

SYED NASIR HUSSAIN*
DR. ABDUL HAMEED**
DR. MUSHTAQ AHMED MALIK***

FINANCIAL POWERS OF HEAD TEACHERS AND STATUS OF PHYSICAL AND LEARNING RESOURCES AT GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS IN PUNJAB

Abstract

This study explores the financial powers of government school head teachers in Punjab and the status of institutional physical and learning resources. Using multi-stage sampling technique, 18 head teachers were selected from 3 districts of Punjab. A semi-structured interview was developed to collect the data. The qualitative data collected were analyzed accordingly. It was found that sufficient physical and learning resources are available but the head teachers are not financial empowered to ensure provision of missing resources. As far as the repair, operation and maintenance of available resources are concerned, the head teachers have sufficient financial powers in papers but they think that they have no autonomy in exercising these powers. This lack of financial empowerment has badly affected the improvement and utilization of physical and learning resources available at government schools in Punjab. It is recommended that along with increasing the school budget, the financial powers of the head teachers should also be ensured in real terms.

Keywords: financial powers, government schools, head teachers, physical and learning resources

Introduction

* PhD (Education) student, University of Management and Technology, Lahore

** Dean, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Management and Technology, Lahore

*** Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Sargodha

Provision of ample financial resources is one of the important determinants of school success. Apart from availability of funds, the effective utilization of these funds also plays a vital role in school success. Keeping in view that financial resources are always limited, efficient spending is preferred over 'spending more'. Furthermore, total quality management supports the concept that the closer the decisions are made to actual product leads to better outcomes. This concept further makes the institutions more responsive to local needs and demands. The head teachers are empowered to address urgent challenges regarding provision and maintenance / repair for effective utilization of the available resources. This study was conducted to analyze the impact of financial powers of the head teachers on provision, improving and utilization of available physical and learning resources at government schools in Punjab.

Literature Review

There is strong literature available to support that decentralization of decision making powers to schools has a positive relationship with student learning and creating a more positive school learning environment (Aturupane, Kellagham & Shojo, 2013; Di Gropello, 2006). Decentralization of powers entails school-based decision making about human and physical resources, and handling of school budget including purchase of teaching-learning material (Aturupane et al., 2013). The potential benefits of head teachers' financial powers to use school budget are: greater resource mobilization (De Grauwe, 2004); more responsive to local needs and requirements (Aturupane et al., 2013; De Grauwe, 2004); and optimum use of available financial resources (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Di Gropello, 2006).

Every country has limited financial resources. Pakistan, despite governments' determination to spend more on education, has been spending around 2% of its GDP on education for the last two decades (UNESCO, 2012). The lesser available financial resources put an extra responsibility for efficient spending of meager funds. The financial decisions made closer to the actual situation will result in higher efficiency (World Bank, 2013). In Punjab, a secondary school head teacher can spend up to 50,000 rupees in each case "provided the rates have been prepared on Market Rate System" on "Special repairs of educational institutions, operation and maintenance of Equipments, Tools, Plants, Machinery and other facilities and sanction payments thereof" (Government of Punjab, 2006). On the other hand, majority of the private schools in Punjab have empowered head teaches and their success lies in flexible decision making (Andrabi et al., 2010). The 'flex-approach' is based on the conviction that different places have different needs and centralized planning cannot align the needs of every unit (Andrabi et al., 2007). In societies where periodical repair and maintenance mechanism is not well established, emergency repairs and maintenances are very common. In these situations, collective and centralized decision making is a fallacy (Asiabaka, 2008).

An important component of school learning environment is the physical and learning resources though availability of resources is not enough to make any major decision (Kangas, 2010). As students spend a considerable time at school premises, the effects of school environment on students' learning are not only natural (Earthman, 2004) but significant also (Adesoji & Olatunbosun, 2008; Iqbal, 2005; Shami & Hussain, 2005). Higgins, Hall, Wall, Woolner, and McCaughery (2005) concluded in their meta-analysis of about 200 studies that improving physical resources have resulted in significantly increased students' scores. These 'planted' facilities which include school building, appropriateness of classrooms, lavatories and playgrounds facilitate students' learning (Khan &

Iqbal, 2012). Though government schools in Punjab do not have adequate physical and learning facilities (Saeed & Wain, 2011) yet still they have better facilities than the private schools (Chaudhary, 2004; Imran, 2008). But these available physical and learning facilities are not being properly utilized in government schools in Punjab (Hussain & Hameed, 2014; Imran, 2008). Under Education Sector Reforms 2001, majority of the government schools have been provided with basic physical facilities (Government of Pakistan, 2008). Misallocation and non-utilization of school resources are common in government sector and have little or insignificant effects on students' achievement (Dahar, 2011).

Empowerment of head teachers results in more efficient use of material and financial resources (De Grauwe, 2004). With the objectives of improving quality and increasing quantity of education within limited financial resources, multiple strategies have been adopted by different governments around the world. Financial empowerment of school head teachers to meet day-to-day costs and educational expenses is one of the most effective strategies to improve delivery of educational services (World Bank, 2007). So, the financial empowerment of head teachers is being used for effective and efficient spending of the limited available funds. Efficient spending will ensure the optimum utilization of institutional resources.

