

Instructional Leadership: Perceptions and Practices of Government School Head teachers

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to analyze the perceptions and practices of government school headteachers regarding their role as instructional leader. The population of the study consisted of all government secondary school headteachers from Punjab province. The sample was selected from two conveniently selected districts – Lahore and Khushab. The study was conducted in two phases involving 40 government secondary school headteachers. In the first phase, their perceptions regarding instructional leadership were sought. In the second phase, after sharing different dimensions of instructional leadership they were asked whether they are performing their role as instructional leader or not; and if not then what are the reasons? The study found that the headteachers have no clear perceptions of instructional leadership neither are they performing the role as instructional leader. They feel that heavy administrative responsibilities and paper work hamper their efforts to lead the instructional activities. It is recommended that special awareness and capacity building trainings may be held for headteachers regarding their role as instructional leader. Furthermore, steps may be taken to free the headteachers from less important administrative duties and unimportant paper work.

Keywords: *Instructional leadership, perceptions, practices, government school, headteachers*

Introduction

Schools are the most important pillar of an education system. With the increasing importance of ‘schooling’, schools management all around the world is facing complex nature of responsibilities. The modern society is experiencing rapid transitions in almost every sphere of life. These changes have turned the educational institutions into more dynamic but complex ones than before (Crow, 2006).

The headteachers manage, react and adapt according to the changing demands of the society (Oplatka, Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2002). In terms of school leadership, the role of the headteacher as instructional leader is pivotal to overcome the problems, to enhance the school capacity, improving teachers’ capabilities, and to provide a more conducive environment for teaching and learning

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(Niqab, Sharma, Wei & Maulod, 2014).

This is only possible when the headteachers will play their due role. An effective instructional leader improves his relations with the teachers and strengthens his role in the local community for school improvement. In these areas, the role of the headteacher as a leader, and his personal traits are crucial (Yunus & Iqbal, 2013).

The instructional responsibilities of headteachers in the government schools in Punjab are not clearly defined, and their roles are obscure. Due to the heavy and dispersed workload, headteachers have the least attention on their roles as instructional leaders (Kandasamy & Blaton, 2004). Schools in the public sector are managed by untrained headteachers who have been promoted on the basis of their teaching experience rather than management and administration expertise (Simkins, Sisum & Memon, 2003). Students' achievements of government schools are very discouraging (Andrabi et al., 2007). On the other hand, effective instructional leadership has positive impacts on students' learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

This raised our interest to conduct a study to explore government school headteachers' perceptions about the concept of instructional leadership, their

practices and the factors that affect their efforts to be effective instructional leaders.

Theoretical background

The fact that school leader matters for school success ultimately recognizes the importance of effective instructional leadership. Instructional leaders create a positive impact not only on their teachers' performance but also on student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Recognition of the importance of school leadership has led to increased attention to recruiting and preparing school leaders more proactive than the past. Many new principal preparation and development programs emphasize the role of principals as 'instructional leaders' (Horng, Klasik & Loeb, 2010). Effective instructional leaders demonstrate behaviors from each of these dimensions i.e. defining and communicating shared goals, monitoring and providing feedback on the teaching-learning process and promoting school-wide professional development (Hallinger, 2010).

Different researchers have discussed multiple dimensions of instructional leadership. The model presented by Hallinger and Murphy (1986), commonly known as PIMRS model of instructional leadership, proposed three dimensions: defining the school's mission; managing the instructional program, and promoting a

progressive school learning climate. Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan and Lee (1982) emphasized the socio-cultural context i.e. personal characteristics of the headteachers, institutional context and community characteristics to the mediating variables like learning climate and instructional organization.

The model presented by Blasé and Blasé (2000) is one of these famous models. Their instructional leadership model was based on two themes and 11 sub-themes of effective instructional leadership. These two themes are (i) talking with teachers' and (ii) 'promoting professional growth' of the teachers. These strategies are briefly discussed as under:

Talking with teachers

Talking with teachers in and outside of formal instructional meetings is the cornerstone of effective instructional leadership (Blasé & Blasé, 2000). Effective instructional leaders valued dialogue and encouraged teachers to become aware of and critically reflect on learning and professional practice. Blasé and Blasé found that principals used five primary talking strategies with teachers to promote reflection: Talking with teachers includes five strategies, (1) making suggestions, (2) giving feedback, (3) modeling, (4) using inquiry, and soliciting advice and opinions, (5) giving praise.

