

## Leadership and Management Practices in Transforming Schools into Learning Organizations

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### Abstract

*Leadership and management practices contribute to learning organizations. Transformational leaders devote considerable time towards developing a shared vision amongst staff regarding the fundamental purpose of the school. They develop mechanisms to enhance communication across the schools, and establish structures that enable the staff to embrace a truly participatory decision making. This study about the role of educational leadership and management practices in transforming schools into learning organizations, aimed to explore how headteachers' transformational leadership and management practices may facilitate progress towards a learning organization. The experiences of three secondary headteachers were used as the basis of the research. The data were collected through the qualitative case study research method, using semi-structured interviews, observations and analysis of relevant documents. The results revealed that the headteachers definitely made differences in their schools to make them learning organizations. The findings of this study are significant as they provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the educational leadership and management practices in transforming schools into learning organizations and also into what additional support is required for the headteachers to transform their schools. This study highlights the recommendations in the area of school as learning organizations and transformational leadership, so as to make the concept of school as learning organizations more amenable to the school stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** Learning Organization, Schools as Learning Organizations, Transformational Leadership, Management Practices.

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### Introduction

Ever since the inception of Pakistan in 1947, it has been facing many challenges, including lack of human and other resources for the country's development, particularly for educational improvement. In addition, school education systems face resource shortages and inadequate infrastructure, specifically to develop school headteachers' leadership and management practices for transforming schools into learning organizations. To date, part of the difficulty in schools is that there is no clear defined role for school headteachers. There is a presumption, that in many developing countries, including Pakistan, the role of the headteacher is relatively insignificant (Khaki, 2010). Moreover, in the education system, school headteachers are promoted to their position on the basis of their seniority and length of service within the organizations (Shafa, 2010). In fact, professional training programs for the headteachers that would enable them to take their schools towards learning organizations are lacking. Bana and Khaki (2014) assert that it

is a dilemma of the Pakistan education system that most of the headteachers who are “not trained to be leaders, did not see themselves as leaders” (p. 465) and did not act like leaders. There is a common perception that school headteachers work as administrators, rather than as educational leaders. Despite this grim picture, some school leadership in all community based and public and private schools have shown improvement through transforming their leadership and management practices (Retallick, et al., 2004) in order to make their schools learning organizations. In order to do this, headteachers need individual learning and support collaborative learning where they can develop themselves as transformational leaders (Akhtar, et al., 2016; Ali, 2016) to transform schools into a learning organizations.

The researcher conducted this study to:

- Explore and understand the significance of the leadership and management practices of the headteachers in transforming schools into learning organizations.
- Furthermore, this research study is indigenous to Pakistan and presents a Pakistani perspective on schools as learning organizations.

The study main question was:

What are the leadership and management practices of the headteachers in transforming schools into learning organizations in community based, public and private urban secondary schools in Karachi, Pakistan?

## **Literature Review**

### **Learning Organization**

The concept of learning organization derives from the early concept of organizational development. Argyris and Schon (1978) are generally credited with placing the term in the mainstream literature, through their seminal book *Organizational Learning*. They begin the book by posing an interesting question: “What is an organization that it may learn?” and they suggest that there is something paradoxical about this:

... There is no learning organization without individual learning, and individual learning is a necessary but insufficient condition for organizational learning. We can think of learning organization as a process mediated by the collaborative inquiry of individual members. In their capacity as agents of organizational learning, individuals restructure the continually changing artefact called organizational theory-in-use (p.115).

An important contribution to organizational learning theory was made by (Argyris & Schon, 1978) when they differentiated between single-loop and double-loop learning. Single loop learning occurs when an error is detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of system, that is, the problem is fixed but may re-occur because the system has not been changed. Double loop learning occurs when errors are corrected by first examining and changing the governing variables of the organization and then the action. Double-loop learning usually implies searching for different purposes and practices rather than making existing routines more efficient (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010). It can involve examining shared assumptions, beliefs and mental models along with inquiries and interventions. This will uncover organizational defences and create a climate of openness, sharing and willingness to change (Senge, 2010). The significance of double-loop learning for the purpose of this study in transforming schools is that it questions the assumptions and values that underpin the headteachers’ practices for bringing about change and improvement, rather than merely reinforcing the status quo (Louis & Murphy, 2017).