Research Questions

Following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What is the status of available physical and learning resources at government schools in Punjab?
2. To what extent the government school head teachers have financial powers for provision of physical and learning resources?

3. To what extent the government school head teachers have the financial powers for the maintenance of available physical and learning resources?
4. Whether the government school head teachers have the freedom to exercise their financial powers for the improvement of physical and learning resources or not?

Methodology

The study was exploratory in nature using qualitative research design. The data were collected from the selected head teachers of the government schools through a semi-structured interview. The research instrument was self-developed and validated by experts. The interview was tried out before the actual data collection. Apart from their financial powers regarding physical and learning resources, the head teachers were asked about the causes of non-utilization of available resources. The data were collected from 18 head teachers which were selected through multi-stage sampling techniques. In the first phase, three districts were selected. On the basis of first ever educational district ranking of Pakistan issued by an NGO - Alif Ailan(2013), 36 districts of Punjab were distributed in high performing, average performing and low performing categories. Both school and education indices were considered. One district from each category was selected using simple random sampling technique. Three districts - Chakwal (high performing district), Mianwali (average performing district) and Rahim Yar Khan (low performing district) were selected. In the next phase, 6 head teachers were conveniently selected from each district. In this way, 18 government secondary schools were selected.

The data collected were qualitative in nature and analyzed accordingly. The main emphasis during the interview was kept on

finding the examples of real situations regarding the impact of financial powers of the head teachers on physical and learning facilities. The interviews were held in Urdu language which were later transcribed and translated into English.

Findings of the Study

The head teachers were satisfied with the availability of physical and learning facilities at their respective schools. Only four out of 18 head teachers were slightly dissatisfied with the availability of physical facilities like sufficiency of classrooms, playground, drinking water and toilets whereas only one of the head teachers showed complete dissatisfaction with the availability of learning facilities like library, computer lab and science lab. On the other hand where these basic facilities were missing, the head teachers had no financial powers to make the missing facilities available. For example, one of the head teachers told that more than 20 years ago, science lab was damaged by the flood in 1992. Despite reiterated requests made to the higher authorities, the school was running without a science lab because the financial powers do not allow them to construct a new science lab. Many head teachers talked different areas where school budget cannot be utilized by them and possible impacts on the teaching-learning process.

“We, the head teachers, are not allowed to build or repair school building due to financial powers’ constraints” (Participant 1).

“There are many obstacles e.g. purchase of machinery is beyond the powers of a head teacher. We can only repair the water pump and if this is not repairable, the school has to manage without it” (Participant 14).

“Courtesy to District Coordination Officer (DCO), district government constructed a multi-purpose hall with a cost of 5.9

million rupees. The hall was handed over to my school but is non-functional and will remain in the same state for an indefinite period of time as I have no powers to purchase the required fixture and furniture” (Participant 9).

“The enrolment of my school is 1400 which was 800 four years back. The number of toilets and furniture could not be increased. The parents get a bad image when their children have to sit on floor. It also affects teaching-learning process” (Participant 3).

“We have to look towards provincial or district government for the provision of missing facilities” (Participant 11).

The head teachers were further asked about their financial powers regarding maintenance and repair of the physical and learning resources to keep them functional for students. Majority (16 out of 18) of the head teachers agreed that the available resources are not being properly utilized. They were further asked about the causes of non-utilization of these resources. Apart from the examination system which encourages rote learning and leaves less space for conceptual learning, majority of the head teachers were of the opinion that their limited financial powers hinder in efficient utilization of already less funds available to them. The ultimate result was non-functioning of physical and learning resources.

“No dedicated fund is allocated for purchase and improvement of science laboratories. Only the ‘cost of others’ head which has an annual allocation of 5,000 rupees can be utilized for this purpose but there are so many other areas where this head is spent” (Participant 13).

“Computer lab was launched with 15 computers. Now only 4 are working. Funds in one head go lapsed but I cannot transfer them

to another head so that I may get the computers functional” (Participant 17).

“There is no extra room which can be turned into library and since long no addition has been made in the books” (Participant 10).

The effects of head teachers’ limited financial powers were further elaborated by another head teacher as thus:

“Some five years ago, the roofs of school’s older portion started leaking. I reported the leakage to higher authorities and building department but no action was taken. Now this portion consisting of 4 classrooms has been declared dangerous. The leakage could have been stopped by spending five to ten thousand rupees but I had no authority to get it repaired. Now it will require millions of rupees to rebuild” (Participant 13).

Apart from the loss of millions of rupees, the school will have to work without four of its classroom till they are rebuilt. The head teachers told that they had powers to get the machinery repaired but they cannot purchase new machinery. Almost all the head teachers mentioned either their limited financial powers or meager funds for the non-utilization of the physical and learning resources. The researcher argued on the basis of a government notification which says that a head teacher can spent up to 50,000 rupees in each case even without inviting open tenders. Majority of the head teachers told that:

“The authority can be traced only in [Official] documents. In reality, we have no authority” (Participant 16).