Promoting professional growth

Effective instructional leaders conduct staff development sessions to address emergent instructional needs. Effective instructional leaders develop the concept of teachers as learners who collaborate with one another to study teaching and the effects of teaching. Promoting professional growth consists of six sub-themes: (1) emphasizing the study of teaching and learning, (2) supporting collaboration efforts among educators, (3) developing coaching relationships among educators, (4) encouraging and supporting redesign of programs, (5) applying the principles of adult learning, growth and development to all phases of staff development, and (6) implementing action research to inform instructional decision making (Blasé and Blasé, 2000).

The available literature suggests a high correlation between the instructional leadership of headteachers and teachers' attitudes towards impending change (Kursunoglu & Tanrogen, 2009). Thus, if headteachers do not take interest in curricula and give more importance to administrative tasks, and show a lack of interest in staff meetings then school might not bring forth the desired student learning. This could lead to school failure and the headteacher will definitely be blamed for this failure of the institution.

Thus, an effective instructional leader is the one who arranges teachers' development programs, sharing views and work with staff and exhibits a high degree of collaboration with staff members, makes frequent visits to classrooms and gives regular feedback (Niazi, 2012).

Instructional leadership practices in Pakistan

The role of headteachers in Pakistan is crucial because teachers' learning and professional development are not valued in Pakistan. They are trained to be a teacher and expected to teach not to lead (Riaz, 2009). A passive attitude is the hallmark of all the stakeholders of an educational institution in Pakistan. The headteachers are not willing to share leadership because they feel threatened, and teachers are unwilling to take on leadership roles because they are already overburdened with academic and administrative assignments. Nevertheless, the headteachers were held responsible for establishing a school environment based on cooperation and helping teachers to become more active (Mustafa, 2012). Horng, Klasik and Loeb (2010) suggest that leaders could mentor their teaching staff by observing practice, providing pointed feedback, and modeling instruction when necessary. Although this is an appealing portrait of the ideal, this

model is poorly fit to the reality of many of today's schools. Kandasamy and Blaton (2004) analyzed the roles of headteachers in seven South Asian countries and explored that the role of headteachers in Pakistan is overburdened with administrative responsibilities where headteachers have to manage human and financial resources, admissions, examinations, and community participation. Out of four provinces in Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtoon Khawa (KPK) is the only province where, to some extent, instructional leadership has been made a part of headteachers' responsibilities (Mustafa, 2012).

When we look at the scenario of school leadership in the government sector of Punjab, instructional responsibilities of headteachers is 'less clearly' defined as job manuals and defined roles are not made clear. Due to a lot of workloads, headteachers have the least attention on their role as instructional leaders (Kandasamy & Blaton, 2004).

Research Methodology

This study is based on a survey design; an interpretative approach based on semi-structured interviews involving headteachers of the government schools was adopted. This qualitative design helps to meet the research objectives and permitting to explore the research question

deeply (Maxwell, 2005). Furthermore, qualitative research design is preferred over quantitative approaches when the study targets exploration of participants' meanings (Creswell, 2009). The key research questions guiding the study were:

- a) How do the government school headteachers perceive their role as an instructional leader?
- b) What are the common techniques do the headteachers practice to perform their role as an instructional leader?
- c) What are the factors that affect headteachers' role as effective instructional leaders?

Sampling

The data was collected from two conveniently selected districts of the Punjab province – Lahore and Khushab. The sample was further delimited to randomly selected units of Samababad Town (Lahore) and Naushera tehsil (Khushab). In total, 40 secondary school headteachers from two districts participated in the study. The average age of the respondents was 52 years (approximately), and they had on average 14 years of experience as a government school headteacher. Names of the participants and schools were re-coded to ensure privacy.

Data collection

The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were carried out by involving seven government secondary school headteachers from each district. They were asked about their perceptions about instructional leadership. The responses were compared by using the lens of instructional leadership model presented by Blasé and Blasé (2000).

In the second phase of the study, 13 headteachers from each district were conveniently selected other than the headteachers who participated in the first phase. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to inquire about their practices as instructional leaders. Various techniques based on the model of Blasé and Blasé (2000) were shared with the headteachers before the interview questions. They were asked what kind of instructional leadership techniques they practice in their respective schools. Next, they were also asked about the factors that affect their efforts to be an effective leader.

