the implementation of the government policies and procedures. The DEOs were also asked to comment on their learnings at the IED where they were offered a certificate course of around three months to help them improve their management and leadership knowledge and skills. This article is the first attempt of putting together their self reported and perceived roles and responsibilities of their work. The research participants were drawn from the selected participants for the course and they came from Baluchistan, Sindh and ICT. The total number of research participants, the nature of the interviews, and other methodological questions are discussed in the respective sections below.

The article reports here for the first time the preliminary findings of the study, hoping that more systematic and long term studies would be undertaken based on this preliminary study to build a strong base of evidenced-based knowledge to understand the complex roles and responsibilities of the officials who are seen often as toothless tigers but equally importantly a class of officials who try their best in less than a perfect world to do what they can. It is easier to pass judgements about what they do not do; but equally difficult to say what they could do, in a difficult country like Pakistan, dubbed by one recent study as "A hard country" in many senses of the word.

Research Question(s)

Following interlinked key questions were explored:

How do the DEOs (district education officers) perceive and practice their roles and responsibilities as educational leaders and managers in Pakistan? How do the head teachers view their managers' roles and responsibilities? How did they find the learning at AKU-IED?

Research Participants (RPs)

The primary subjects of this study are those DEOs who have benefited from the ED-LINKS programme during 2008 – 2009. However, this study was not exclusively meant, as was said in the beginning of this report, on the so called 'impact' of the programme. The secondary participants of the study were the headteachers to see how they perceived the contribution of the middle management as a source of support and inspiration or obstacle/hindrance. These headteachers were only those who benefited from the IED programme except ICT. No headteachers participated in the ED-LINKS programme for reasons best known to the ED-LINKS. Therefore some heads were interviewed in Islamabad seeking their views about their directors as they are called (they are not called DEOs, but Assistant/ directors). So, two headteachers of ICT were interviewed to see their views of the seniors and whether they see them as supportive in their endeavours.

The number of primary participants with secondary participants from each site of selection is given below in a grid form (see Table 1).

Table 1: Research Participants against each Province/Territory

Research participants	Baluchistan	Sindh	ICT	Total
EDO's	2	2	1	05
DEO's	2	2	1	05
Headteachers	2	2	1	05

Selection Criteria

The selection criteria of the research participants (RPs) were the following:

- have attended the ED-LINKS sponsored AKU-IED course;
- are willing to participate in the study;
- are able to communicate fluently either in English or Urdu; and
- are able to spare time for the interview and subsequent discussion;

Findings of the Study

This article, due to word limit, discusses only the first part of the question (perceptions of DEOs' about their role and responsibilities) and the second and third question [regarding HTs' perceptions of the DEOs' roles and responsibilities, and their learning from IED course] will be reported in future.

Perceptions of their roles and responsibilities

A. Bridge between two layers of governance

Very generally, the DEOs of all the three places (Baluchistan, Sindh and ICT) perceive their roles *as a bridge* between the EDOs and headteachers (HTs), meaning thereby that they are responsible to share and implement policies that seniors devise and convey the problems of the headteachers to the seniors for their resolution. Reflecting this role, one of the DEOs from Baluchistan said, "Basically we ... work as a bridge between EDO and headteachers of the school." The quote reflects their image of themselves as bridge between the upper and lower echelons of the bureaucracy. The same respondent further added, "The governance structures are based on bureaucracy and appeasing the seniors who behave like demagogues." The statement reflects that that the other end of the bridge is seen as muddy; they have a negative perception of the upper bureaucracy; they perceive their seniors as authoritarian figures, which they are unable to challenge.

B. Follower vs Leader

The DEOs interviewed saw themselves more as followers than leaders. They reported that the DEOs are supposed to follow the policies and have no real say in their formulation. One of the Directors of the ICT argued that his and his colleagues' job was implementation of the policies, and they have no say as such in the policy formulation. They can at best give advices but they have no say in framing the policies. This implies that they see themselves as more "followers" than "leaders". One DEO commented, "The important thing (in their job) is to do whatever *you are assigned to do* effectively." This officer perceives his job as given and thus key quality is to do it effectively, as we say in management literature, managers do things right. Doing things right is what is key here in this perception. The role is seen more

as ‘given’ and performing it effectively seems to make the job important. Thus, it leads to what we said above as compliant culture.

