How the Leader Leads Now? The Impact of Educational Leadership Course on Leadership Practices of School Heads

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Abstract

Despite the fact that school leadership has tremendous role in school improvement, little attention has been paid on building the capacity of head teachers in developing context especially in rural Pakistan. This study reports the impact of an educational leadership course conducted for head teachers coming from various sectors in context of rural Pakistan. Drawing on the data collected from head teachers, teachers and parents through interviews and observations, the study finds that the leadership course had a positive impact upon the practices of the studied head teachers. They arrange more frequent meetings and discussions inside schools, value teachers' voice, try to address teachers' academic issues and have better and greater relations with the community. Similarly, they have implemented the concept of action research to improve their practices. However, they have not been able to sustain the practice of action research and to fully engage teachers in their ongoing development. The study suggests that future in-service courses conducted for head teachers should focus more on providing them with more ideas and skills to sustain the innovations.

Keywords: School Leadership, Rural Context, In-Service Course Impact

Introduction

Where today's turbulent world and the speedy process of change has forced schools to improve their practices on ongoing basis, there seems a greater inclination towards developing the capacity of teachers in order to develop the capacity of schools for improvement. A number of public institutions and NGOs have been contributing in teacher development through external programs and school based interventions. However, despite such efforts, little desirable impact has been observed on the classroom practices of the participating teachers especially in the context of developing countries.

According to a study conducted by UNICEF (2007), in the context of developing countries, one reason for this little or no positive impact of the initiatives is the lack of supportive leadership to facilitate and encourage teachers in implementation of their learning. Even in the

developed contexts, the crucial role of school leadership has been well established. The emerging body of literature on school leadership suggests that an effective leader not only role models learning but inspires as well as facilitates teachers in their ongoing development (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

However, to be an effective leader, one needs capacity and leadership skills. There is a general agreement that leadership skills could be developed through capacity building programs and exposing school leaders to updated leadership ideas and practices. Realizing this fact, Professional Development Centre Chitral, a sub-unit of Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED, PDCC) has been conducting a capacity building program namely Certificate Course in Educational Leadership and Management (CE: ELM) for school leaders. However, little is known about the impact of this program upon the leadership practices of the school heads as no study has been conducted to understand how the PDCC trained head teachers implement the course ideas and strategies in their real context. This paper reports the results of a study conducted to understand the impact of CE:ELM course upon the leadership practices of the participating head teachers.

Literature Review
The importance of school leadership in school improvement has widely been debated and accepted in educational literature. School heads play an important role in creating supportive and conducive teaching learning environment to ensure high achievements for the students (UNICEF, 2007). Davis (2005) argues that the school heads ensure students achievement through development of teachers and implementation of effective organizational processes. Moreover, effective school heads help their teachers through support, modeling and creating conditions for professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Such professional development conditions could be created through structuring formal mentoring programs as reported by Komba and Nkumbi (2008). Similarly, as Dillon and Peterson (1986) argue, the effectiveness of a school is related to the roles of the school leader as facilitator, encourager, resource provider, coach and cheerleader. It is the responsibility of the head teacher to professionally develop teachers. For this purpose, s/he should be able to design professional development activities responsive to the need of teachers (Rowlands & Adams, 1999).

The above mentioned importance and various roles of school leadership highlight the fact that a school should have an effective leader in order to be an effective school and to meet the expectations of school stakeholders. However, the skills of leading school may not be directly bestowed upon individuals by birth rather such skills could be learnt through training and practice. A study report by UNICEF (2007) reveals that in the context of developing countries, most school heads are poorly trained to handle the complex and varied tasks which they are supposed to do under heavy workload conditions. Therefore, they often apply bureaucratic approach to handle the situation resulting in low performance.
One of the major reasons of their failure to deal with the complex situation is that originally they are trained for classroom teaching not for administrative tasks (Ibrahim, 2011). He also argues that the school heads can play their multi-faced roles effectively provided there are effective mechanism for their development. One of the conditions that determine the effectiveness of head teachers' capacity building programs is their relevance to the context. It has been suggested that the head teachers capacity building programs should be

contextually relevant as different contexts, systems and organizational stages have different contextual realities and needs (OECD, 2008).

