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Effective Leadership Skills and Approaches During the Pandemic Time: An Action Research

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak has blatantly exposed the drawbacks of our education systems around the globe. It is important that the possible opportunities which have to ascend in these circumstances be utilized to make the education systems more objective, inclusive, and resilient. The aim of the action research was to recognise and examine the traits of effective leadership and the strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic at a private O level school in Karachi, Pakistan. The key focus was on how the school leadership had ensured to support the teachers during these challenging times. Phenomenological research was done through purposive sampling technique, where school leadership and teaching staff were selected as participants from a O Level school in Karachi. The total number of participants were 12. The objective of the study was to examine the challenges faced by schools during the COVID times and the role of school leadership. Through the findings of this study, it was discovered that the school leaders adopted various approaches to cope with the emerging issues. Few noteworthy recommendations could be considered, which would be useful for other researchers, academic scholars, school leadership teams, and experts in the educational context.

Keywords: challenges, motivation, online education, stress, well-being, work performance

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak has blatantly exposed the drawbacks of education systems around the globe. It is important that the opportunities which emerged during these circumstances be utilized to make the education systems more objective, inclusive, and robust. According to UNESCO (2020), more than 90% of students around the world were unable to attend physical schools. The priority for school principals has been to meet the unprecedented challenges created by the pandemic for their staff, families, and students. School leadership performed as frontline forces to foster learning through a virtual medium, equip and train staff with the necessary skills to cope with this sudden shift, and keep up the morale of staff through social-emotional support and clear communication. Principals have rigorously thought of ways to support continuous learning to keep up the tradition of alive school. During this entire period, teacher beliefs and eagerness to learn the new skills required of them have played an instrumental role in adaptively managing stress, finding joy, and bouncing back from inevitable setbacks with resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised many concerns as the schools had to manage learning virtually. This sudden shift has been a great challenge for school leaders and teachers as they are used to face-to-face interaction and some of them are also not tech-savvy. Hence, school leaders need to develop strategies and methods to uphold their daily routines and targets and sustain the productivity levels of employees (Agarwal et al., 2020). School leadership teams were forced to make critical decisions as the spread of COVID-19 was rapid and educators needed to move to online learning for classroom-based activities (Aagaard & Earnest, 2021). Therefore, the school leadership teams and the teachers had to quickly adapt to the changes while striving to stay abreast with the technological aspects.

While most of the schools were caught in this situation, the priority for administrators wavered about what to do due to the uncertainty. In addition to this, the government support for schools was ambiguous and limited (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Moreover, dealing with this sudden change was also a challenge for the teaching community. It was observed that the teachers required support in order to deal with the pressure and challenges, which caused stress and anxiety at work. The stressors at work negatively impacted teachers' performance and harmed their well-being. Studies have shown that fatigue leads to rise in absenteeism and turnover (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). Thus, it is important that school leadership come up with strategies and steps to support the teachers in dealing with these unprecedented times.

Staff Wellbeing

As stated by Harris and Jones (2020) in their research, self-care and well-being is the priority and should be the focus for teachers and school leaders. It is essential that teachers prioritize their health and well-being so that they are able to help students. Teachers are responsible to make the teaching and learning process effective by managing their emotions and other stressors. Unfortunately, they compromise their own health and peace. Teaching is a gratifying profession, but work stress hampers the contentment which teachers may acquire by connecting with the students. If stress at work exceeds and continues for a longer duration, it may affect physical and social well-being (Chirico et al., 2020). Toxic environment is contagious, hence the school leaders should not overlook this aspect as it may dampen the morale of the entire workforce (Skakon et al., 2010). Therefore, it is important that teachers are provided with a conducive environment to support their well-being and improve their work performance.

The world has experienced many challenges of complex nature during the pandemic times, which has increased the need to provide extended support to the workforce. It has impacted the psychological reserves globally, with increased stress about the uncertainty, fear of losing the loved ones, and apprehensions about the future. Institutions must ensure to foster resilience which is an important tool to recover (Cobo & Ciarrusta, 2022). In recent years, teachers' well-being has emerged as an important component of their performance. It is therefore, stressed that schools are increasingly focusing on it as it contributes to enhanced productivity and ultimately impacts student learning experience. Studies have proven that a meaningful life leads to improved psychological well-being (Bowman, 2010).