Next to the interview questionnaire, an interview protocol was developed comprising of an interview scenario and introduction to the research topic to be given before the interviews. On average, one interview lasted 18 minutes. All

interviews were audio-taped in view of the analysis. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To overcome any kind of communication barrier, the interviews were conducted in the national language ‘Urdu’, and later were transcribed and translated into English language. Names of respondents were recoded to ensure privacy.

Data analysis

Building on the methodology suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), each interview was transcribed verbatim in view of the analysis. The researcher coded all transcripts. Content analysis was carried out to determine the content units for analysis based on the two themes of Table 1

instructional leadership model. A deductive method was adopted to develop a theme matrix. Next, interview data were reviewed for interpretations and reflections of the identified sub-themes related to the two primary themes i.e. (i) *talking with teachers* and (2) *promoting teachers professional growth*.

Results

Results of the first phase

In the first phase, 14 secondary school headteachers were interviewed to explore their perceptions in relations to instructional leadership. We summarized the findings in table 1 to clearly see the overview of the study results.

Headteachers’ perceptions regarding their role as instructional leader

Themes / sub themes presented by Blasé and Blasé (2000)	Participants’ responses													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<i>Talking with teachers</i>														
Making suggestions	x	x	x	x	x	X		x	x		x			x
Giving feedback														
Modeling														
Using inquiry, and soliciting advice and opinions														x
Giving praise	x													

Promoting professional growth

Emphasizing the study of teaching and learning	x		X	x		x		x	x
Supporting collaboration efforts among educators									
Developing coaching relationships among educators									
Encouraging and supporting redesign of programs									
Adult learning, growth and development to all phases of staff		x							
Implementing action research to inform instructional decision making									

Data were analyzed by following the model presented by Blasé and Blasé (2000). Table 1 helps to understand the teachers' perception related to each theme presented in the model. The table shows that few headteachers mentioned some of their responses related to the themes, but somehow they were unknowingly. It seems that they are unaware of these strategies which are so helpful for a school head to run a school system in an effective and efficient way.

If we look at the first theme, *talking with teachers*, most of the respondents show their responses related to first sub-theme 'making suggestions' which looks the easiest way to do but how to make useful suggestions is critical. One of the headteachers said:

"Being a school leader, I give instructions to my teachers related to all the activities in the school. If my instructions are helpful to make a progressive or effective school then I would be a good instructional leader, otherwise I am not." (Participant No. 2)

None of the respondents referred to giving feedback and modeling which are also very important sub-themes. If headteachers share

their feedback with teachers in view of their performance, they can improve their classroom instructions. The modeling of headteachers is vital in school effectiveness context if the leader will model the behavior what he/she expects from other, teachers will also follow him/her.

As to the next main theme of the model, *promoting professional growth*, few of the headteachers emphasizing the study of teaching and learning but 'how' is missing there, e.g. when we ask them how you do this they were unable to explain it.

One of the participants stated:

"A head-teacher has different duties to perform. He has to teach at least eight classes in a week. He should be the instructional leader of the institution by setting higher standards for his teaching." (Participants No. 7)

Overall, none of them specifically talked about their facilitation in promoting professional growth among teachers. They were not clear that how they can promote professional growth of the teachers. The maximum elements related to the promoting professional growth were missing in their talks.

To sum up the findings of the first phase, we can conclude that headteachers are not

aware of the concept of instructional leadership. The majority of the headteachers mainly talked about the administrative responsibilities and directions they provide to accomplish the tasks.

Results of the second phase

In the second phase of the study, next to the semi-structured interview questions, the researchers shared the various techniques based on Blasé and Blasé (2000) adopted by instructional leaders in their schools. Then the headteachers were asked about the techniques they use to perform their role as an instructional leader. Majority of the headteachers replied that they are not performing this kind of role in their schools. We analyzed the interview data to find the responses related to the two primary themes: (1) *talking with teachers* and (2) *promoting professional growth*.

Talking with teachers

In the analysis, we could find two sub-themes related to talking with teachers: (1) *making suggestions* (2) *giving praise*

(1) ***Making suggestions.*** Few of the headteachers mentioned that teachers often discuss teaching-learning problems and classroom issues with them. They also hold monthly meetings with staff members

where classroom experiences are shared with each other. One headteacher said:

“At times, I talk with my teachers but often these discussions are informal” (Participant No. 22).

Another participant told:

“I regularly arrange monthly meetings with the teaching staff. Usually, we discuss classroom-related problems (Participant No. 16).

