



9-14-2015

# Relationship between Decision-Making and Professional Experiences of a Pakistani Female Head Teacher in Initial Years of Headship

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### Recommended APA Citation

Khan, S. T. (2015). Relationship between Decision-Making and Professional Experiences of a Pakistani Female Head Teacher in Initial Years of Headship. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1417-1433. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss9/5>

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### Abstract

*This study investigated how a head teacher's decisions were informed by her prior professional experiences in coping with the challenges in the initial years of headship in Government Secondary School in Pakistan. It is a qualitative case study of a newly promoted female head teacher with twenty-nine years of teaching experience, posted in the same school. Multiple data collection tools (interviews, observations, document analysis and field notes) were used to collect data about the inquiry. The study found that decision-making processes and professional experiences were co-related in teaching and learning, managing the staff, efficient and effective placement of the staff, strategic planning and development of the school, and resource management and accountability. Other factors, which influenced the head teacher's decisions were: pressure from high management and the community, accountability, personal values and priorities, and relationships with stakeholders. The study recommended that policy makers provide support and professional development opportunities for novice and aspiring head teachers and has raised questions for further exploration.*

### Keywords

Professional Development, Decision-Making, Influence of Professional Experiences, Pakistani Educational System, Administrative Conflicts, Qualitative Case Study

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### Acknowledgements

Sumaira T. Khan is a Ph.D candidate at the University of Iowa. She received her M.Ed and M.Phil from Pakistan. Her research focuses on females in educational management, particularly women in developing countries. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Sumaira Khan at, [sumaira-khan@uiowa.edu](mailto:sumaira-khan@uiowa.edu).

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*This study investigated how a head teacher's decisions were informed by her prior professional experiences in coping with the challenges in the initial years of headship in Government Secondary School in Pakistan. It is a qualitative case study of a newly promoted female head teacher with twenty-nine years of teaching experience, posted in the same school. Multiple data collection tools (interviews, observations, document analysis and field notes) were used to collect data about the inquiry. The study found that decision-making processes and professional experiences were co-related in teaching and learning, managing the staff, efficient and effective placement of the staff, strategic planning and development of the school, and resource management and accountability. Other factors, which influenced the head teacher's decisions were: pressure from high management and the community, accountability, personal values and priorities, and relationships with stakeholders. The study recommended that policy makers provide support and professional development opportunities for novice and aspiring head teachers and has raised questions for further exploration. Keywords: Professional Development, Decision-Making, Influence of Professional Experiences, Pakistani Educational System, Administrative Conflicts, Qualitative Case Study*

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The importance of a head teacher in a school has been the focus of many educational research studies for many decades. For example, Hallinger and Leithwood (1994) cited in Shafa (2003) say, "In fact it has almost become an article of faith that the capacity of schools to improve teaching and learning is strongly mediated by the quality of leadership exercised by the principal" (p. 17). However, in many developing countries including Pakistan, very little effort has been made to understand this role. Consequently, in Pakistan the quality of leadership in government schools has remained almost unimproved for almost four decades. What seems evident is that decision-making styles are transferred from one head to another for many reasons, such as insufficient and inappropriate preparation for the post.

One of the criteria for becoming a head teacher in government schools in Pakistan is seniority, which is mainly based on teaching experiences. This criterion has some role to play in the transmission of headship roles in schools. Memon (2000) has argued that recruitment of head teachers on the basis of their teaching experience rather than their experience in school management has resulted in the induction of unqualified and untrained head teachers into government schools. This indicates that head teachers' prior professional experiences are critical in understanding their ways of decision-making. Moreover, the way new head teachers respond to different situations in the school could be rooted in their own accumulated professional experiences. As Feiman-Nemser (1983) argues, "students internalize models of teaching which are activated when they become teachers" (p. 153). Probably teachers internalize models of management as sub-ordinates in the school and reactivate them on their turn when they become head teachers. So, there is a need to explore how prior professional experiences influence decision-making. Hence, this study attempts to

unpack the influence of prior professional experiences on the decision-making of head teachers in dealing with challenges in their initial years.

The ever-growing body of knowledge in educational leadership is witnessed in researchers' concentration on support strategies (Benaim & Humphreys, 1997) and professional development of head teachers (Kanwar, 2000; Shafa, 2003). Therefore, to some extent, researchers understand how various support strategies are planned, implemented and sustained; how an organization's culture in a context responds to the complex dimensions of headship; and how professional development of head teachers influences the whole process of leadership, at least in western industrialized nations. But researchers have rarely, if ever, examined the utilization of nonmaterial resources (head teachers' prior professional experiences); and have hardly ever linked them to the approaches that they take in addressing issues in the initial years of their position. This study, therefore, is significant because it will explore the co-relation of prior professional experiences and decision-making of a new head teacher. As there is a dearth of systematic studies on head teachers in the context of Pakistan, and as Kanwar (2000) claims, he was not aware of any systematic study on head teachers in Pakistan before 1998, the findings of this study will add to the growing body of knowledge in Pakistan. The purpose of this case study was to gain insight into the process of how a head teacher's decisions are informed by her prior professional experiences in coping with the challenges in initial years in a well-established government secondary school in Pakistan and to explore the factors, other than professional experiences, which tend to influence a beginning head teacher's decisions in dealing with those challenges.