One of such relevant components that could be required in any context is reflective practice as this skill enables a head teacher to reflect on their own practices for the purpose of bringing improvement in them and to help their teachers become reflective practitioners resulting in innovations and improvement (Lambert, 2007). This developmental model is not resource hungry and could be initiated and sustained at the workplace without being dependent upon external sources. Similarly, a head teacher leading change initiatives should have the capacity to study the change process and the contextual conditions influencing the change process. There are enough evidences to suggest that action research has been considered an effective tool for studying the change processes and the local conditions (Edqual, 2010). Since the schools as organizations in developing context especially in Pakistan desperately need improvement, developing head teachers' capacity in managing change, doing action research and reflective practice seems a positive and timely strategy for school improvement.

The CE:ELM course offered at PDCC is informed by these contextual needs of the head teachers and includes the components such as effective leadership, reflective practice, action research and managing change. This course consists of three phases spreading over a period of approximately nine months. The first phase consists of two weeks face-to -face sessions covering the themes of educational leadership and management and the reflective practice. In the second face-to-face two-week phase, participants develop understanding of action research and find issues or ideas from their practice for action research. While the third and last component of the certificate course covers another two crucial concepts, managing change and monitoring and evaluation. During these two weeks, the participants are prepared to plan school based educational initiatives in their respective organizations and their knowledge and skills are enhanced for promoting and managing change.

The observations of course facilitators and reflections of the participants reveal that they develop a good understanding of educational leadership and management as a result of attending the said program. Even the observations from fields have revealed that the CE:ELM trained head teachers perform differently and uniquely as compared to their untrained counterparts. However, no systematic study has been conducted to systematically record the impact of the program on the leadership practices of the participating teachers. While studying the impact was important to understand the quality of PDCC courses, to identify issues faced by the participant teachers in their respective contexts and to further improve the program based on the research findings.

Methodology
The study aimed at identifying the impact of the specific course (CE:ELM) in specific setting (schools) through exploring perceptions and observing the practices of the specific population (three head teachers). Therefore, a case study within qualitative paradigm was adopted for the study. Since qualitative approach allows researchers to personally visit the setting and interact with the participants, it seemed more appropriate approach to adopt keeping in view the purpose of the research (Merriam, 1998).

The study focused on three head teachers representing the three sectors working in education sector in the context of Chitral namely Aga Khan Education Service, private sector and public sector. The researcher's intention to include all the sectors was to understand whether different sectors could differently influence the implementation of training ideas and strategies. Out of the 23 head teachers who had participated in the 2008 CE:ELM program, the three teachers were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study as well as the geographical locations of the schools. Focusing only one participant in each sector was considered important to get deeper understanding of the situation through in-depth data (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998). In order to enrich and triangulate the data, one group of teachers and one group of parents from each sector were also consulted. Before my intervention, formal consents were obtained from these participants.

Semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis were employed as tools and procedures to generate data. The head teachers were interviewed individually while the group of teachers and parents were interviewed in groups to collect maximum data in minimum time. The focused group interviews also enabled the participants to question each other's views and experience and thus, to bring forth the real picture (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Each individual and group was interviewed twice, each interview lasting for 45 minutes to one hour. All the interviews were audio recorded to listen to them repeatedly during data analysis. Similarly, the leadership practices of the participants, their interactions with teachers, students and community, relationships and school routines were observed and recorded as field notes. Moreover, some relevant documents such as communication letters, school improvement plans and records of in-house teacher development, if any, were analyzed to get deeper understanding of the situation.

The acquired data were analyzed on ongoing basis. The purpose of the research guided the initial classification and coding of data. However, the researcher followed grounded theory to pick up the most frequently emerging themes (Straus & Corbin, 1998). Separate files were maintained to record relevant data into relevant themes. As a result, the findings are presented and discussed according to the most frequently emerged themes during the data analysis.

Results and Discussion
After the analysis of the collected data the finding of the study have been summarized and discussed under the following five broader themes.

