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School leaders' engagement in curriculum planning and decision-making

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Whether students are engaged in meaningful learning or rote memorization depends to a large extent on the way students' learning experiences are planned and executed in a school setting. A critical analysis of the policy and practice context in Pakistan, with regard to curriculum reforms undertaken by the successive governments and their implications for curriculum planning and decision making, reveals that the policies provided little flexibility for the school leaders to be engaged in the planning and decision making at the school level.

The new education policy of 2009 (GoP, 2009) identifies lack of involvement of teachers in education reform as a key reason for policy failures. It also recognizes that curriculum alone cannot cater for the diverse conditions in the education sector itself and the variations within the geographical breadth of Pakistan. In short, it recognizes the role of teachers in curriculum planning and decision making at the school level in order to respond to the diverse contextual needs of the students.

To initiate change from schools, it would be ideal to have freedom at the school level. Darling-Hammond (1996) reminds us that, "Ordinary schools can succeed in extra ordinary ways when they refocus their work on the needs of the students…" (p. 14). When the students' need for meaningful learning becomes a major curriculum goal, its attainment will obviously depend primarily on curriculum plans and decisions made by school leaders. Hence, the study reported in this chapter, explored different ways in which school leaders engaged in curriculum planning and decision making in schools.

Dimensions of curriculum planning and decision making

Curriculum planning and decision making is a process of translating educational "images and aspirations" (Eisner, 1985, p. 128) into school programmes that will effectively realize the vision

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that initiated the process. Based on the scope of this study and the contextual relevancy, four dimensions of curriculum planning are selected: goals, content, learning opportunities, and mode of presentation and mode of response (Eisner, 1985; Klein, 1991). A brief review of these dimensions is given below.

Objectives of teaching and learning

Stating school purpose and formulating objectives to achieve it is an important step of curriculum planning. However, formulating goals and objectives is a political activity because it involves preferring certain goals and objectives over many others (Broudy, 1970).

Providing a field of action for all those who have a stake in the educational processes of schools, goal setting presents the major issue for school leaders to decide on which aspects of human life they take responsibility to guide (Saylor & Alexander, 1974). By virtue of their position, school leaders have to face this issue and take on the responsibility of curriculum planning and decision making.

Content to be taught

Content selection is an ideological process (Apple, 2004). Content is defined as the subject matter of the teaching (Print, 1993). It includes knowledge, skills associated with knowledge (reading, writing, calculating, dancing, critical thinking, decision making and communicating) and values associated with what is learnt. Apart from guidance that can be taken from goals already set, school leaders may also consider the content's meaningfulness for students as criteria for content selection. Curriculum planners must respond to students' diversity by including a range of content options from which teachers and students can choose.

Learning opportunities

Zais (1976) argues that, "Good intentions, fine goals and objectives, excellent content, flawless evaluation procedures, then, are all for naught if the learning activities in which students engage do not provide them with experience whose consequences are educational" (p. 350). Unless goals and content are not translated into events or learning opportunities, there will be no educational consequences for students. Eisner (1985) contends that this is the translation of goals and content into learning opportunities that draws heavily on the expertise of school leaders as curriculum planners.

Mode of presentation and mode of response

Contrary to the traditional lecture method, research indicates that students have different preferences for the ways in which they receive information (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer & Bjork, 2008). The difference in the preferences of students for ways of receiving information provides a focus for teachers to think of modes of presentation tailored to student requirements.

Therefore, teachers should not restrict themselves to limited ways of presentation and students should not be restricted to limited ways of response. If curriculum planners have to offer equal opportunities to students and provide them a level ground to play, then they have to consider students' preferences and accordingly present what they develop as learning opportunities and expect student responses in their preferred ways of expression.

Research methodology

We used a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design (quan → Qual) that consisted of two distinct phases (Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Research started with a survey method followed by qualitative case studies. In this chapter, we report our pilot study data collected through a questionnaire to answer one of our research questions: What are the different ways in which secondary school leaders are engaged in curriculum planning and decision making in Chitral?

Description of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed in light of the research framework. Items were developed in light of the literature (e.g. Eisner, 1985; Klien, 1991; Henderson & Gornik, 2007; Marsh, 2009; Saylor & Alexander, 1974; Print, 1993; Zais, 1976), personal experiences and insights from studies and questionnaires (e.g. Rizvi, 2003; Al-Daami & Stanley, 1998) in order to measure school leaders' current engagement in the four earlier discussed dimensions of curriculum planning and decision making on five point Likert scales.