The research that this study addresses is: How are a head teacher's decision-making processes informed by her prior professional experiences in dealing with challenges in the initial years of a headship, in a government secondary school in Pakistan? Professional experiences refer to experiences relating or belonging to a teaching profession and initial years means the first one to two years' experience as a head teacher.

## **Literature Review**

### **Challenges to New Head Teachers**

Whilst providing leadership for schools is a complex activity, regardless of experience levels of the novice head teachers, the challenges can be devastating (Daresh & Male, 2000). In exploring the nature and sort of challenges of beginning head teachers, Weindling and Early's (1987) research was one of the pioneering studies in this field. They found that non-familiarity to the culture of the school was one of the main challenges for new head teachers. Furthermore, their study highlights the differences in new head teachers' approaches with the head teachers' prior to them as the possible cause of the issue. They recommended appropriate professional development training for head teachers and improving preparation of head teachers.

Although becoming a head teacher is a major step in the professional life of an educator (Pounder & Young, 1996), losses of moving to a headship were felt most seriously in terms of relationships, the loss of friendship with and support from previous colleagues and association with pupils (Draper & McMichael, 1998). Parkay and Currie (1992) have identified five stages that head teachers go through in their first three years. They are: survival, control, stability, educational leadership and professional actualization. During all the aforesaid stages, they face challenges of varied intensities and complexities. Benaim and Humphreys (1997) discussed Dunning (1996) who has identified three categories of problems experienced by new primary head teachers: those internal to their school, those external to

their school and those related to staff and staffing issues. These studies suggest strong advisory support for novice head teachers during their first year of inauguration.

School administrators are confronted with a complex array of multi-faceted challenges from “learning the ropes” for the day-to-day operation of the school to enhancing the school culture so that it becomes more educative (Parkay & Currie, 1992). According to Ronkowski and Iannaccone (1989), cited in Normore (2003), perhaps the most difficult challenge that the beginning school administrator faces, however, is the need to develop a professional identity, “an image of the self,” as a proactive leader who can make a difference. Male (2000) identified the central problem as being about managing geographical location of the school; mentoring for the new head teacher was recommendation of the study.

Macmillan (1994) identified the head teachers’ role distance from the rest of the staff, and the chasm that exists between themselves and teachers in perception of role and school culture. This led to both groups feeling a sense of isolation from each other (Benaim & Humphreys, 1997). Weindling and Pocklington (1996) similarly reported new heads in England coping with difficulties caused by previous head teachers’ styles and practices. Hobson, et al. (2005) in their literature review about mentoring the beginning head teachers have pointed out some generic problems that new head teachers encounter in/outside the United Kingdom (UK). Those included negative feelings associated with professional loneliness, coping with multifold tasks, and dealing with the school budget. Their literature review also looks into the support strategies for novice head teachers’ induction in their schools and recommends support strategies according to the needs of new head teachers.

Multiple challenges to new head teachers can cause anxiety, which was investigated, for instance by Daresh and Male (2000) who found that new head teachers reported that they experienced a short “honeymoon period,” followed by an intense culture shock related to their change of status. It was the worst for head teachers who were promoted in the same school. Dealing with these challenges, head teachers have recourse to their value systems and professional goals (Shafa, 2003).

All the research findings presented here reveal that most of these researchers argued for the mechanism of coping with the challenges at the beginning stages. They see solution in professional development trainings, which are undoubtedly effective devices for adjusting successfully in a new set up with different demands and responsibilities. However, a very important aspect that these researchers seem to be surpassing, is the resource that they are already equipped with; their prior professional experiences.

### **What Facilitates New Head Teachers in Decision-Making Process?**

Shafa (2003) argues that head teachers’ approach to deal with challenges depends mainly on their value system, and personal and professional visions. Personal values facilitate their decisions in both the technical and managerial nature of challenges. Their personal values are deep-rooted in their experiences. In a school context, those can be termed as professional experiences. The views of Shafa (2003) were further strengthened by Daresh (2004) when he used “lenses” for already existing mental models of the head teachers. He emphasized that “each [decision] is made through certain lenses that individuals bring to the job and the sources of those lenses vary” (p. 14). Concisely, value systems, personal choices, and mental models of the decision maker seem to be guiding them in the decision-making process.