C. Troubleshooters vs Problem-solvers

Some DEOs thought that their job description is relatively unclear; their roles are often defined by external factors, like the political forces. They respond to these external demands and try to survive in a relatively hostile environment. Describing their roles, one of the DEOs from Baluchistan stated, “We should visit and inspect school frequently and identify and solve issues such as student’s lack of interest, issues related to feudalism etc.” Another DEO reported, “They (DEOs) should visit every school and arrange programmes, it all depends on funds but unfortunately they don’t have enough funds to make proper visits. This issue and many other issues can be resolved by providing them sufficient budgets.” The citation shows some of the problems that we have already discussed in the contextual review.

D. Inspectors vs Facilitators

DEOs visualize themselves as more followers than leaders. They think their job predominantly is to provide basic things to schools and oversee what they are supposed to do. One of the DEOs articulated their central role in these words:

We provide and ensure the regular provision of free books to students of class one to ten. We make sure that teachers complete the syllabus in the due course, we visit every class for the same and we try our best to guarantee that students are being taught according to syllabus and that they maintain their daily diary so that they don’t feel burdened.

This in nutshell is reported often as DEOs’ key responsibility because their bosses often keep on telling them that these are the sorts of their duties they are supposed to perform.

E. Psychologists vs politicians

DEOs have to deal with all sorts of people in their role set. They have to deal with not only just the personnel inside the school, but also outside the school. Elaborating how they perceive their role, a director from ICT said, “[Their job is] understanding different kinds of nature, temperament, abilities, capabilities, talent, attitudes, and aptitudes of the staff; and [appointing] a right man for the right job. People believe that running the management is a one man show, but it is not.” The official argued that his organization is an outdated one and there are no clear cut rules and regulations developed to follow. In such an uncertain situation it is difficult for them to execute their duties. He elaborated:

Unfortunately, in Pakistan we have no system in place, we have no defined sets of procedures, and if we have any of them, they are outdated. The institutions are not intact even. We need to build capacities of institutions. People here are working on personal capabilities, institutions do not facilitate them.

What this vignette tells is that due to ambiguity in roles there is wide variation for interpretation and misinterpretation of the rules and regulations.

F. Political pressure and corruption

While discharging their duties, DEOs face many challenges but the most daunting is political pressure leading to corruption for one favor or another. One of the DEOs from ICT, went on to say,

Another challenge was, mostly people use their authorities in wrong ways on political grounds. Being Director Administration people expect the same from me, but I don’t believe in using my authorities

for unfair means which make people against me sometimes.

Citing corruption as one of the major issues, another DEO complained,

One of the major issues we are facing is like if we have 100 teachers, only 20 among them are on duty remaining have their representatives for just signing the attendance record, which the teachers hire for Rs 2000 (two thousand rupees) per month for appearing in the school in their place.

This problem appears to be common in both Sindh and Baluchistan but not reported from ICT. Such teachers, we are told, are called '*Ewazi*' (replacement) teachers, persons who are not teachers but a relative of theirs who have no teaching qualifications are sent to school but the real teachers actually do some other business. Alluding to the level of corruption one DEO frankly told that,

Everyone (i. e., DEOs) is involved in some kind of corruption at times. Recently, in our district...the Deputy DEO had given Rs 120,000 (one hundred twenty thousand rupees) for his transfer. In the new place he would first recover this amount ...and then only he would do anything for education.

Another DEO from Baluchistan reported that due to lack of follow up by the DEOs, even good work is being destroyed. Citing an example, he went on to say, "99% of the 16 fully furnished computer labs that were constructed in 101 schools of Baluchistan in 2003 stay unsuccessful because of teacher's negligence. Proper follow-ups should be done in this regard." Thus, lack of efficacy and helplessness are recurrent themes most DEOs' referred to in their interviews.

We conclude this very brief reporting of the findings with a quote (writer unknown) that reflects the mood of this study, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed unless faced." More or less the same spirit has been expressed by a verse from the Qur'an which says, "Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves" (al-Qur'an, 13: 11). A poet conveys the same message so well:

خدا نے آج تک اُس قوم کی حالت نہ بدلی، نہ ہو جس کو خیال اپنی حالت آپ بدلنے کا

God never changed till today the condition of a nation; unless it thought of changing its condition itself.