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LEADING LEADERS: A SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE IN PAKISTAN

ABSTRACT

The gurus of change management research remind us that change is a slow process, and where there has been stagnation for a long time, it may be difficult if not impossible. This paper discusses an educational change venture undertaken by the Aga Khan University's Institute for Educational Development, in the field of educational management for school heads of different education providers in Pakistan. This paper deals with the experience of a faculty member (the writer) involved in some of these programs. It focuses on the salient features of the program, its challenges and responses, and lessons learnt. The paper focuses on the difficulties of developing educational leadership in developing countries, by describing the issues involved in the implementation of the program at the Aga Khan University (AKU-IED). The paper analyzes the challenges that the circumstances of a developing country impose upon such leadership development initiatives. It further argues that by careful conceptualization, involvement of the grassroots level leadership, schools can be improved through developing headteachers for leadership roles.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the role of headteachers in making a school a better place for teaching and learning has been argued for by a substantive number of studies (Leithwood, Riehl, 2003; Leithwood, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1999). "I have seen unsuccessful schools turned around into successful ones, and regressively, outstanding schools slide rapidly into decline. In each case, the rise and fall could readily be traced to the quality of the principal", claim Davis & Thomas (1989, in Safdar, 2001). "Scratch the surface of an excellent school and you are likely to find an excellent principal" argue Leithwood and Reihl (2003). As a

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consequence, numerous models of leadership have emerged. Some of these models include effective leadership (Lane et al. 1987), value-added leadership (Sergiovanni, 1990), pedagogical leadership (Sergiovanni, 1998), cultural leadership (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993), constructivist leadership (Lambert et al. 1995), instructional leadership (McEwan, 1998), transformational leadership (Leithwood, Jantazi & Steinbach, 2000; MacBeath, 1998), to cite a few. A good deal of research has been carried out that was geared towards understanding the role of school leaders/headteachers in school management, particularly in the context of school improvement and effectiveness initiatives in the 1980s, and 1990s.

Following the research studies in the Western world, many developing counties are also focusing on this area (e.g., Simkins, et al. 1995; 1998; Memon, 19998; Shafa, 2003; Khaki, 2005). In the context of the developing countries, particularly in Pakistan, although headteachers are regarded important in many ways, very few systematic studies have been conducted in this area (Simkins et al. 1998, Harbor et al. 1991, Memon, 1997, 1999, 2000; Khaki, 2005). It is in the 1990s, that the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), the first private university in Pakistan has initiated programs headteachers' professional development. The neglect was due partly to the fact that headteachers were not considered overly important professionals in the government hierarchy (Simkins, et al. 1998). However, the scenario is changing and headteachers are being given importance in both the government policy initiatives as well as providing opportunities for their ongoing professional development Government of Pakistan, 1998).

NATURE OF THE PROGRAM

Established in 1993, the AKU-IED has initiated school improvement programs tailored to the needs of the developing countries in general and the educational requirements of Pakistan in particular (A proposal, 1991). As an integral part of its whole school improvement model, the AKU-IED has introduced a diploma program for the current and aspiring heads of all the

education sectors – government, private and community. Based on its successful programs in Karachi (where the AKU-IED is located), it has replicated the same, with contextual modifications, in East Africa also.

Moreover, it has also encouraged research into different areas of school leadership. Furthermore, numerous private schools have emerged both in the urban and the rural areas. These institutions are seeking professional development of teachers and headteachers. Realizing the critical importance of headteachers in view of both the situation in Pakistan, as well because of research conducted in the field, the AKU-IED developed a need assessment according to which, it was found that schools in Pakistan needed careful intervention in many areas of school improvement, including leadership. A study by the first Director of the AKU-IED, Mr Kazim Bacchus (1996) noted:

> The AKU-IED's success in introducing change in its cooperating schools [1] will be dependent on the heads' competence as managers, leaders, decision-makers and supervisors, and their ability and willingness to support Professional Development Teachers (PDTs)[2] and Visiting Teachers (VTs)[3] when they return from their training".