(2) ***Giving praise.*** The next major sub theme in the analysis was “giving the teachers praise.” As far as, praise or commendation of teachers is concerned, the majority of the headteachers stated that they generously appreciate their teachers upon their good performance. One of the headteachers said:

“I always appreciate my teachers in front of other teachers so that they can also get some motivation.” (Participant No. 7)

A headteacher explained his main purpose of praising teachers in the following way:

“Most of us (the headteachers) appreciate their teachers. I think praise is the best tool to keep them motivated.” (Participant No. 23)

It was found that apart from giving praise to better-performing teachers, no other techniques suggested in the hypothetical model are adopted by the headteachers. The headteachers do not intervene in the teaching process by offering any suggestion or modeling. All of them talked about the absence of seeking advice and inquiry from the headteachers, and thus providing no space for giving feedback.

To conclude, headteachers are not aware of the instructional leadership strategies. It seems they are just following a set system, coping with the routine and are not ready to take any extra assignment to improve their instructional leadership strategies.

Promoting professional growth

The headteachers were of the view that Directorate of the Staff Development (DSD) is working continuously on the professional growth of the teachers. They showed complete satisfaction with the efforts of the DSD and felt that there is little space left for them to work on the professional growth of the teachers. The support for promoting professional growth is related to the main theme of our instructional leadership model. One of the headteachers said:

“The Directorate of Staff Development is successfully

working for teachers’ professional development.” (Participant No. 19)

Another headteacher also shows her satisfaction with the program:

“The Government of Punjab has taken appreciable initiatives in providing professional development opportunities for teachers through DSD.” (Participant No. 15)

Supporting collaboration efforts among teachers

Some of the headteachers told that ‘working directly’ with classroom teaching skills of the teachers has been assigned to senior staff members. The experienced teachers work with the less experienced teachers which support the idea of shared instructional leadership. This can be linked to “supporting collaboration efforts among educators.” A headteacher said:

“The senior teachers help the less experienced teachers whereas my duty is to facilitate such cooperation” (Participant No. 3). Another headteacher explained:

“I have formed different committees, classes are regularly checked, and suggestions are provided to teachers

for improving their skills”
(Participant No. 12).

But the strategies that are under the direct influence of the headteachers like emphasizing the study of teaching and learning, developing coaching relationships, implementing action research, and encouraging and supporting the redesign of programs are being completely ignored by the headteachers.

To sum up, the prevailing situation in the government schools regarding instructional role of the headteachers is not encouraging. The headteachers explicitly stated that they are overburdened, and they cannot even focus on classroom teaching. They are unable to manage effective talk with their teachers. When the researchers shared the instructional leadership strategies with the headteachers so that they could identify some of the strategies in their practices but they were unable to identify the possible strategies being practiced in government schools.

Factors obstructing in adopting instructional leadership techniques

Considering the critical situation in the public schools of Punjab, the headteachers were asked about the factors which are affecting their effective role as instructional

leaders in their schools. During the interview analysis, we have identified various factors which are affecting their instructional leadership. But we will only mention a few of the factors that are seriously affecting their practices.

Almost all the headteachers were of the view that their heavy administrative responsibilities do not permit them to adopt instructional leadership strategies. One participant said:

“We are overburdened due to a lot of school-related responsibilities and extra administrative duties. Due to the administrative responsibilities, we remain away from our schools very often.” (Participant No. 2)

Another head said:

“We are unable to work according to our plans because of extra administrative responsibilities assigned by the higher authorities. I want to visit the classes but, I could not find time due to these responsibilities.” (Participant No. 17)

While few of the headteachers mentioned that government school culture does not allow them to directly intervene in classroom teaching. One headteacher revealed:

“In the absence of proper lesson planning in government sector schools, we are unable to provide any feedback to our teachers.” (Participant No. 9)

A headteacher stated:

“I find it odd to visit classes to observe my teachers and provide them feedback. All the teachers have proper qualifications. They have devised their own teaching methods. Usually, nobody likes to be watched” (Participant No. 24).

Some of the headteachers mentioned that higher authorities keep them busy in a lot of paperwork and sometimes unnecessary paperwork. They cannot spare time to talk with the teachers and enhance their classroom teaching skills. One headteacher said:

“Submission of same information repeatedly has unnecessarily diverted our attention from teaching-learning activities.” (Participant No. 19)

The higher authorities give deadlines for such tasks and the headteachers are threatened by strict disciplinary actions against them in case of non-compliance. One headteacher explained this situation:

“The information is demanded in a threatening way, usually, on a short notice and we have to provide information in a two-hour time or face disciplinary actions under PEEDA, etc.” (Participant No. 11)

They mentioned some other factors too which are affecting instructional leadership practices in the government schools like absence of instructional leadership in the manual of headteachers’ responsibilities and lack of proper training for the headteachers.