School-based Discussions and Meetings
The study revealed that all the three head teachers involved in the study initiated discussions with teachers to identify the issues they face during their routine practices. Each of the head teachers was proud to state that listening to the issues of the teachers was a new activity which they were not interested in before attending the CE:ELM course. This finding was validated by the teachers who confessed that the head teachers were listening to their voice and showing empathy. The head teacher of school a conducted group discussion with his teachers to identify the professional development needs of the teachers and found that ECD teacher was facing problem in classroom management. Two other teachers had problems in subject matters. Such discussions and interactions were not limited to identifying only issues. One teacher in school A during the group interview stated that "now the head teacher

discusses everything regarding school during scheduled staff meetings as well as informal meeting and asks about the problems which we face in the school". Similarly, the head teacher of school B shared his learning from the course with teachers, highlighted the importance of professional development and advised them to avail such opportunities for bringing improvement in their practices. A teacher in school B stated during the group interview that "on advice of the head master I went for mathematics workshop and my colleague science teacher attended science course at PDCC". Moreover, the head teacher of school C conducted meeting with his teachers after each phase of the course and shared his learning with them. During such meetings, he found that most of the teachers were unable to plan their lesson properly because being a newly established private school, majority of the teachers were fresh graduates and had not availed any in-service training.

These discussions and meetings had positive impact upon the relationship of the teachers as they were now frankly sharing their issues and the head teachers were patiently listening to them. Moreover, now they realize the importance of professional development. Some of the interviewed teachers were showing interest to attend any professional development course offered at PDCC. It suggests that the trained head teachers had shifted their previous practices and thus, positively influenced the attitude of other teachers.

Addressing Teachers' Problems
The second common theme emerging from the data was the initiatives undertaken by the head teachers involved in the study to address the issues as raised by the teachers during their discussions and meetings. Head teacher of school A sent his ECD teacher to attend an external course which helped her in better organization of the resources and management of the classroom to facilitate learning of the students. "The course helped me to overcome the challenges which I faced in the ECD classroom", said the ECD teacher during the group interview with teachers. Two other teachers were facing difficulty regarding the contents and pedagogies of Mathematics. The head teacher created structures to take help from colleagues having expertise in the subject during break and vacant periods. As a result, contextual and workplace solution to the issue was identified. The head teacher of school B encouraged and motivated mathematics and science teachers to attend professional development opportunities and sent them to attend two weeks workshops each for mathematics and science. As the teachers in School C were lacking skill in lesson planning, the head teacher arranged a three days' workshop on lesson planning in his school utilizing the expertise of one of his teachers who had attended a lesson planning workshop. "After the lesson planning workshop, now it is easier for us to plan our lessons and teach accordingly" a teacher in school C commented during the group interview with teachers.

Moreover, all the three head teachers initiated the systematic way of reflective practice in their schools which was the major theme during the first phase of the course. Though the head teachers intimated that they had shared the idea of reflection with other teachers, no evidence on parts of teachers was seen in writing reflections on their practices. On being inquired about the reason of not continuing the practice of writing reflection, the teachers in all the three schools mentioned lack of time being the main reason. Still it was evident that learning from the CE:ELM course had motivated all the three head teachers to take responsibility for professional development of their staffs. However, to what extent these initiatives will sustain in the school context is a concern.

Conducting Action Research

The head teachers of school A, B and C conducted action research to bring improvement in the areas falling short of their aspirations. They tried to address the most burning issues in their respective contexts. The head teacher of school A tried to improve reading skills of those students of class VI who came from surrounding schools and could not cope with the reading pace of the students of their new school. The head teacher reported that considerable improvement had happened in the reading skills of the target students as a result of his action research. The head teacher of school B worked to enhance the confidence level of his students by involving them in leadership roles and decision making activities. The head teacher of school C worked to improve the presentation skills of the students through presentations in school assembly and in the classrooms. He was happy to announce that a remarkable improvement had occurred in the confidence of the students.

Commenting on their action research experience, all the three head teachers considered it a real learning opportunity which helped them in understanding and resolving the particular issues in their respective schools. Their understanding of the concept of action research was further increased when they put the idea into practice. Commenting on his learning from the experience of action research, the head teacher of school A stated that " we learnt a lot about leadership and management from the course but action research was of more practical importance as it helped us in understanding and addressing our school issues". However, there were no evidences of conducting action research on any other issue except the ones they had conducted as part of their course. The workload and time factor was the excuse which they commonly shared with the researcher for not conducting action research on any other issue. Thus, the study reveals that all the three head teachers gained skills necessary for conducting action research. However, they had not been able to extend the idea to other issues and the teachers. How can the participants of the course be helped to sustain the practice of action research in their school context and help other teachers in becoming action researchers is a major concern to be addressed in the next CE:ELM course.