### **What are the Factors that Influence Decision-Making?**

Decision-making being a cognitive process of adding and retrieving information from the brain's memory pushes one to explore which factors influence the decisions of a decision maker. Hence, the following paragraph briefly delineates influencing factors on the decision-making process.

*Personal Values*: “the decision maker will make decisions consistent to his/her values” (A Lexicon of Decision Making, n.d.). Therefore, new head teachers make decisions based on their personal values that are shaped by professional experiences.

*Lack of Confidence* also influences decision-making. This is true in cases where an individual with authority is of relatively low status (Enayati, 2002). Lack of confidence may be because of no prior managerial training in case of head teachers.

*Status and Power* is also a potential influencing factor on the decision-making process (Enayati, 2002). Within their schools, head teachers hold a powerful position and hence are charged to make major decisions. However, at the district level their status changes from top positions to middle managers that, in turn, influence their decision making about their schools. Moreover, *Needs, Goals, and Hopes*: Newman (1999) argue that people's needs and desires guide their decisions. Therefore, head teachers consider need of schools, schools' strategic goals, and anticipate results before making any decision. In addition, *Social Factors*, according to Jackson (as cited in Enayati, 2002) social factors do influence the decision-making process. Social factors refer to chances of agreements and disagreement of others who are likely to be influenced by the decision. He argued, “decision-making is not simply rational information gathering” (as cited in Enayati, 2002, p. 6). Rather empirical evidences reveal that individuals pull back when her/his decision is intercepted by others. However, according to Asch (as cited in Enayati, 2002), “in the presence of just one other person who agreed with the subject, subjects persevered in the face of oppositions” (p. 6).

Almost all of the above influencing factors stem from past experiences, observations or generally accepted facts. These prior impressions of experiences are so strong in human life that they influence the cognitive process of decision-making. In the professional career of a head teacher, these will be part of the professional experiences which, among other factors, tend to influence the decision-making of head teachers in their exercise of leadership.

### **Relationship Between Decision-Making, Prior Professional Experiences and Challenges**

According to (Descriptive approaches to decision-making, n.d.), there is a relationship between prior professional experiences and decision-making to address challenges, because “factors such as existing knowledge and previous experience of similar situations combine in the individual to create a unique body of knowledge and professional process informed by, but not restricted to the information learned in formal education or training.” This accumulated knowledge from prior professional experiences in brain memory becomes activated when the head teacher comes across similar or opposite situations, allowing them to make a decision that is consistent with the pre-existing mental pattern (brain physiology). In addition, due to cognitive processes, the information given to brain memory to preserve, once internalized, is used almost without consciousness. Terry (1995) argues that “three sources from which to seek guidance include the past, present and alternative image of future possibilities” (Radical change: Methodology of Empowerment, Fifth Paragraph). In the context of school, a head teacher can seek guidance from her/his prior experience to guide decision-making in dealing with the challenges in her/his present role. Likewise, Ubben, Hughes and Norris (2001) cited in Khaki (2005), say that principals bring in their values, beliefs and philosophies to schools and make their decisions in light of them. Khaki (2005)

further found that the government head teacher, in his study of three head teachers, drew on his professional experiences when he had to make decisions.

The above review of literature provides a strong stage for me to investigate how the above factors influence a newly promoted female head teacher's decision in dealing with challenges in initial years of headship in Pakistan. I have been teaching in Pakistan for more than two decades at elementary school, high and higher secondary levels, and in a professional development institution. This is a significant study for me because the findings may benefit me to devise, organize, and facilitate professional development courses for novice and aspiring head teachers. The findings may further help me recommend policies to address head teachers' issues and improve the quality of education and educational management in Pakistan.

### **Methodology**

This inquiry was to explore the relationship between decision-making and prior professional experiences of a head teacher in dealing with challenges in initial years as a head teacher in a Government Secondary School in Pakistan. A qualitative research paradigm was an appropriate approach for this study because qualitative research offers valuable ways to explore the qualitative world of human beings (Creswell, 1996, 1998; Schumacher & McMillan, 1993). Other reasons for employing a qualitative paradigm included: Firstly, the inquiry focus was on the *process* of decision making in the transitional years of a head teacher, from a teacher to head teacher, and qualitative research emphasizes the process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Secondly, there were no pre-determined variables within professional experiences therefore influencing factors on the decision-making required *exploration*, and qualitative research entails exploration of event / incident / phenomenon (Flick, 1998; Thomas, 2003). Thirdly, the research question needed a *detailed view* of the topic, which means one cannot address this question without having in-depth understanding of the process, which is the characteristic of qualitative research paradigm (Creswell, 1996, 1998). Fourthly, my intention was to see research participant in a *natural setting* (Freebody, 2003; Ross & Rallis, 1998; Thomas, 2003), to observe, to validate, and to explore the process of decision making as much as possible by interpreting the findings of the study, and qualitative research was more suitable for that. Finally, qualitative approach allows the researcher "to learn at first hand, about the social world they are investigating by means of involvement and participation in that world through a focus upon what individual actors say and do" (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 12). I actively participated in the process, and hence, learnt more about the study. All of the above mentioned dimensions of the research question helped to decide on qualitative research paradigm, and within that a case study tradition was chosen for this study.