In order to bring this vision to fruition, and also to enable the school heads to support and enable school improvement, the AKU-IED conceptualized a workshop series for the heads "to provide a forum for discussion of relevant concerns." (AKU-IED Phase 2 Proposal, 2000). More than 40 such seminars had been held on Saturdays at the AKU-IED by the end of 1997. However, as a sequel of these seminars, it soon became clear that the heads

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[1]   Cooperating schools are those, which have entered in an agreement with the AKU-IED to develop their schools by adhering to certain measures, which characterize mutual collaboration. Initially, the number of cooperating schools was around 25, but since then, the number has increased.

[2]   Teachers who have done their M. Ed. from the AKU-IED and now are working with their respective or other schools working like master teachers, who help other teachers develop professionally.

[3]   Teachers who attend a short episodic course for around eight weeks focusing on some of the school subject areas, like Social Studies and Maths. They came from many regions of Pakistan, besides Central Asia, East Africa, Middle East, India and Bangladesh.

faced much deeper and wider issues that needed to be addressed, not just through sporadic seminars, like the ones organized, but ones that could be sustained in a more systematic manner. It was realized as a result of these seminars that "there was a need, on the one hand, to provide professional development for heads in the much needed area of school management, and on the other, to introduce certification and the opportunity for career development at this level." (AKU-IED Phase 2 Proposal, 2000).

This led to the launching of ADISM (Advanced Diploma In School Management), a field based program for the professional development of serving and/or aspiring headteachers/ departmental heads. These programs were/are aimed at developing the leadership skills of the course participants, so that they could work as catalysts and professional development agents in their schools to mange change effectively. The participating heads and other potential candidates, showed willingness to commit their time. ADISM started in July 1997, as a one year program, with regular (fortnightly) seminars held at AKU-IED on Saturdays, accompanied by workshops over extended periods during holiday breaks. The program was developed with the cooperation of two overseas universities, the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) and the Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), UK. The course participants (CPs) come from different and diverse backgrounds, sectors, gender, orientations, systems, and age ranges (20 to 50).

THE MODEL

The leadership professional development model, currently followed at the AKU-IED, is rooted in the contextual realities of Pakistan and has evolved over time. Nonetheless, it heavily draws on research from industrialized countries. One can arguably say that the model is a blend of both western as well as developing countries' experiences. The ultimate purpose of the program is to professionally develop existing and potential headteachers as "pedagogical leaders" as has been shown in Figure 1 (Sergiovanni, 1998; Memon 1998; ADIMS Program Handbook, 2000). The aim is to encourage course participants to play a leadership role in a

creative and contributory manner rather than just following the bureaucratic rules and roles. It is aimed at capacity building in schools. The program is predicated on field-based work, through reflective practice and action research, under the close mentorship of the concerned teaching faculty. Course participants are clustered together and assigned to individual faculty members. The figure below demonstrates the model of the program.

Figure 1: Pedagogical leadership model (after Sergiovanni, 1998)
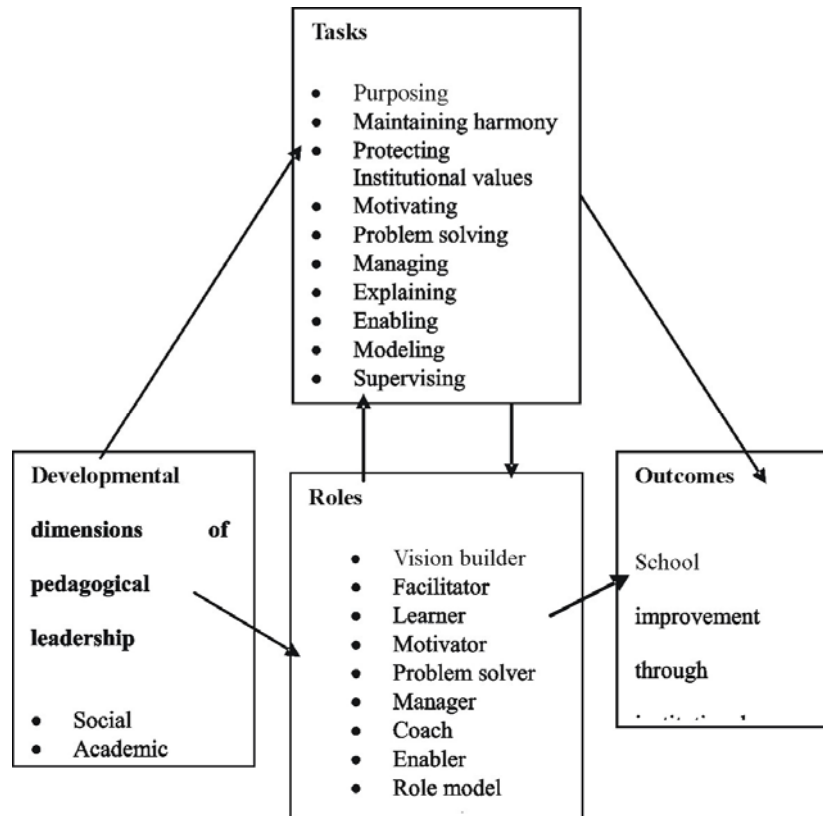
(Adapted from ADISM Handbook, 2000)