Data collection

The questionnaire was self-administered to 200 teachers and head-teachers selected from a randomized list of schools in Chitral district. Urdu[37] translation of the questionnaire was available for those respondents who chose it. Of the total questionnaires distributed 152 were returned.

Data analysis

The items of each dimension were subjected to Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation method and Kaiser Normalization to determine the underlying structure of items that made up the engagement of school leaders in curriculum planning and decision making. This was done by grouping variables having moderate or high correlation with each other (Field, 2009).

Inspection of the correlation matrix for the four dimensions of curriculum planning and decision making revealed the presence of several coefficients of .3 and above. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values exceeded the recommended value of .6 (Pallant, 2005). The Barlett's Tests of Sphericity for the four sub-scales respectively reached statistical significance and supported the factorability of 152 cases of school leaders as an adequate sample size. Factors were extracted based on predetermined criteria.

Results of the survey research

Tables 1 to 4 show the key extracted factors with their Cronbach's alpha values, item loadings and counts of views of respondents to these items. The loading columns of each table show that

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Urdu is the national language in Pakistan and medium of instruction in many schools.

these items strongly correlate with their respective factors. For the purpose of this chapter, the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' views of respondents were collapsed together under one view of 'agree' assigned with a numerical value of 3. In the same manner, the 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' views were collapsed together to form one view of 'disagree' equal to a numerical value 1. The uncertain views were retained as such but assigned numerical value equal to 2.

Objectives of teaching and learning (OTL) scale

Based on the set criteria as described earlier, the principal component analysis of OTL scale produced four factors. The four factor solution explained 58.1 % of the variance with factor one, two, three and four contributing 31.4 %, 11.0 %, 8.5 and 7.3 % respectively.

Table 1 presents the factor solutions and frequency distribution of the first two factors which have emerged as more significant for the study.

Table 1. Dimensions of Objectives of Teaching and Learning (OTL) scale with loadings and counts of views of respondents

Factors				
Factor 1: Formulate and review learning objectives in the light of student needs and national standards (alpha =.807)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
OTL13 discuss/reflect on the objectives of teaching and learning formulated for students to achieve	.744	135	8	9
OTL9 develop objectives for lessons in the light of the objectives set out in the national curriculum documents	.662	129	6	15
OTL2 formulate the overall aims of teaching a subject in the school	.648	136	2	13
OTL8 hold formal meetings with students to learn about their educational needs/interests	.593	127	6	17
OTL11 have the opportunity to sit together and review progress toward achieving objectives of teaching and learning	.592	136	8	8
OTL3 informally talk to the students about their learning/career interests	.585	138	1	10
OTL10 formulate teaching and learning objectives in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude	.502	121	7	22
Average %		87 %	4 %	9 %
Factor 2: formulate policies and education goals at the district level (alpha =.821)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
OTL15 formulate policies for secondary schools in meetings held with district education officials	.874	79	27	43
OTL16 formulate educational goals for secondary schools in sessions organized under the supervision of district education office	.855	79	21	47
OTL17 have the opportunity to review district education goals in the light of the national curriculum goals	.690	90	23	36
Average %		54 %	16 %	28 %

Formulating and reviewing of learning objectives in light of the set standards has come out to be an important engagement activity for school leaders. Providing a stage for school leaders to choose from among many (Broudy, 1970), these standards are essential knowledge, skills, attitude, and guidelines as set in the national curriculum. Beyond their schools, though relatively less engaged, school leaders seemingly deem curriculum planning and decision making an important aspect of their work to engage in at the district level, a desire which teachers elsewhere also have expressed (Al-Daami & Stanley, 1998). Another important aspect of school leaders' engagement is planning an annual school development plan that enables them to create space for their involvement in curriculum planning and decision making. While engaging in all these planning and decision making activities, school leaders seem to take board examination requirements into account.

The 28 % uncertain response for items of factor 2 indicates some confusion in the minds of respondents. It may be possible for the respondents to have an impression that these items ask about involvement in meetings officially held with heads of schools at the district education office not the ones held with them when they (district officials) visit schools.