The main objective of a teacher's job is underpinned by its day-to-day practices, as well as the teacher's motivation and commitment towards her/his work. It is the responsibility of the school to provide a supportive and caring environment to the staff and students and pay attention towards developing a positive school culture (Zhou, 2020). Schools focus on the well-being of teachers by enhancing their work experience, which helps them curb teachers' turnover (Tanvir, 2021). School leadership understands the importance of the well-being of staff, but due to lack of awareness, clarity, and steadfastness, it mislays its purpose and impact (Asghar & Ali, 2021).

Switch to Online Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has reformed education entirely with an unexpected shift from conventional teaching to online education. As educators, we need to ponder whether this radical modification in the teaching methodologies would continue to prevail, and how the educational scenario will look like in the world Post-COVID-19. With the sudden closure of schools as an emergency to deal with COVID-19, the education system

had to rapidly equip itself with the online learning tools (Shehzadi et al., 2021). The immediate response to deal with the circumstances was adapting the existing curriculum through an online mode in the best possible manner. After few months of online teaching in 2020, the educators got a hold of online instructional tools and tried their best to make the teaching and learning process effective.

Even after more than two years of the menace of COVID-19 pandemic, educators, students, and schools are still struggling to manage the learning loss. The teaching approaches that can be easily processed and understood in the conventional classroom require a lot of effort, recurrence, and vigilance in an online class (Nambiar, 2020). The post-COVID-19 era would bring about the shift in teaching pedagogies to survive with advancements brought in the education system during the pandemic times. While the challenges faced during the era of COVID-19 are numerous, it also has positive aspects and has brought an opportunity to rethink education (Zhou, 2020).

Indeed, online education has brought a paradigm shift from conventional teacher-centred and lecture-based activities towards a more student-centred approach (Zhu & Liu, 2020). Moreover, the teachers quickly moved to online education to continue teaching and learning, where online apps became an alternative classroom, and hybrid models of in-person and virtual teaching were adapted. The process of teaching and learning has taken a 360-degree shift during the COVID times and it will shape the future of education.

Purpose of Research

This action research was aimed to identify and analyse effective leadership skills and approaches in a private O Level school in Karachi, Pakistan, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus area of this research is the role of school leadership in sustaining teacher performance and well-being during the pandemic times. Action research was selected for this purpose to identify ways to progress teachers' performance during virtual schooling and also look for ways to improve their professional well-being. It is important for school leadership to address its organizational and decision-making structures that have an impact on performance of their staff. Phenomenological research was done through purposive sampling technique and five teachers as participants teaching social sciences and business subjects were interviewed from one O Level school in Karachi. The objective of this study was to investigate the role of school leadership in continuing the teaching and learning, providing training to up skill teachers during these difficult times, and suggest ways to help school leadership cope with the crises and similar changes, while sustaining teachers' mental and emotional wellbeing and productivity.

Research Questions

The following questions were derived from its research purpose so as to determine the role of school leadership and the experiences of the O Level teachers during the pandemic times:

1. How was the O Level school able to maintain the continuity of teaching during the pandemic time?
2. How has professional development within the school changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How did the O Level school support teachers' social-emotional wellbeing and mental health?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The phenomenological research design was adopted to investigate the challenges faced by the O Level school to continue teaching and learning during the pandemic times. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research which focuses experiences of individuals in the world. This type of research helped to understand the impact of the challenges and experiences faced by the school and the role of leadership teams in facilitating the process. As mentioned in the literature, qualitative research methods are useful when the researcher is trying to develop in-depth insights of individuals' experiences and feelings to understand a particular phenomenon. An online survey was also conducted to reach out to the teachers and record their experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants included the school principal, admin coordinator and ten teachers. An online 'Leadership Check-in' survey was conducted with teachers. Furthermore, online observations were done for teachers conducting classes to understand the virtual learning dynamics. In addition to this, an interview to find out the real-life scenarios was conducted with the school principal to compare and evaluate the support provided by the school leadership to the teachers to perform better and nurture their well-being.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

An interview with the school principal was based on analysing her role in the leadership capacity and the skills and approaches that were used to effectively lead the staff. The responses have been categorized as follows:

Challenges Faced While Transitioning to Hybrid Model of Education

The principal highlighted technological awareness as the main challenge for teachers during the shift to online education. She highlighted the following aspects:

“The usage of apps like Google meet, zoom, Google classroom, then tools like Padlet, Slido, break outs etc were considered. We had to learn and practice. We knew nothing about them. Another was the provision of the gadgets and then strong internet device / connection.”