### **Case Study**

Case study tradition was chosen for this exploration for three reasons; firstly, case study offers explanations for the way things happen (Thomas, 2003), and the nature of my inquiry demanded explanation rather than describing in figures. Secondly, this inquiry has "pre-determined boundaries" (Creswell, 1998), which are professional experiences in teaching in Government Secondary School. It also allows a researcher not only to find out the facts but also to transcend from *what is seen to what is unseen*. For example, in this study knowing head teacher's decision-making to deal with challenges in transitional years was not sufficient, but to reach to the roots of these decisions in order to see their implications for her professional development and effectively playing the role of a head teacher was important.

Finally, within case study experience-narratives approach was selected for this investigation because it not only allows the research participant to describe influential events in his/her own life, but at the same time it is focused and allows both research participant and researcher to make meaning out of the influential events (Thomas, 2003). As Tajik (1998) argues “qualitative case study allows us to begin with a blank paper and write onto it the reports of what occurs during the process” (p. 24). Therefore, a qualitative experience-narrative case study was chosen for this study.

## **Research Context**

This study was conducted in Pakistan. It would thus be appropriate to delineate a brief sketch of Pakistani education. There are three major types of schools in Pakistan that include Public, Private and Religious. The majority of children (approximately 80 %) attend Public school. Public schools in Pakistan are single sex at secondary (grade 6 to grade 10) and higher secondary levels (grade 6 to grade 12). Therefore, they are supervised separately. Females supervise girls’ schools and males supervise boys’ schools. This particular research was carried out in Pearl<sup>1</sup> Government Girls Higher Secondary School (PGGHSS)<sup>2</sup> in the area near the periphery of the metropolitan city of Pakistan. The school was upgraded to higher secondary level in 2004. However, the principal, subject specialists (teachers who teach grade 11 and 12) and other staff for higher secondary level have not been assigned to the school so far. Therefore, the same head teacher who was heading the school at secondary level still heads the school. This school was established in 1958. There are two shifts in the school: morning shift is for Secondary and Higher Secondary students and afternoon shift is for primary level students. This research was conducted in the morning shift with the head teacher in charge of the school.

## **Research Participant**

Looking into the variables in the research question, the “purposive sample method” (Sidhu, 1984, p. 265) was adopted which means selecting samples “that are likely to be information-rich with respect to the purpose of the study” (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 231). A newly-promoted position was more suited for this inquiry question as with the passage of time other links from administrative life, for example, reshaping of beliefs by getting through some effective professional development courses, may influence decision-making (Dollard, 1949 as cited in Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

Nadia<sup>3</sup> was invited to participate in the study after I collected her promotion records from the district office. She agreed to participate in our third meeting. Nadia Khan has been the principal of Pearl<sup>4</sup> Government Girls Higher Secondary School for the last year. She joined the teaching profession in 1974 as High School Teacher (HST) in the same school. Since then, she has been serving in the same school at different ranks.

Nadia’s professional trajectory includes classroom teaching (twenty-nine years), assistant head teacher (one year) and head teacher (one year). She likes her job and has viewed it as “worship” from day one. In other words she takes as seriously as prayer. While recalling her experiences, Nadia said that she faced numerous challenges in the beginning of her teaching life, including classroom management, discipline, and pedagogy, as she found

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>2</sup> Higher Secondary Schools means grade 6<sup>th</sup> to grade 12<sup>th</sup> (grade 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> are called Higher Secondary Classes in the context of Pakistan).

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>4</sup> Pseudo name of the school



reality different from the content of her pre-service teaching course. She acknowledged her head teacher's and colleagues' support and co-operation during her induction period in school. During her teaching career, she has received five in-service short-term trainings; two in mathematics content knowledge, two in computer literacy and one head teachers' training. She did not find them useful in her teaching because of the quality of those training sessions.

During her whole professional career, Nadia has worked with five different head teachers in the same school. In the twenty-nine years of her teaching responsibilities, she hardly worked closely with any head teacher. However, before becoming a head teacher, she remained assistant head teacher for a year, which provided an opportunity for her to work closely with the head teacher and to learn about headship roles.