Content to be Taught (CtT) scale

The CtT scale on subjecting to PCA, produced four factor solution, explaining 57.8 % of the variance with factor one to four contributing 24.4 %, 13.3 %, 11.2 %, and 8.9 % respectively. The factors illustrate how teachers determine the content for students to learn (Grossman and Stodolsky as cited in Weiss et al, 2001) through engaging in a range of activities—developing curricular materials for teachers and students, modifying and improving on existing contents, planning and reviewing schemes of work and engaging in discussion on strengths and weaknesses of textbooks

Table 2 presents the first two factors. Thirty-two percent (32 %) of respondents in factor 1 have indicated involvement in preparing teacher guidebooks, student workbooks and textbooks. This is a significant number of respondents agreeing to these items. It may be possible that respondents have misunderstood these items taking them as curricular enrichment activities and hence this large number of agreeing views for these items. Another account for it may be that the provincial government of KPK[38] had recently invited experts and teachers from Chitral district to prepare Khowar[39] curriculum and related materials to be taught in schools. It would be interesting to further investigate this factor in the next phase of the study to know who was involved and how they were involved.

It is worth noting that statistics for items of factor 2 suggest quite a large number of school leaders (27% and 37%) restrain doing activities that are conceptual in nature like CtT3 (modifying course material) or involve budget like CtT6 (inviting guest speaker) respectively.

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Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, formerly known as North West Frontier Province (NWFP)
Local language of Chitral district

Table 2. Dimensions of Content to be Taught (CtT) scale with loadings and counts of views of respondents

Factors				
Factor 1: Participate in developing content/material for teachers and students (alpha =.921)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
CtT15 have opportunities to participate in preparing teachers' guidebooks	.936	51	63	35
CtT14 have opportunities to participate in textbook writing	.890	46	85	34
CtT16 have the opportunities to participate in preparing student workbooks	.889	47	57	34
Average		32%	45%	23%
Factor 2: Modify and improve the existing materials (alpha =.687)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
CtT4 welcome students to share material they find useful in the library or on the internet	.772	137	5	8
CtT1 consult books, magazines, newspapers or internet etc. to find supplementary material to existing textbooks	.714	120	13	18
CtT3 modify course material throughout the academic year according to changing needs of students	.655	110	18	20
CtT6 have the liberty to sometimes invite guest speakers who have expertise in a particular content area	.482	95	15	41
Average %		76%	8%	14%

Learning Opportunities (LO) scale

Subjecting LO scale to PCA, four factors were produced. The four factor solution explained 54 % of the variance with factor one to four contributing 31.8 %, 8.4 %, 7.1 %, and 6.7 % respectively.

Table 3 presents the first three factors. School leaders appear to believe in the importance of co-curricular activities in student learning but they seem to be restricted in their choice of activities by lack of resources (Jenkinson & Benson, 2010). Lack of resources is a reality in most schools, at least in Chitral, that restricts students' engagement in co-curricular activities for enhanced learning. However, this lack of resources seems not to prevent teachers from encouraging and involving students in hands-on minds-on activities that can be carried out with available resources in school. For the purpose of providing useful experiences to students, school leaders engage in preparing teaching materials from easily available local resources. It is also important to note that school leaders engage in planning and implementing programmes to fill gaps found in the textbooks. Their prompt response to questions raised or gaps identified by students is noticeable. It highlights the importance of student engagement in their education for meaningful learning. The more they are engaged the more teachers become responsive to their needs for meaningful learning.

Table 3. Dimensions of Learning Opportunities (LO) scale with loadings and counts of views
of respondents

Factors	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
Factor 1: Plan co-curricular activities to supplement classroom learning (alpha =.817)				
LO16 arrange educational video watching sessions for students	.808	62	34	51
LO17 have established different student clubs (nature club, literary club etc.) in the school	.794	78	25	48
LO18 have developed educational links of students with students of other schools within and outside the district	.681	76	31	44
LO15 organize educational trips for students	.655	106	11	34
LO19 make arrangements for students to contest elections to win student leadership positions in the school	. 526	86	23	37
Average %		54%	16%	28%
Factor 2: Encourage and involve students in mental and physical activities (alpha =.773)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
LO3 generate a discussion in the classroom as and when a situation presents this possibility	.741	142	3	2
LO9 think of activities during the delivery of lessons and implement them (on the spot) to involve students	.712	126	4	19
LO12 regularly organize co-curricular activities for students	.635	140	4	6
LO10 suggest activities for students to carry out at homes as they occur to them towards the end of a lesson	.567	135	5	12
LO13 discuss and share ideas regarding classroom activities with each other	.534	138	5	7
Average %		90%	3%	6%
Factor 3: Plan programmes to address gaps in the textbooks and student needs (alpha =.747)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
LO8 know from their experience that what kind of activities can be carried out to teach a particular lesson	.778	142	4	5
LO7 make additional plans and implement to address questions asked by the students	.661	128	7	16
LO5 plan and implement programmes (e.g. about local plants, animals or culture) that are not sufficiently addressed in textbooks	.659	106	18	26
LO6 make additional plans and implement to address topics that may come from students	.520	93	18	38
Average %		77%	8%	14%