The course participants undertake planned and structured visits to each other's schools with specific aims focused on good practice. Moreover, assigned faulty members visit the schools of each and every participant at least thrice a year and hold in-depth discussions, each time focusing on a theme according to the needs

of the concerned course participants. The focus of discussion is different each time but revolves around the concerned heads' practices and the implications on the teaching and learning process in their schools. Besides the local faculty, some visiting faculty from the partner universities (OISE/UT and SHU) are also involved in teaching some of the Modules in these programs.

A good deal of strategic and programmatic thinking has gone into conceptualizing this program, which has evolved into an effective professional development tool for leaders. It has provided them a space to voice concerns and share problems as well as experiences with their counterparts within, as well as across sectors and systems. Some of these heads have had the opportunity to attend some international conferences like International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI) in Texas and Toronto in 1998 and 2001 respectively through the AKU-IED (not a very usual practice for heads to participate in international conferences in Pakistan), which otherwise might not have been possible.

The AKU-IED Whole School Model (WSI) suggests creating a critical mass to bring about meaningful change in the cooperating schools causing thereby an enhancement in children's learning. Efforts to develop teachers without concomitantly developing the headteachers were fraught with risks (Maksutova, 1999). Thus, the AKU-IED visualized the danger and therefore, adopted a holistic strategy (Memon, 1999). The aim was to develop a critical mass of professional development teachers and heads, who would play the role of catalysts and develop their own school, and where possible help others. Although leadership has not been changed completely from the transmission model, significant progress has been made in terms of providing proposal development opportunities for heads and aspiring heads.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

The program conductors faced many challenges and some of the significant ones and their challenges are briefly examined below:

Language

The medium of instruction at the AKU-IED is English due to a variety of reasons the main being the fact that a substantive amount of literature can be found in English. There is wide variation in terms of the English language facility of the course participants - some of whom are very fluent, others find difficulty in comprehending literature. These participants, though literate, find the academic English writing particularly difficult to comprehend. As there is not much literature in vernacular languages[1] on leadership and management, the course is limited to the use of mostly English resources. While writing their assignments, those who require assistance is provided by faculty member(s) or by their own colleagues. Sometimes, selected articles are summarized into Urdu to facilitate understanding. Given that some participants may not have more than superficial understanding of their course materials, it is difficult for them to move from merely absorbing information to critically analyzing it and coming up with creative solutions to their leadership issues.

Political challenges

Since the overall political and educational context is uncertain due to frequent regime change; policies of the government remain volatile, and politicized. Often, it becomes difficult to have a discourse on what is possible and what could be achieved in view of the downright pessimism, expressed especially by the public system heads. Since the heads in the public system are not always discouraged from initiating innovation, they perceive themselves to be watchpersons over the system (Memon, 1999).