Comparing all her positions, Nadia said that she missed her teaching life because during that time she was the center of attention and received respect from the students. She said that she tried to respect the students, and always remained honest and loyal to them. Her teaching responsibilities included taking care of everything related to students such as taking daily attendance, maintaining registers, collecting fees, grading, teaching mathematics to different grades, checking their notebooks, giving tests, maintaining discipline in the class and dealing with students' parents. During those years, Nadia went to the head teacher's office whenever she was called. When talking about decision-making, she very comfortably admitted that all decisions, regardless of their nature and importance, were made by the head teachers as far as she knew and were implemented by the assistant head teachers. Therefore, it seems like she was never provided an opportunity to make any decision about school, teachers, students or staff.

Whilst recognizing that her experience as assistant head teacher was the most beneficial year in terms of getting an understanding of the activities in the office, Nadia feels that she was not ready to take up the responsibility of being assistant head teacher in the school. She said that she learnt everything about assisting head teacher on her own and that was really challenging. She seemed disappointed by the attitude of the head teacher (being not supportive in her informal training), teachers (being non-cooperative) and staff during that year. She claimed that during that year her relationships with teachers and staff started being affected negatively. Her responsibilities as assistant head teacher included assigning provisional periods<sup>5</sup> to teachers and maintaining the teachers' attendance register. In other words, she was the connecting channel between head teacher and teachers. Here one can see the shift of responsibilities from teaching students to managerial tasks in management. She viewed her role as an implementer. She conveyed all the messages and orders from head teacher to teachers. She was not involved in any kind of decision-making even at this stage. It seems like not involving teachers and assistant head teacher in any decision-making process is not uncommon or unusual for her. In the Pakistani context, the experience as an assistant-head teacher is considered as a prerequisite for becoming the head teacher, and promoting a teacher to assistant head teacher is practical preparation of head teachers without providing any pre-rigorous training for the post. Nadia is not satisfied because she was not given a leadership role.

Although Nadia has received headship training, she felt unequipped in terms of expertise and power. She argued that the training was ineffective because of its time, content and duration. It was given to her three years before taking up the headship position. She felt that responsibilities of a teacher were different from responsibilities of an assistant head teacher, and she found that within the same office, responsibilities of a head teacher are very different from those of an assistant head teacher. She faced diverse challenges in her new position.

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<sup>5</sup> Temporarily assigning extra periods to teachers, in the absence of the subjects' teachers in Pakistani context.

## **Data Collection Processes**

For recognizing relationship in qualitative variables (prior professional experiences and decision-making), multiple data collection sources were utilized to collect data. Multiple tools, for example interview, observation, document analysis, and informal conversation, are appropriate to view the study from different dimensions (Yin, 1989). Those dimensions would be helpful to arrive at trustworthy conclusions.

### ***Interviews***

The nature of the research question required collecting information about the head teacher's past and present professional experiences; therefore, interviewing was appropriate because interviews "are excellent means of finding out how people think or feel in relation to a given topic" (Darlington & Scott, 2002, p. 50). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were adapted because these were helpful in getting more detailed information about certain issues as Smith, Kleine, Prunty, and Dwyer (1986) argue that narratives represent events in an individual's life, obtained with the help of lengthy interviews. Interviews include significant stories of others, in order to embed the narratives in a broader context. So this type of interaction results in mutual learning to understand the interviewee's thinking process, which is the purpose of every qualitative inquiry.

Five interviews of varying durations- from 20 minutes to one hour, were conducted. In order to keep the direction of the interviews focused and collect as much relevant information as possible, interview-guiding questions were shared with the head teacher beforehand. All interviews were done in Urdu as per her convenience, which were later translated into English. Initially the interview site was the school but after the second interview, I realized that due to interviewee's multiple tasks, maintaining privacy and avoiding disturbance was almost impossible. Therefore, the participant invited me to her home to provide an environment conducive for recording, maintaining privacy, flow of thoughts, concentration, attention, pace and direction of interview. I accepted her invitation and conducted interviews at her home after school.

### ***Observation***

Observation was another tool that I used for "making the familiar strange" (Glesne, 1999) and collecting information in the research context. In order to find out the influence of prior experiences on the decision-making of a head teacher, I used observations because it "is a very effective way of finding out what people do in particular context, the routines and interactional patterns of their every day life" (Darlington & Scott, 2002, p. 74). The purpose of observation was to see her decision-making in a natural setting, and to identify if there were areas in management where she was particularly referring to her previous experiences in dealing with the challenges.

### ***Document and Records Analysis***

As the research participant was promoted to a headship position in the same school where she has been working since 1974, it was reasonable to ask for documents such as order/notice books, meeting agenda books, and movement registers. She also shared some pages from her personal diary with me.