Involving Parents

All the interviewed head teachers seemed well aware of the importance of parental involvement in schools related matters. In two of the studied school, there were even structures for parental involvement namely School Management Committee (SMC) in school A and Parents Teachers Council (PTC) in school B. However, these committees were not properly functional though there were some evidences of the committee's involvement in case of school A. After attending the course, the head teacher in school A utilized SMC members to mobilize other parents to pay school fee of their children and to remain in contact with the school in order to monitor their children progress. During the group interview in school A, one male parent said that "Now the head master forces us to come to school. Though we cannot help them, still we come to school".

The head teacher of school B utilized the forum of PTC to address the issue of absenteeism of the students and was successful in improving the attendance. Another parent in School B during the group interview with parents said "whenever my child does not go to school, the head master contacts me and advises me to send the boy to school regularly". Similarly, the head teacher of school C involved parents to monitor students at home to ensure their engagement with studies and to report to schools about students activities at home. "I am an

illiterate person and do not know what my son reads or writes but I know that for how long my son reads or writes during a day", one of the parents in school C commented.

Here it seems apparent that as compared to their previous practices, the head teachers had relatively more interactions and contacts with parents. As a result, parents have been involved at least to some extent in school related matters. However, the existing structures and cultures of parents' involvement suggest that there is still enough space to involve parents more effectively in school activities. The head teachers believe that parents' lack of awareness is the big challenge in their involvement.

Change in the Attitudes of the Head Teachers

It was evident from the observations and interviews that a positive change has occurred in the attitude of the three head teachers. These head teachers were frankly acknowledging this fact. Previously all of them used to remain reserved and hold discretional powers in matters of decision-making and also get angry on small issues happening against their will. Head teacher of school A, responding to a question, boldly stated that "the difference in my attitude before and after the course is like the difference between earth and sky". He confessed that now staff and students were more important for him and he spends most of his time in addressing the issues faced by the teachers and students. One teacher commented that, "he is now very much open and friendly with us. Previously, he used to get angry on matters of small importance but now he is flexible and chats with teachers and student whenever he gets a chance".

Similarly, the head teacher of school B reported increased students' interest in him after he attended the course. He said that, "every class want me to take class with them but I do not know why?". He also mentioned the change in the attitude of his teachers after he shared his learning from each phase of the course and working culture of the training institute. Previously, his staff used to leave for homes at noon when they had no classes but now they stay at the school and offer their services to engage the vacant periods of the absent teachers. It is because of the head teacher's longer stay at school as other teachers cannot leave for home when the head teacher is there. Similarly, the head teacher in school C reported that the course has developed a thirst in him for further and ongoing learning. All these examples indicate the positive change in the attitude and practices of the trained head teachers.

Conclusion

To conclude, as compare to other contexts, the role of school leadership in rural Pakistan is even more important as the geographical isolation of these contexts is a barrier for the schools to keep abreast with the speedy process of change. Lack of networking with external sources limits the schools to their traditional practices. In such situation, only the head teacher could create some ripples in the otherwise stagnant water. However, even the head teachers could not initiate some innovations without being exposed to some external professional development.

This study supports the findings reported from other contexts that in-service professional development opportunities help in enhancing the capacity of schools heads to successfully initiate and lead school development activities. The heads involved in the study developed the habit of discussing school issues with their colleagues and finding solutions for them. The

course motivated the involved head teachers to take responsibility for the professional development of the staff and to build their capacity to take initiatives in this direction. One important skill to lead and monitor the change process is that of conducting action research. All the three head teachers involved in the study had successfully conducted action research on different issues in their school. Moreover, they showed positive attitude and realized that they could make a difference in their schools. However, the study also revealed that the head teachers had not been able to extend the practices of action research and reflective practice to the other teachers. Though the other teachers seemed familiar with the concept of reflective practice, they were not used to this practice. Similarly, even the head teachers had not sustained the practice of action research.

Future CE:ELM course have to focus more on how to enable head teachers in sustaining the innovations and extending them to other teachers. Once other teachers are also involved in action research and reflective practice, schools could be able to develop their capacity from within. Similarly, future studies have to focus on the challenges which the head teachers face in sustaining school based development models and extending these learning models to other teachers. These steps would be helpful in improving schools in rural context of Pakistan.

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