### **School as a Learning Organization**

Traditionally, schools have been viewed as organizations featuring bureaucracy, hierarchy, accountability, procedures, rules and regulations. These are elements and languages used in bureaucratic organizations. Shafa (2010) and Ali (2016), referring to developing countries mention that unfortunately, in terms of decision-making, bureaucracy is a rigid, closed and non-participatory form of organization, which has severe shortcomings in the contemporary world of rapid change. It is assumed that good learning takes place in a climate of openness where political behaviour is minimized (Kearns, 2014; Louis & Murphy, 2017). In a very pertinent study on conditions that foster learning organization in schools, Leithwood, et al. (1998, p.258) identify three specific characteristics of variables: (a) district; (b) school culture; (c) policies and researches that strongly influence learning organizations. While discussing the concept of learning organizations, the study uses the ideas and languages of relationships, meaning, collaboration, inquiry and reflections. These are the ideas that underpin the construct of a learning organization. Mitchell & Sackney (2011) believe that "Each organization is unique and the construction of the organization is an ongoing process of active participation and intense communication" (p.22). What this means is that each school has to embark on its own journey of becoming a learning organization and the results will differ from place to place, depending on the approaches and emphasis of the participants in each school. There is no recipe for building a learning organization, but it may be possible to see a number of stages in a change process that may help schools to transform. The change process from a bureaucratic organization to a learning organization happens when the principles of learning organization are adopted to continuously transform itself.

### **The Headteachers as Transformational Leaders in Learning Organizations**

Researchers acknowledge that the environment in which the headteachers functions has changed dramatically over the past many years. A range of commentators argue that the evolution of school leadership research in recent years shows a clear movement from the headteachers as managers of administrative tasks to the headteachers as transformational leaders (Harris and Jones, 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Simkins, 2012). In a learning organization, the total effectiveness of a school includes the continuing education of all school stakeholders. A transformational leader develops a strong school culture, provides opportunity for meaningful student involvement, provides strong staff collaboration, cohesion and seeks additional resources.

Moreover, researches done in different contexts show that a school as a learning organization is characterized by transformational leadership (Leithwood, 2016; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005). They concluded that transformational leaders are in continuous pursuit of three goals: (a) helping staff members; (b) developing and maintaining a collaborative professional school culture; and (c) fostering teacher development and helping teachers solve problems together. This study, particularly looked at the leadership theory on transformational leadership and their practices, as this was considered the core focus in creating a learning organization.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership and management practices of the headteachers in transforming schools into learning organizations. This study was exploratory in nature and the qualitative research method of a case study (Robson, 2002) was used to explore the headteachers' beliefs, actions and subsequently leadership practices by exploring the issues in depth and in context (Creswell, 2009). The epistemology consideration in this study focused on a collective generation and transmission of meaning (Crotty, 2003). Within the qualitative research method, the paradigm of this research was constructivist to make meanings of social context.

## **Participants**

Gaining access and entry to research participants are necessary beginning stages through which a researcher has to go (Burgess, 1998). The process involves, for example, selecting samples, getting consent and negotiating access to spaces and persons. The researcher used different approaches during these stages. The researcher first consulted a cross-section of the headteachers to find about selected headteachers' who had a reputation of being transformational leaders and who had transformed their schools into learning organizations. For the public schools, the researcher communicated through phone calls and met local government Education District Officials formally as well as informally to find out about headteachers who were trying to transform their schools into learning organizations. The male and female officials shared names of some of the headteachers' that they thought were trying to transform their schools into learning organization. The researcher communicated with private school organizations to get access to few headteachers who had their schools. The researcher finally selected three schools from which headteachers were identified.

## **Data Collection Methods**

The data were collected using three main methods: semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis to help produce three in-depth case studies that analyzed the headteachers leadership and management practices experiences.

## **Interviews**

For face to face semi-structured interviews a list of topics was developed rather than questions. The respondents were drawn from two categories: The primary respondents were the head teachers and the secondary participants were school coordinators, teachers and students. Semi structured interviews were conducted individually and in focus groups using English and Urdu as appropriate to probe the participants' experiences and practices. The criteria for head teachers' selection was: a) one head teachers from each, the community based, public, and private, school systems; b) experience of being a head teachers for at least three years in the same school; c) willing to participate as study participants ; and d) the level of confidence and articulation of their experiences. The interviews were conducted in the case studies schools in Karachi. The average time of an interview was 45 minutes. Since this study was based entirely on qualitative data, a qualitative study of this sort is necessarily textured and detailed, which means that it would apply most directly to the study sites; yet, it might raise issues that can be more widely applied. The conclusions drawn from the qualitative data analysis may not be generalizable to a larger population of the head teachers, as the data was specific to the schools, geographic locations, and time at which the interviews were conducted.