## ***Memos***

I wrote reflective memos as the research progressed and then consulted them for summative data analysis. Reflective memos were good in clarifying confusions about her statements, actions and about my observations. I always read them before starting the sessions and they refreshed my memory, so they were effective tools to keep the flow of information from one session to another.

## ***Data Recording Procedure***

The data included tape recordings of the interviews, interview transcriptions and translations (from Urdu to English), reflective notes on the transcripts, and field notes.

## **Data Analysis**

Many researchers have defined data analysis in different ways. For example, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) have defined data analysis as “the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes and other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others” (p. 157). Regarding data analysis commencement, Merriam (1988) argues, “analysis starts with the first interview, observation, and the first document read” (p. 119). About its nature and purpose, Merriam (1988) asserts, “it is an interactive process throughout the process in which the investigator is concerned with producing believable and trustworthy findings” (p. 120). Working in the described framework, I carried out the analysis process throughout the data collection period to focus and update the participant on the evolving shape of the study.

Data analysis started from the very first meeting with the head teacher and continued until the last interview. I found it fruitful because with the help of formative analysis, I was able to identify the gaps in data, ambiguities in statements and emerging themes. After going through the process, I strongly feel that without formative analysis in qualitative research the quality of findings as well as the efforts of researcher is likely to suffer.

Once fieldwork was over, the major exercise of data analysis was carried out with the help of my academic supervisor. Available data was thoroughly studied and categorized under various themes. During analysis, the researcher kept in mind Bogdan and Biklen’s (1998) view that, “the researcher’s primary goal is to add to knowledge, not to pass judgment on a setting” (p. 34). Color codes were used to identify themes in the data. At this stage, I realized that relationship was varied for different areas in school leadership. So I decided to present data analysis in thematic fashion. That would be helpful for the reader to see the intensity and density of the co-relationship of decision-making and prior professional experiences in different leadership areas.

## **Ethical Considerations and Remedial Alternatives**

As this study was conducted in an institution, I followed ethical protocols determined by The Aga Khan University- Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) Ethical Review Committee (ERC). I remained conscious about those standards from the beginning of the research. For example, voluntary participation, consent forms, confidentiality, privacy and freedom of withdrawal at any stage of the study were afforded the participant.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The following section presents findings of the study.

### **Findings**

Findings are discussed in thematic fashion. Each theme discusses the relationship of decision-making and prior professional experiences within the respective theme.

### **Teaching and Learning**

Data from various sources, such as formal interviews, informal conversations, observations, and document analysis, reflected that Nadia considered the area of teaching and learning of her interest, her top priority and the ultimate goal of the school. She acknowledged her experience as a teacher. She believed that her previous experience in teaching facilitated her role as a head in decision-making, in areas related to classroom such as checking students' registers, setting the timetable and understanding teachers' and students' problems and their needs. For example she said:

If I would not have that experience in teaching, I would not be in a position to check: results, monthly attendance registers, transfer certificate (TC) .... But today I am aware of the rules for everything in the school, so I am in a position to deal with those. (Interview, 06/05/2005)

Data suggested that Nadia faced challenges in subject allocation, in setting the annual time-table and settling problems related to students. It seemed that her decisions in this area were influenced by her prior professional experiences. However, the degree varied. For example in subject teachers, resource arrangement at classroom level, and in maintaining discipline in school, her decisions, to greater extent, were influenced by her prior professional experiences. But strong relationship was not identified in decision-making and professional experiences in dealing with challenges related to the relationship with students.

### **Managing Staff**

Leading and managing staff seemed to be more challenging for Nadia in terms of decision-making in dealing with challenges. As data revealed that Nadia joined the position with some expectations regarding her "power parcel" (Benaim & Humphreys, 1997) and "order and obey" attitude given in authority of head teacher. However, being promoted in the same school was the first obstacle in controlling the school for which Nadia was unsatisfied with her own role in the school. In addition, she was confronted with the challenge that Weindling and Pocklington (1996) have reported that new heads in England cope with difficulties caused by previous head teacher's styles and practices. She said that, "I cannot control teachers; they are spoiled by our previous head teacher.... If I would have replaced some strict head teacher, I would be relatively in a better position" (Interview, 25/04/05). She remained under pressure most of the time because she did not want to adopt the previous head teacher's style but the teachers did not seem to be ready to accept any change in those practices.

It appears that Nadia strongly believed that head teachers are controlling authorities. Maybe this is coming from her own accumulated experiences when she used to observe head teachers of her own times, when she was not involved in any kind of decision-making and

was never allowed to go to the office unless she was called for. Moreover, she mentioned that her relationships with her head teachers were very good because she always carried out tasks assigned from the head teacher's office and was regular, punctual and always gave good results. So she assumed that all teachers with those qualities are good and obedient while the rest are disobedient. Therefore, in dealing with those "disobedient" teachers Nadia said, "as my previous head teachers used to say *teachers ku haram ke aadat par gaii hain* (teachers have been used to unethical practices) so it is better to keep quiet" (Interview, 25/04/05).