Mode of Presentation and Mode of Response (MPMR) scale

In the PCA of MPMR scale, four factors were extracted. The four factor solution explained 57.7 % of the variance with factor one, two, three, and four contributing 30.4 %, 12.4 %, 7.9 %, and 6.9 % respectively.

Table 4. Dimensions of Mode of Presentation and Mode of Response (MPMR) scale with loadings and counts of views of respondents

Factors				
Factor 1: Discuss with fellow teachers and students how to improve teaching (alpha =.757)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
MPMR15 discuss among each other how to improve delivery of lessons in the classroom	.772	146	2	13
MPMR13 take students feedback to guide their planning and teaching	.739	137	4	11
MPMR17 have the opportunity to formally meet and discuss issues regarding delivery of a lesson in the classroom	.626	128	4	17
MPMR12 encourage students to ask questions	.576	146	0	4
MPMR11 sometimes set students questions and ask them to develop their own answers which is not directly found in the textbooks	.549	126	6	19
Average %		90%	2%	7%
Factor 2: Match methods to concepts for better teaching (alpha =.773)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
MPMR9 teach some of the lessons through role play and drama	.837	108	11	31
MPMR10 teach some topics by performing a hands-on activity in front and having students watch it	.646	129	6	16
MPMR8 teach some of the lessons (e.g. about crops) outside the classroom	.616	107	12	32
MPMR4 assess student learning also through assigning them project work	.577	101	11	35
MPMR3 assess student learning also through posing problems for them to solve	.561	133	6	11
MPMR5 assess student learning also through organizing different competition events such as science and technology competition	.498	98	14	38
Average %		74%	7%	18%
Factor 3: Test student learning in conventional ways (alpha =.747)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
MPMR1 give paper and pencil tests to measure student learning	.831	138	8	5
MPMR2 assess student learning also through questioning	.737	147	2	2
Average %		94%	3%	2%
Factor 4: Teach having exam requirements in mind (alpha=.605)	Loadings	Agree	Disagree	Uncertain
MPMR6 give lectures while teaching in the classroom	.768	112	14	25
MPMR16 have little time to discuss different ways of improving lesson delivery among each other	.674	87	24	38
MPMR7 write notes for students on important topics for examination	.601	121	10	19
Average %		70%	11%	18%

These factors (see Table 4) revealed that school leaders have, while engaging in planning, at least two things in their minds: meaningful learning of students and their scores in the examinations. For meaningful learning, they teach and assess employing innovative ways (factor 1 and 2) showing their belief that mode of presentation can be improved with insights from knowing what and how students respond. While for good scoring in the board examinations, they also employ conventional teaching and assessment (factors 3 and 4). School leaders seem to be carrying the tension between the two competing positions – the progressive and the traditional teaching approaches.

Conclusion and implications

The findings are important with respect to the notion of school leaders' as curriculum planners and decision makers at school level. The results show that school leaders are not just implementers of curriculum through teaching textbooks in the classroom. Rather, empirical findings have illustrated that school leaders exercise their personal agency to adapt and enrich nationally developed curriculum in order to serve the meaningful learning purpose of the students. All findings of data analysis are in contrast with the way teachers and students in schools are viewed as mere consumers of textbook knowledge (Bacchus, as cited in Rehmani, 2006; Hoodbhoy, 1998; GoP, 1998). Though school leaders are not engaged in developing curriculum at the national level (at least those who participated in this survey), they build upon the national curriculum in many ways that makes them, in their own right, the re-developers of the curriculum that serves the learning requirements of the students well. It is important to recognize this status of school leaders as re-developers of the national curriculum. National curriculum policy makers need to acknowledge and provide due space for school leaders to engage creatively in planning curriculum at the local level. The findings highlight some of the stumbling blocks that prevent school leaders from full engagement in curriculum planning at the school level and beyond, providing an agenda for action to the policy makers and the programme developers.

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