Discussion and Conclusions

Findings regarding the perceptions of government secondary school headteachers about their instructional leadership roles, practices and the factors that obstruct their instructional leadership efforts in their respective schools are as follows.

The findings clearly suggest that headteachers are mostly unaware of the concept of instructional leadership neither do they try to learn its strategies. Furthermore, instructional leadership is not a part of main job description of the headteachers in Punjab. Hallinger and Lee (2014) also concluded that in majority of the developing countries, it is *poorly* understood and out of the main job descriptions of the headteachers in many parts of the world.

Nevertheless, instructional leadership strategies are imperative for school effectiveness. A number of factors have been identified affecting the headteachers' performance as an instructional leader in the government schools. Some of the key factors are: (1) *administrative responsibilities* (2) *school culture* (3) *lack of training* (4) *Lack of monitoring*.

As to the *administrative responsibilities*, headteachers feel overburdened. They are always busy not only with school matters but other than school matter i.e. extra administrative duties assigned by the higher authorities, meetings, and a lot of paperwork to fulfill the official formalities. The findings of Kandasamy and Blaton (2004) regarding Pakistani headteachers' heavy administrative responsibilities are in line with the findings of this study. This overburden affects their performance and motivation leaving them with no time to think about their school performance and effectiveness. But some of the headteachers told that they shared their responsibilities with their colleagues who help them to work efficiently. This is also in line with the study results of Lambert (2002). George (2001) also concluded that despite the importance headteachers attach to their role as

instructional leader, they are unable to deliver due to unnecessary paper work. Robinson (2012) recommended to shed off some of the administrative roles of the headteachers that if we want them to lead 'more strategically'

Next, *school culture* is a crucial factor; headteachers mentioned that government school culture does not allow them to intervene in classroom teaching. That means their teachers feel awkward when headteachers monitor their classes. If they will not visit their classrooms how they would be able to give them feedback about their teaching. Consequently, teachers will not improve themselves. A good instructional leader has to model the way which means leader go first. If he shows the behavior what he expects from other, then teachers will also follow him. This argument is also supported by the study of Yunus and Iqbal (2013) who concluded that if instructional leader possess adequate knowledge, skills and professional enthusiasm in the school, the teacher usually follow him as a role model.

Another important factor is the *lack of training*. Provision of training for the instructional leaders is the key to the whole educational process. Through training

headteachers can transfer skills to the teachers to cope with various problems efficiently. If headteachers are fully supported with the related training, they will eventually become an excellent mentor and role model for their teachers (Alam, 2012; Khan, 2013). Higher authorities should also organize in-service training for instructional leaders, conduct some seminars on behavioral change, and highlight the roles of the teacher to bring change in the school environment. Although, headteachers were satisfied with the performance of Directorate of Staff Development (DSD), but it seems that much remains to be achieved.

Another important factor is the *lack of monitoring*; our findings suggest that government schools are following a 'set' system. There is no hard and fast rule for monitoring. Sometimes, District Education Officer (DEO) or other officials come to visit the school, but they hardly pay attention to teaching and classroom environment. Monitoring is solely the business of headteachers. He/she has to manage all his/her responsibilities in an efficient way so that he can monitor each and everything within the school boundary. Monitoring and evaluation help the instructional leader to change strategy if

necessary. The principal needs to set objectives for academic improvement, and to circulate these set objectives among the teachers as guidelines (Alam, 2012). The headteachers should be familiar with modern approaches to fulfill monitoring and evaluation of the improvement oriented tasks efficiently. For that, they design monitoring framework for their schools.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of the study, it is recommended that special seminars and training for headteachers may be arranged to make the headteachers aware of their responsibilities as instructional leader of their respective schools. Their roles as an instructional leader should also be made part of main job descriptions of the headteachers in Punjab. Furthermore, the headteachers may be spared from the administrative duties of little importance which can be distributed among the teachers. The clerical staff may be trained and held responsible for paperwork and provision of information to the higher offices so that the headteachers might get time to work as an instructional leader. The factors that have not been focused in this study like pre-service teacher

education, government policies and incentives need to be investigated in future research.

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