Not only this, the principal shared that the virtual mode of learning during classes was also full of challenges as:

“The students were not trained for an online plan that was developed. Teams were built to make the planning and procedures swift for online classes, but whenever they would login to zoom classes planning would seem to fade away because everyone was in the learning phase.”

Continuing Teaching and Learning During the Pandemic Times

Keeping in mind the infrastructure of Pakistan, teachers required more support than it was provided. It is unlikely for teachers in Pakistan to have their personal/individual digital devices because traditional teaching methods have been practiced for ages here. The principal shared:

“It was difficult for teachers’ amidst COVID-19 crisis to get their own laptops, internet devices etc. to keep themselves connected. The school provided initial support by providing teachers with laptops, tools that were required for a virtual mode of learning on special criteria.”

The priority was to plan the sudden switch to the online mode of learning and adapt the line of action to impart education. According to the principal:

“Teacher input was not taken while developing the hybrid model, but it was made sure that the model that is being developed is doable for the teachers. They were taken on board by sharing information with them and simultaneously providing them multiple trainings-virtual and on campus.”

Furthermore, she added:

“Special tools for teaching online like VaCom and laptops were provided by the school, the teachers were also given an open option of coming to the school building for taking online classes initially, who were in their learning phase. At school trained staff would assist them and familiarize them with online teaching SOPs.”

Communication is the key to keep the staff abreast with all the necessary information. The principal shared this skill as one of her strengths:

“Clear and meaningful communication was done by sharing information with the teachers, which was immediately communicated and queries were answered on the spot. Passing on decisions, information and plans as soon as they were communicated worked the best.”

The challenge was to cope with all these changes as it happened within a short period of time and it took some time for the teachers to familiarize or get used to the hybrid teaching mode. The key takeaways were collaboration, communication, and appreciation, that is, valuing teachers’ contribution.

Fear of Uncertainty and Challenges to Meet

When COVID-19 crisis surfaced the globe, people were unaware of the harms of the virus. What they were really scared about was their job security, their social and emotional needs being abandoned. The principal shed light on her experience that teachers were stressed to a point where they felt uncertain about their jobs. The school provided the teachers with wellness sessions that stabilized the teaching staff emotionally and socially.

There were other factors that added to the stress of teachers, such as the families did not understand the situation teachers were in and work from home seemed like no work at all initially. The families could hardly support teachers and understand their perspectives. The teachers faced a digital divide with the absence of gadgets at home and connectivity issues.

Well-being of Staff

The school provided teachers with various sessions, trainings, virtual and on campus meet ups that highlighted the aspect of Social Emotional Learning. During the interview, the principal shared:

“The school year goals led us to focus more on connectivity and communication as well. The connection on personal level with the teachers where their wellbeing was focused, gave their moral a high boost which motivated them and enhanced their performances. It was definitely a big support to initiate such a program on this level”

The overall learning and takeaways have been immense. The principal expressed:

“I still can’t figure out why people call this pandemic a dark time, it was a golden period here as we discovered innovations, technology, strategies and above all we discovered our strengths.”

It is never too late to step out of your comfort zone. The most important skill during these times have been to keep the team highly motivated and well communicated with all the decisions and developments. The school leadership has transformed into digitally active, socially aware, emotionally strong, and self-motivated educators and administrators during these times. They discovered transformational learning and teaching and socially mobilized themselves upwards in the education sector.

Online Survey Results

An online survey was also conducted with 10 teachers. The results of the survey indicated that the teachers rated the support provided by the school leadership as good and were satisfied with the work environment during the pandemic times. 82% of the teachers rated the support by the school leadership as 5 on the Likert scale. The teachers were also asked about their level of worriedness, keeping in mind the given external and internal stressors such as mental health, job security, organizational performance, and global economy. The results revealed that the majority of the teachers were neutral or barely worried about their own well-being and organizational performance. This again implies that their satisfaction level from the school leadership was high.