There appears to be some dissonance in the perception of their own roles and the ones proposed by research studies or by the program philosophy that they are exposed to. This leads to a great deal of debate and discussion over what they can, are able

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[1] Even if there were material available in other languages, not all the participants come from the homogeneous linguistic backgrounds, thus making it difficult for the course conductors to select a language, and therefore, for all practical purposes, English is adopted as the official language, but more often than not, main points are summarized in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan.

to, or should, achieve, as opposed to what they are presently achieving. The course participants, as was discussed above, are not a monolithic group. They represent many sectors and systems, each working in different power equations. For example, while the government headteachers feel helpless to do much in their schools due to the bureaucratic regime and the policies of the District Office, heads from the private systems, on the other hand, are often the owners of their schools and enjoy, understandably, much greater, if not total, freedom, to run their school the way they wish, though they too are still obliged to follow certain government policies.

Yet another area of concern for the government heads is that they are reportedly transferred frequently from one school to another, thus making their positions generally unstable. If they start an innovation, they may not have enough time to complete it, as their successor may have different priorities. In order to deal with this problem, AKU-IED has started policy dialogues with the higher echelons of the government. Some success has been reported in this regard. The effort to bring these disparate parties together allows them share their experiences, so that they help comprehend each other's school challenges.

Cultural challenges

Headteachers and officials in Pakistan, as the research (for example, Simkins et al. 1998) reports tend to adopt a very bureaucratic attitude (Hosfstede, 1991, 1997; Bengali, 1999) largely due to the prevailing culture, which tends to promote existing practices and thus, leads to stagnation. It becomes difficult to convince many heads to adopt alternate management practices and leadership notions. Also, often due to cultural norms, female and male heads find it difficult to even work together, at least in the initial stages of the course. Combining male course participants with female course participants, throws some interesting challenges due to cultural norms, as some have been exposed to this kind of workshop activity for the first time in their career.

Furthermore, some heads have had limited exposure to collaborative and interactive learning, as most of them are used

to the lecture, or chalk-and-talk method of instruction. These individuals have to be socialized to take part in discussions – an exercise that assists in moving them from a cultural transmission model of learning to one of cultural transformation.

Age differences

Often the age factor also makes it difficult to encourage course participants to change. Their ages normally range from 30 to 55. When they are above 50, they are reluctant to change, as they retire at the age of 60. In terms of pedagogy also, the wider age range becomes an obstacle, as younger course participants are reluctant to challenge their senior heads.. Clearly, gerontocracy, as opposed to democracy or meritocracy, seems to be still strongly working in this cultural zone (Hofstede, 1991). When it comes to debating issues, at least psychologically, the elder heads prevail more on the younger ones. This factor is common in traditional societies, once again impeding the move towards creative rather than maintenance tendencies in the school leader population. Often, either the younger participants would not dare to challenge the senior heads. Conversely, senior heads do not often take the views of the younger ones seriously. The faculty members have to play a more educative role to help break such barriers to andragogical learning

Writing skills

One component of encouraging creative tendencies is the encouragement of maintenance of journals. Writing is not generally a strong skill of the heads in Pakistan. Participants are often out of touch with reading and writing after graduation. Reflective writing exercises such as the keeping of a journal and other critical analysis assignments became onerous tasks. Often, their journals are developed into diaries of events rather than reflective journals (Safdar (2001).

FOLLOW UP

AKU-IED has learnt that in order to have a multiplier effect, and reinforce the future learning of the headteachers, a continued and sustained effort was necessary to let these heads

keep in touch with each other and with AKU-IED. Thus, a forum, named *The School Heads Association for the Development of Education (SHADE)* has been established the first of its kind in Pakistan.   This forum is managed by headteachers themselves with the support of the AKU-IED. Any head interested in professional development of their school teachers, can become a member of the organization.

Regular workshops are held quarterly. Often the heads themselves present their school development plan or progress report, to get feedback from their colleagues. Since the membership is institutional, a head may send in their place if they are unable to attend. The Association organizes monthly or quarterly workshops and seminars for the headteachers and /or their representatives on topics that relate to teaching and learning. These sessions have been conducted by the local as well as visiting foreign faculty from the partner universities (OISE/UT and Oxford). Headteachers have found these workshops very useful, and have shown enthusiasm in its activities.