## **Observations**

Observations were undertaken as a second approach for data collection to provide insights into each headteacher leadership and management practices. This method helped the researcher understand the headteachers' actions or behavior and not just what they believed in or intended to do. Earley's (2013) checklist of activities under six broad headings, namely leadership, management, administration, teaching, continuing professional development and personal – was adapted considering the context.

## **Document Review**

During the school visits, the researcher analyzed relevant documents from the schools, like school vision, headteachers' diary, students' progress reports, headteachers' meetings with coordinators, teachers, students, parents and community members, the headteachers' reminder book, public notices and school website. This enhanced the researcher's understanding of the leadership of headteachers and management



practices in the schools to support and provide a cross check analysis on the data obtained during interviews and observations for this research.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

The researcher analyzed data from interviews, document analysis and observation records. Throughout the data analysis, the researcher immersed herself in the data to extract themes and to construct and organize new meanings. This allowed, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), for extrapolation and interpretation of evolving concepts into logical categories. The interviews, documents analysis and observations helped in uncovering the underlying assumptions, core values, feelings, emphases and reasons that the three headteachers' attached to their orientation towards leadership and management practices in transforming their schools into learning organizations.

In this article the researcher will discuss only one case, namely the 'Seashore Girls School' (SGS) (pseudonym).

### **Key Findings and Discussion**

In order to answer the research question, data were analyzed by identifying common themes from the feedback provided by the headteachers, coordinators, teachers and students. This section examines the key results in relation to the intended research question, which is the base of the study.

Educational leadership and management practices in transforming schools into learning organizations characterizes the role of transformational headteachers in many ways; however, what seems to be in common is what Leithwood (2016) calls helpful practices. These helpful practices include having a common goal and working for it; an emphasis on student learning; delegating responsibilities to teachers; shared decision making in management responsibilities; keeping a close liaison with the parents; and dealing with the larger political or other forces in the community (Louis & Murphy, 2017; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011; Watkins & Marsick, 2014). The head teachers have many leadership and management practices in common with their counterparts around the world; however, their approach to practical application is different.

In the Pakistani context, the image of transformational headteachers that emerges for Shafa (2010) is that of caring interventionist; while Khaki (2010) suggests prophetic professional. Both images relate to care and concern for the students' learning and running of a smooth, calm and safe school conducive to teaching and learning. However, this study's in-depth picture looks at the headteacher in a broader way, in which the images and expectations of the stakeholders' are also taken into account, with wider connotations and implications for the image of a learning organization and the headteachers. All the above mentioned studies culminated in a number of articles, which the researcher has extensively referred to in this study.

### **Seashore Girls School (SGS)**

The Seashore Girls School is located on the outskirts of Karachi. The SGS provides education solely for girls and a majority of the students come from the surrounding community. The families of the students are economically disadvantaged, with many living below the poverty line. The majority of adults are not literate. In addition, interviews with the headteacher and the teachers, observations, and document analysis revealed that most of the surrounding community was not giving importance to girls' education; they believed that it was not as important as boys' education.

The five key findings regarding the headteacher leadership and management practices to transform school into a learning organization in the SGS in Pakistan are explained below:

1. Management of pedagogical processes in the learning organization;
2. Collaborative culture in the teaching and learning processes in the learning organization;
3. Transformational leadership to make the school a learning organization;
4. School as a learning organization; and
5. Barriers to making the school a learning organization.

### **Management of Pedagogical Processes in the Learning Organization**

Pedagogical management is a significant role of the headteacher. It is the teaching and learning process management for enhancing the quality of education and providing a conducive environment for the teaching and learning process. In SGS, all teachers were females and were duly qualified. These teachers appeared to be devoted, friendly and willing to give time, even as volunteers for school improvement. In the headteacher's view, the SGS teachers were motivated and devoted and were trained. The headteacher had hired teachers living within the community and quite a few had received their education from the SGS. The head teacher stated:

*"Pedagogical management is very important because we are working with girls who either have no educational background or have a very weak educational background. So, we give a lot of importance and of course this is the basis of the school".*