An open-ended question was asked to know the role of the school leadership in making the job of teachers’ effective and building overall feeling of confidence and satisfaction. The teachers shared their various experiences and support programs such as focus on professional development and webinars to provide the necessary skills and wellness program on an on-going basis, a well-managed schedule to work from home, consistent support and feedback provided by the school leadership, and continuous motivation and encouragement.

Furthermore, the teachers suggested ways to support them in their work performance and wellbeing. Some of the ideas shared included on campus work schedule at least once or twice a week to keep their physical connection intact with the work environment and the school leadership, provision of gadgets such as laptops and, improved internet quality to work on campus to take online classes. They looked forward to continued opportunities for their professional growth and financial incentives to motivate them for a boost in their overall performance.

Discussion And Implications

The prime objective of this research was to recognize and study effective leadership skills and approaches in an elite private O Level school during the pandemic times and suggest how educators can prepare themselves for a better and secure future for the 21st century learners. The findings of this research are interlinked with the

literature of recent years where the transformation of education and the need for educators to upgrade their skills had been emphasized.

The findings of the research revealed that the teachers faced the major challenge of power failure and poor internet connections. Though the schools managed to deal with administrative facilitation and teachers also put in a lot of effort for technology integration, but the struggle for stable internet connections and power outage has been a major obstacle (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). The participants had to do their own investment to upgrade internet connection at home and work on contingency plans, which is something they had not foreseen.

It is possible that Pakistan will continue with a combination of conventional and online teaching in the future to connect students and even with other students of similar interests across the globe (Arnove, 2020). The role of school leadership in training their teachers is also very important. The teachers have no option other than to up skill their technological skills to teach the future learners and survive in this radical shift (Tesar, 2020). The teachers need to train themselves, develop the right attitude, update their skill competence, and rethink the teaching methodologies to facilitate the future learners (Alea et al., 2020). Intense collaboration would be required between all the stakeholders such as teacher-teacher, teacher-parent and teacher-administration to make this transformation successful. School leadership must develop social-emotional support channels or platforms and offer active listening. Ultimately, teacher effectiveness cannot be amplified without a focus on teacher wellbeing. School leadership must continue to keep the communication open and provide immediate feedback improvement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The future of the upcoming generation is dependent on our planning and readiness to make sure we can meet the demands of the learners. The role of school leadership is most significant as they are responsible for multiple aspects such as training teachers, providing resources, creating awareness of change, changing teachers' mind-sets to enable them to understand that in a changing scenario, a new kind of teaching will be needed. However, it is the duty of each stakeholder involved in this process to play their part by actively contributing to the management of this change.

Online education is not a new concept, yet it had previously remained a peripheral one, especially in developing countries that lack digital infrastructure on the whole. COVID-19 has fast-tracked online teaching and learning, intertwining it with the mainstream education in Pakistan and thereby created an opportunity for us to prepare ourselves for a future on the brink of realization. It is essential that we understand what our learners need and how it can be provided to them, so as to mobilize a progressive tomorrow and ensure our students are not left behind in the competitive global landscape.

In the light of the research findings, it is recommended that the school administrators must take steps to ensure teachers and learners have the support required for schools to transform into 21st century facilitation hubs. These include the creation of guidelines for teachers and students, teacher and student awareness strategies, changes in teacher evaluation formats that factor in the new normal so as to align teaching practices with emerging requirements, and the provision of professional development for educators. Training should be planned for technology usage, upgrading the teaching pedagogies, and dealing with students' emerging behavioural issues. To this end, school administrators are recommended to formulate committees to conduct in-depth research into teachers' issues and generate solutions, as well as collaborate with providers of professional

development workshops and resources such as Google Classroom and Exam.net. It is important for the committees to have multi-functional representation from administrators, teachers, curriculum developers, and top leadership. Moreover, school administrators must ensure that teachers receive social-emotional support required to manage such a massive change. System-wide changes to incorporate empathetic leadership and collaborative teacher-administration decision-making are required to support teachers, so as to boost their morale and increase their productivity.

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