Although Nadia acknowledged that experience of being assistant head was useful in her preparation for headship, she regretted that her friendly relationships with teachers were negatively affected. This negative effect on relationships is perhaps one of the distinctive findings of this study, which is affecting the approach of the new head teacher to deal with challenges in leading and managing staff in the same school. Nonetheless, literature discusses professional loneliness (Hobson et al., 2003), and the head teacher's role is distanced from the rest of the staff (Macmillan, 1994), and the new head teachers, yet it does not suggest that head teacher's experience as deputy in the same school can also become a challenge for the new head teacher in dealing with challenges.

This area seems more challenging in terms of decision-making, as Nadia wanted to keep the final authority of decision-making with her, but being promoted in the same school did not facilitate that role. In making decisions in dealing with challenges, two approaches are coming out clearly, and both of them depict her prior experiences clearly, first when Nadia goes along with teachers to avoid conflicts with them, and second, when she decides with the help of some external person to keep harmony in the system.

Findings from this theme show that Nadia's prior teaching experience does not seem to be facilitating her to make effective decisions in managing staff. Surprisingly, while sharing challenges and approaches to cope with them, Nadia did not refer to her headship training even once; and data revealed that her teaching experience is facilitating her to make rational decisions. This seems to confirm Sarason's (1982) argument that classroom teaching experience is not a very good preparation for becoming an effective head (as cited in Fullan, 1992), as it seems relevant in this case.

### **Efficient and Effective Placement of Staff**

Data revealed that Nadia has developed a mental pattern of efficient and effective placement of staff, which is mainly based on "order and obey" and "strong content understandings." Therefore, while making decisions, she referred to the same criteria. For instance, the head teacher's decision of refusing to let willing teachers teach science subject did not seem appealing from those teachers' development perspectives because teachers should be given the chance to develop themselves professionally. There could be many alternatives of helping those willing teachers to teach the subject they wish to teach. That would in turn develop teachers' capacity (Sergiovanni, 1998) in the school. She could have used strategies like mentoring to help teachers, or could give teachers a chance to start teaching science from elementary level and then gradually going to secondary level, but she suppressed the teachers' motivation by a simple refusal to allow them to teach science subjects.

Nadia's decision in the area of efficient and effective placement of the staff seemed very much to have been influenced by her mental pattern from her past experiences in the school and her constant recourse to past experience to make decisions in this area. Findings from this theme substantiate the results of the previous theme that Nadia's prior teaching experience does not seem to facilitate her in making decisions other than the conventional ways that she has been exposed to, in her experiences as a teacher and head teacher.

## **Strategic Planning and Development of the School**

Data suggested that Nadia viewed herself as implementer of decisions more than decisions-maker in strategic direction and development of the school. She believed that in the bureaucratic context of government schools, she could not make major decisions for the school. This view is supported by Oplatka (2004) that in most developing countries, principals' power is severely limited. However, for implementation of various government policies, she certainly makes decisions. Most of her decisions in this particular area do not seem to be directly influenced by her professional experience, rather she consults experienced head teachers of other schools or the senior clerk of her own school.

Nadia did not see any use of school developmental plan as the school is led by the *District Officer*. She argued that decisions were imposed on her and she was bound to carry them out.

In summary, dealing with challenges in strategic direction and development of the school, officials are largely responsible for making decisions. Nadia saw her role as an implementer rather than decision-maker. However, Nadia does make many decisions that do not affect major policy guidelines given by the *District Office*. In her decision-making, Nadia largely takes inspiration from her past experiences with her professional colleagues, teachers or head teachers.

## **Resource Management and Accountability**

In arranging resources for effective implementation of curriculum, most of Nadia's decisions were based on prior professional experiences. However, in accountability there seemed a mixed approach to decision-making; some decisions were influenced by her prior professional experiences, while others were dependent on some external (who were not directly involved) factors. For example, a science teacher demanded chemicals and some equipment for students' practical and the head teacher suggested for written request including the list of the required chemicals. Later on, she explained that she was careful about the use of the school's funds because "I do understand that this money is coming from poor students' pockets so we need to spend it carefully. My head teacher was also very cautious about using funds due to the same reasons" (Interview 04/05/05). Nadia further said that she wished to make teaching and learning effective in the school and for that she planned to make accountability strict in the school. She saw accountability at three levels that is; at students' level, at teachers' level and at head teacher's level. At students' level she, to a larger extent, she relied on class teachers, while for the teachers' accountability she had the plan, while at her own level, she was really careful and did not take the risk of making decisions on her own. She consulted her prior head teacher, supervisors or senior clerk in her school before making any administrative decision.