The SGS documents were collected and reviewed to explore what the leadership and management practices of the SGS headteacher were in transforming her school into learning organization. The school vision, development plan, annual reports, individual and collective study participants' teachers' reflections, schools notices and circulars were selected for the review. The SGS development plan focused on all core school activities, including teacher training, curricular and co-curricular activities. The school plan was developed by the headteacher, coordinators, and teachers. The headteacher had authority to develop and execute the school's annual plan, which mentioned teachers' continuous professional development programs inside and outside the school. Moreover, the SGS continuously provided individual support to the students for their better learning outcomes. This is similar to the findings of the study conducted by Khaki (2010). It was evident that there was a clear and sustained focus on teaching and learning in the SGS and the headteacher was very much involved in this.

### **Collaborative Culture for the Teaching and Learning Process in a Learning Organization**

Kools and Stoll (2016) found that promoting team learning and collaboration among staff established a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration to establish embedded systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning. During interviews, while discussing how the collaborative culture for teaching and learning process in learning organization related to the students, the headteacher informed the researcher clearly that the headteacher emphasized on friendly environment To foster this environment, relations with students in class changed from being teacher-centered to student-centered. One teacher stated:

*"The headteacher has empowered us by giving us freedom to introduce innovative material and teaching methodologies in the classrooms. She wants us to do the best."*

Classroom observations in the SGS showed that teachers were following their lesson plans. They were not only using the course books, but were also sharing global knowledge with the students by involving them in hands-on activities for students better learning outcomes. The classroom environment was conducive for the teaching and learning process. The headteacher had confidence that teachers were working well in the classroom and not wasting time. As a support, she was always available to discuss any problems the teachers might be having. The headteacher also mentioned the cordial relations between the teachers. Furthermore, the SGS headteacher was very much involved in mentoring her coordinators and teachers.

She also introduced peer coaching for the teachers, which created a conducive environment for the learning organization.

Additionally, before the final exams in order to reduce domestic issues of the girl students, the headteacher herself conducted workshops for the parents and community, where she tried to make parents aware about the issues related to the girls' students. She also tried through awareness sessions to reduce early childhood marriages so that girls could get a chance to complete their education.

### **Transformational Leadership to Transform SGS into a Learning Organization**

The headteacher encouraged students to bring improvement in other schools and in females within the community by participating in community projects and educating women along with their teachers. Students and teachers developed skills based projects based on women need, like mathematics. Moreover, two teams of students were working in government schools, which were facing human and other resources shortages. The SGS students provided support to these schools by providing them teaching and learning support. One of the students confirmed that:

*"We wanted [SGS students] to make other students happy and transform more learning opportunities for other schools."*

Similar outcomes are reported in a research study done by Afzal and Hussain (2020) that community services give students real life experiences that enable them to learn, for example, how to help and teach others. This would help educators to support humanity to transform schools into learning organizations. The interviews and observations further revealed that as a transformational leader, the SGS headteacher was continuously trying to transform the school and the surrounding community schools into learning organizations by providing them educational and social support. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) found that transformational leadership and management practices play an important role in transforming schools into learning organizations. Due to the SGS headteacher transformational leadership, the teachers' confidence was also evident in decisive measures for improving the teaching and learning outcomes. Observational data of the SGS headteacher meetings with teachers and coordinators highlighted that she empowered subject/class teachers to work to the best of their ability, specifically with respect to decision making pertaining to the teaching and learning processes. Leithwood (2016) identified that focus on teaching and learning needs to go beyond management and into the realm of transformational leadership. Similarly, overarching findings from the interviews, observational data, and document analysis were that the SGS headteacher, as transformational leader, pursued the path of transforming the school into a learning organization. She went beyond the school's core role of teaching students and included everyone in the process from within the organization and the outside stakeholders (Harber and Davies, 2019).