Another way in which the participants and their work is tracked and gauged is through the research in the field by the graduate headteachers from this program and by foreign and local faculty members. Some of the findings of these research projects have already been reported in many international conferences (e. g. BEMAS, 1999, ICSEI, 2000, 2001, 2002, etc.) and papers have been published (e. g. Memon 1999; Simkins et al. 1998; Simkins et al. 2001, Wheelers et al. 2001). Due to the demonstrated efficacy of the model, it is being replicated in different regions within Pakistan, and also abroad, like East Africa where AKU has a presence. These programs are being conducted by the joint faculty, some from the AKU-IED, and the rest, from the local headteachers.

It has been discovered that the program has transformed headteachers from a maintenance mode to a reflective mode where discussion among participants is encouraged and learnings are exchanged with one another. A constant exposure to researchers in their schools as well as exposure to literature in

their regular upgrading courses, has slowly but surely moved educational leaders from a maintenance mode where their sole concern was academic grades, to one which challenges their thinking and encourages them to seek creative solutions outside of their own schools and government edict.

IMPACT

The program's impact has been studied by many internal and external studies. The internal studies have been carried out by the AKU-IED's own M. Ed. graduates who have studied heads who have undergone the ADISM program. The external studies are those who have evaluated the AKU-IED's programs. A couple of comments are cited here to show how the program has been seen by these evaluators, internal as well as external.

Studies that have carried out from within the AKU-IED community, deal with the comparative studies of graduating and non-graduating heads, those who have and those who have not undergone the ADISM program. Such studies (e.g., Kirmani, 1999; Khaki, 2005; Maksutova, 1999; Yousufi, 1998) argue that although ADISM graduates have to go a long way in improving their schools according to the IED's whole school improvement vision, these graduates have developed a positive self image and are struggling to do make a difference.

SUMMARY

ADISM program is a field based one-year program predicated on the needs of the serving or aspiring headteachers. The program has been regarded as successful both by the internal and external evaluators. The results are encouraging, as it is creating a hope among the heads and well as the stakeholders of the schools for better teaching, learning and leading in schools. This will ultimately prove to provide benefits to the students in the schools where the leaders belong. Nonetheless, the program has to go a long way in creating a sustained interest in, and encouraging headteachers to fight what is worth fighting for out there in schools (Fullan, 1997). The philosophy of the AKU-IED addresses issues related to the whole school improvement program through multidimensional ways, and multifaceted

tracks, like developing teachers on the one hand, and further preparing the headteachers for pedagogical leadership roles, on the other. Yet, as we have observed, at another level, initiating dialogues with the stakeholders, like the government and other key players in education, like the NGOs begins the process of change.

However, change cannot be brought about in a piecemeal, in an unorganized fashion. If it has to be meaningful, it has to be holistic, systemic and synergistic. It is hoped that ADISM, along with the other programs at IED, and similar institutes, will go a long way in helping those headteachers and their schools, in replacing their prevalent feeling of despair and helpless (Warwick and Reimers, 1983) with hope – a hope that will give further anticipation for a promising future for schools. So, the lessons that can be learnt from this program is that, given the institutional will, a motivated visionary staff and willing clients, change for better is possible. In the words of an ADISM program participant, the program did help in transforming the way some of the participants think about the way they learnt about some of the dimensions of the course: "I really cherish and hold dear my ADISM class. I say with an honest heart that after every class, I feel that a small fraction of the unawareness, the darkness of my being has been enlightened. (Safdar, 2001, p. 7)

Thus it is that a new institution, with a new mandate and a fledgling program with faculty that are sometimes new and sometimes borrowed from partner institutions in the developed world, can light the way for leaders through new venues and voices of knowledge, such that darkness can be replaced by light. And ultimately as Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) have noted: "the evidence suggests that successful leadership can play a highly significant – and frequently underestimated – role in improving student learning. Leadership for creative change and not for academic maintenance serves not only the school leaders themselves, their teachers, the government and the citizenry of Pakistan, but also finally the students themselves. They are growing up in a world that refuses

to stay stationary, and it is they who will benefit most from creative, visionary leadership to lead their schools.

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