“Head teachers have no such powers at all” (Participant 9).

Some head teachers reported that few and far between, schools are provided funds for some specific purchase e.g. furniture and other equipments, etc. But it was also reported that in such cases, the head teachers have no real powers to purchase.

“My school was provided funds to purchase furniture last year. But we were asked to handover *cheques* to higher authorities. They purchased it for us. At the end, it proved very costly. If we had powers to purchase it from local market, we would have purchased double [in numbers] chairs” (Participant 11).

Another head teacher told that they are not free to utilize the allocated funds.

“We are compelled by the higher administration to purchase from [certain] favored firms. If we are empowered to buy from the open market, it would cost significantly less” (Participant 18).

Conclusions

The study concluded that:

1. The head teachers believe that government schools in Punjab have no serious issues regarding availability of physical resources e.g. playground, toilets, drinking water, etc. and learning resources like library, science lab, computer lab. But the financial powers of the head teachers regarding the provision of missing physical and learning resources are very limited. They cannot spend from the school budget on construction of building and purchase of furniture or machinery.
2. The available physical and learning resources are not being maintained properly which ultimately results in non-utilization of the available resources. One of the main causes of their non-

utilization is the limited financial powers of the head teachers. Due to limited financial powers, the head teachers are unable to make the urgent and timely decisions. The centralized powers result in non-efficient spending of already meager funds.

3. The head teachers have sufficient financial powers but these powers are found in government statutes only. In reality, the head teachers are not allowed to exercise their designated powers. The higher authorities' intervention and non-transferable funds allocated for specific heads reduce their financial autonomy. Financial powers without any autonomy have badly affected the improvement and utilization of available physical and learning resources. The head teachers are unable to respond to the local needs and demands of the schools and community.

Discussion

The study concludes that government schools in Punjab do not face serious deficiency of physical and learning facilities. The studies of Iqbal (2005), Chaudhary (2004), and Imran (2008) also concluded that majority of government schools in Punjab have basic physical and learning facilities like drinking water facility, electricity, playground, science laboratories, a regular library, and furniture. Whereas, the findings of the different studies (Akram & Khan, 2007; Saeed & Wain, 2011) contradict with the findings of this study as they found that government schools in Punjab have severe deficit of basic facilities. The possible reason of these contradicting findings might be the provision of basic facilities especially provision of drinking water and adequate sanitation by the government under Education Sector Reforms (ESR) 2001 has made the situation better (Government of Pakistan, 2008). Basic facilities are being provided to schools on priority basis. The infrastructure of rural government schools has significantly improved under ESR which was implemented in 2003 (Andrabi, et al., 2007). The

contradiction of results might be due to the available resources at sample schools. But the provision of missing resources is out of the jurisdiction of head teachers' financial powers. The official document regarding financial powers of head teachers in Punjab also limits their powers to construct new buildings or purchase new items (Government of Punjab, 2006). Provision of missing facilities is centralized which are not provided on emergent basis. Petitions for provision of missing facilities are made to higher education authorities but due to lack of a clear mechanism, such petitions are rarely or never responded (Andrabi et al., 2007).

The available physical and learning resources are not being properly maintained and utilized to enhance students' learning. The findings of the study of Hussain and Hameed (2014) are in line with the findings of this study. They found that parents are completely dissatisfied with the utilization of available physical resources. Earlier, Imran (2008) and Dahar (2011) also found the ineffective utilization of available resources. Chaudhary (2004) recommended radical changes regarding management and delivery of available resources at schools as only the availability of resources are not enough to conclude their impact on students' learning (Kangas, 2010).

One of the important causes of non-utilization of available resources is the limited financial powers of the head teachers. Very strong leadership with a constant desire and willingness to '*chart their own course*' through financial empowerment is a key component of effective utilization of school resources (Dodd, 2006). Charting one's own course require financial empowerment. The improvement and utilization of school resources largely depends on school-based decision e.g. lack of fresh and up-to-date reading materials is one of the major reasons of non-utilization of school library (Benard & Dulle, 2014).

The study further found that government school head teachers in Punjab have financial powers in official documents but in reality they have no such powers. Earlier, Kandasamy and Blaton (2004) found that the government school head teachers in Pakistan have no real powers and they have no autonomy. Later, the head teachers were empowered to spend up to 50,000 rupees in each case (Government of Punjab, 2006). But this also proved futile as the over-centralization of decision making in Punjab regarding public sector education continued (World Education Forum, 2013).

Recommendations

The financial empowerment of head teachers needs to be reconsidered. Along with increasing school budget for each school, allocation in different heads of accounts should be removed. Serious steps should be taken to empower the head teachers in real terms. Special trainings should also be held for the head teachers to improve their financial management. For mega projects like construction of building, a fast tracking mechanism should be developed so that the schools might be provided the missing facilities without any delay.

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