### **SGS as a Learning Organization**

When asked about how SGC was able to transfer into a learning organization, the headteacher identified the collaborative culture of the school, the unity amongst the staff, trust building and community development as important feature. One coordinator confirmed that:

*"Every organization has its own learning aspect and we are a community development project. As the community gets better, we will all learn better".*

Secondly, the headteacher praised her Board of Governors (BoG) members. Thirdly, to enhance the school as a learning organization, she felt that a change of strategy with individuals was needed and she stated:

*"One impact of a learning organization is that it transforms, produces and enhances protective individuals. This is a supportive system: the BoG's are supporting me, I am supporting the teachers,*

*the teachers are supporting their students and through students we are supporting the families. So this is a collaborative supporting system."*

It was evident that the SGS was adopting several new initiatives. The SGS headteacher had the tendency of trying new ideas. Moreover, team learning and encouraging collaborative teaching and learning is regarded as one of the most distinguishing indicators of a learning organization (e.g., Kool and Stoll, 2016; Watkins and Marsicks, 2014). The data suggested that the SGS headteacher seemed to be in favor of participatory decision making process. The result was an enhanced sense of transforming schools into a learning organization with the common goal of ensuring better student outcomes for the school.

### **Barriers to Making SGS a Learning Organization**

The findings showed that the headteacher faced major hindrances. The SGS, management support, particularly with respect to involving parents in the school system, still needed improvement. The parents also thought that if a girl was educated she would go out of their control and not pay due respect to the family. The headteacher highlighted another barrier:

*"Absenteeism is the most crucial problem, as most of the girls are responsible for their house chores. Thus, at times it's difficult for them to cope with school and manage work at home".*

The data also suggested that the unwillingness of the parents to participate in school activities was one of the barriers faced by the SGS headteacher. One teacher also confirmed and explained:

*"Some parents do not attend school programmes as they considered attending these programmes a waste of time."*

The SGS headteacher leadership and management practices in transforming her school into a learning organization may be summed up under two categories: School as learning organization and the headteacher's transformational leadership and management practices to make the school a learning organization.

### **Learning Organization**

The SGS is a community-based school for girls, headed by a female headteacher. The headteacher professional education, professional experience, and her leadership and management practices play a vital role in transforming school into learning organizations. The result showed that the headteacher of the SGS was dynamic and well-educated with a strong commitment to her school and the profession. She was found to be an outstandingly dedicated person. Commitment was demonstrated most clearly in the amount of hours per week that she put in to transform her schools into learning organizations (Joseph & Reigeluth, 2010)..

### **The Headteacher as Transformational Leader in a Learning Organization**

Five characteristics of transformational leadership that helped in transforming schools into a learning organization were identified as part of the literature review. Sewani, (2010), elaborates that headteachers as transformational leaders in transforming a school into a learning organization should have confidence in challenging the processes, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act and model the way for change.

The headteacher of the SGS best exemplified the ability to challenge the process. She was able to introduce new approaches to manage the school that entailed the participation of all stakeholders. The involvement of coordinators, teachers, students and management in developing a shared school vision for the SGS was an excellent example of the headteacher's ability to inspire a shared vision. Also she was effective in enabling others to act. The SGS headteacher initiated changes to empower teachers' and strengthen the parent-



teachers meeting process to allow parents to feel more comfortable in attending the meetings. The headteacher was actively trying to show by her examples what constituted transforming of a school into a learning organization. The fact that activities were organized for students, teachers and parents to encourage them to participate for getting better learning outcomes for the students shows that there was indeed a commitment to engage school stake holders to transform the school into a learning organization. Inspiring trust is a key part of modelling the way. The activities for school development motivated the stakeholders around a common goal and the motivation was apparent in the comments made by teachers to make the school a learning organization (Louis & Murphy, 2017).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study findings and results were based on the areas of learning organization, school as learning organization and transformational leadership, so as to make the transformation of a school into a school learning organization. The findings and results of this research study were significant in that they provided insight into the educational leadership and management practices in transforming schools into learning organizations.

This study has recommendations for the school headteachers in Pakistan in particular, and around the world in general. There is a need for a proper platform where all the school headteachers can meet regularly and share their issues, challenges, experiences, knowledge and skills. Through such platform, the headteachers could learn from experienced headteachers who have already worked for transforming their schools into learning organizations. International conferences for continuous professional development of headteachers should be organized by the government, where the headteachers can share their practices with national and international community. The challenges that the headteachers face are certainly relevant to other parts of Pakistan and to other developing countries. Moreover, mini conferences can also be organized at the school level.

There are many important areas that need to be studied in a larger research project. To see the aspects of sustainability of such initiatives, the building up of current initiatives and to learn more about the elements of a learning organization in the above-mentioned school. Another useful part of a larger study could be the ability to survey different school systems and higher education systems for girls' education. This would allow the researchers to see how leadership practices have evolved over time and compare headteachers' experiences in transforming their schools into successful learning organizations.

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