## **The Influence of the Head teacher's Mental Models on Decision-Making**

There are two different approaches coming out from the data about influences of mental models on her decision-making process. There are some areas, mostly in resolving staffing issues, where she purposely followed the decisions, which were made previously by her head teachers. For example, she said, "yes, of course I follow them [previous head teachers] because I believe we should follow good things" (Interview, 25/04/05). Often Nadia took decisions that did not seem to be based on the realities on the ground, but rather based on her prior assumptions. In other words, she seemed to take those decisions as "true-for-all

recipes.” Another equally important approach, which is contradictory to the first one is that she feels compelled to follow whatever were the practices of previous the heads.

### **Conclusion**

This concluding section begins with a synthesis of the research findings, it then poses some questions for further study followed by recommendations.

### **Synthesis of the Findings**

The findings of the study explored the assumptions that a head teachers’ prior professional experiences must influence her decision-making in dealing with administrative challenges in the initial years of headship. Moreover, it was found that decision-making processes and prior professional experiences were co-related in teaching and learning, managing staff, efficient and effective placement of staff, strategic planning and development of the school, and resource management and accountability. In the case of Nadia, in her new position as a head, she was facing challenges in matters which are internal to the school, for example, issues related to infrastructure, resources, and discipline, and matters external to the school, such as orders from higher authorities and community concerns, and those related to staff and staffing issues. These are the areas that Dunning’s (1996) study has also identified as challenging areas for novice head teachers (cited in Benaim and Humphreys, 1997).

Another significant finding of this study was the partial disagreement with Draper’s and McMichael’s (1998) argument that the deputies who became heads would feel ready for the management role because of the extensive preparation they had undergone, and because of their long-term initiations into a management identity. In the present case, Nadia considered her role as “connecting channel” or messenger of a head teacher and teachers rather than the initiator or decision-maker in her assistantship role. Whilst she admitted that her (assistantship) experience was beneficial because she got familiar with office activities, as she said, “decision-making is the responsibility of a head teacher and implementation of decisions is the responsibility of the assistant head teacher” (Interview, 30/03/05). In spite of the fact that she has received head teacher training as well as experienced assistant headship, she faced many challenges in learning and knowing her role as a head teacher in the school. It is in accord with Daresh’s (2004) study in which he described the case of two trained head teachers, for whom assistant headship was like giving them first hands-on experience of headship. None of these subjects are comfortable with their new authority/ positions of authority.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are some limitations of this study that should be considered before generalizing the findings to other contexts. “Because qualitative research occurs in the natural setting it is extremely difficult to replicate studies” (Wiersma, 2000, p. 211). First, the study was done with only one head teacher. Therefore, it is quite possible that other head teachers may have different relationships between their decision-making and their professional experiences. Second, the research participant had worked in the same school for 31 years; therefore her professional exposure was limited to just one school. More exposure of a head teacher may yield different relationships. Third, this study was done in one school. Differences in culture at different schools may affect the overall findings of a study. Finally, this study relied on self-report data. It is quite possible that the research participant may have said something that she thought was a socially accepted answer rather than what was the accurate response.

### **Questions for Further Exploration**

This study showed that Nadia's tendency in decision-making to choose the option from her prior experiences was adoptive rather than adaptive. How much of this dependency on past experiences is likely to facilitate the endeavors of bringing about a change in school leadership and management in a government school is a question that needs to be explored.

Further, this investigation identified influencing factors other than professional experiences, among which pressure from higher authorities and lack of confidence were evident. What the implications are for school improvement and students' achievements in light of the kind of pressure on school head teachers, is a question that needs to be explored in contexts like that of Pakistan.

### **Recommendations**

In light of the research findings, this study put forward some recommendations to head teachers and policy makers.

This study recommends that head teachers keep creating opportunities for the teachers to take part in the management of the school so that all invested parties understand the different dimensions of school management. It further recommends to policy makers to put policy in place to provide new head teachers with sufficient support within their contextual realities, for example, mentoring or co-head teachership that could help new head teachers to induct themselves into positions. Also, it recommends to policy-makers to provide opportunities for senior teachers, which will help them to develop these teachers for the headship position.

In a nutshell, this study confirmed the assumption that prior professional experiences do influence decision-making of a newly promoted head teacher in dealing with challenges in the initial years of headship. The relationship was found in all dimensions of school management. There were, certainly, some others factors such as pressures from higher ups that tend to influence the head teacher's decisions. What implications of all influencing factors on decision-making, including prior professional experiences and other factors, for school improvement efforts is the question that this study puts forward for further exploration.



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**Article Citation**

Khan, S. T. (2015). Relationship between decision-making and professional experiences of a Pakistani female head teacher in initial years of headship. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1417-1433.

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