A CASE STUDY ON A SENIOR LEADER'S ROLE AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract: This case study analyses the leadership behaviour of a senior leader who works in an urban secondary school in Bangladesh. The case study leader holds the assistant headmaster office at a private school in the capital city. The data collection was made through a phone interview. The study reveals that despite instructional leadership being quite strongly prevalent at secondary education in Bangladesh, the presence of distributive leadership seems to be present at a little extent. It also appears that the case study leader is more goal oriented than relationship oriented, and he tends to apply instructional leadership style in most cases with a little understanding of distributive leadership. While performing his duties and responsibilities, he faces some challenges which often seem to be unfavourable to reach the goal of a school. He has also to put some extra effort because of the understanding gap between the senior and junior teachers in his school. Moreover, the sudden rules and regulations imposed by the government are also sometimes troublesome to face. This essay suggests some training programmes for school leaders' professional skills development on educational leadership which seem to be more effective for the better understanding of their roles within the school.

Keywords: Leadership, Secondary School, Professional Development, Bangladesh.

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Introduction

In the context of Bangladesh, a hierarchical leadership model is established at secondary school level (Salahuddin & Conner, 2015; Salahuddin, 2012) where the Principal or Head-Teacher holds the highest position in a school, and under the guidance of the Principal or Head-Teacher, several leaders (Assistant Headmaster or Senior Teachers) play the role of senior leaders. The senior leaders' duties include assisting the Principal or Head-Teacher with managerial work, having a limited authority to make decisions. This study aims to identify and characterise the typical behaviour of one senior leader in a secondary school, analysing the roles he played as an Assistant Headmaster. By studying the data generated and collected, it also examines the leadership style he practices and the challenges he faces while performing his regular routine duties within his school.

This study is significant for several reasons. To begin with, the research into the issue of secondary school leaders' role in Bangladesh is very thin. Therefore, there is a need to address the role of an efficient senior leader at secondary school level. Secondly, most secondary school leaders in this region perform their leadership roles even though they do not have enough practical knowledge of how to lead a school properly. So, this study will help increase the awareness of a leader's appropriate roles. Finally, another significant reason to conduct this investigation is that there is huge competition among Bangladeshi schools on the basis of public examination results. Within this highly competitive environment, the parents in general look for schools in a top position, and it is the leaders of those top schools who play a prominent role in their success. Therefore, studying this topic would seem to be useful for secondary school leaders as well as school management committee members in Bangladesh.

The present study first outlines the relevant literature relating to the topic in question. It then follows its data collection by applying qualitative methodology. Subsequently, it discusses the findings and analyses the data descriptively. Finally, this study makes some recommendations which are expected to be effective for school leaders' professional skills development.

Literature Review

Leadership

Leaders and their leadership qualities have a vital role to play in the positive outcome or successful achievement of a school. According to Hoy and Miskel (2013, p426), "[l]eaders and leadership are important because they serve as anchors, provide guidance in times of change, and enhance the effectiveness of organisations". A school's success or failure may even be judged on a particular leader, or the leadership styles they follow. Leithwood et al. (2000) argued that in an educational institution, in terms of influencing students' outcomes, the significance of leadership is second only to classroom practice. Robinson et al. (2008) further described that a leader's impact on student outcomes depends on the particular leadership practices they engage.

Effective leadership is one of the most important factors for the success of a school (Dunford et al., 2000). Since the early 21st century, educational leadership has gained increasing attention from researchers. This is because of the ever-growing belief that quality leadership significantly influences great student achievement and helps make schools outstanding (Bush, 2007). Numerous studies have been carried out on this subject, and this number is constantly rising. Hoy and Miskel (2013) define leadership as the efforts of a person or persons which encourage others to meet a shared objective. They further explain that leadership can be encountered in various rational, social, and emotional interactions and experiences which occur in an institution, whether formalised or not. After a wide analysis of different scholars' views, Northouse (2013, p5) likewise defines leadership as a process in which an individual influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. He conceptualises leadership by identifying the following components: that (a) leadership is a process, (b) leadership involves influence, (c) leadership occurs in groups, and (d) leadership involves common goals. In a similar vein, Cuban (cited in Bush, 2013) considers leadership as influencing others' actions in achieving desirable ends.

Instructional Leadership

Teaching, as well as learning management, is a key task of any educational institution. Within the school environment, instructional leadership seems to be an obvious practice to improve teaching. According to Bush (2007), the primary aim of instructional leadership is to develop

educators' understanding of the learning process and teaching practice, with a view to simultaneously improving student progress. Gullatt and Lofton (1996) similarly describe instructional leaders as being people-oriented. They maintain that interactional leaders always stay attentive to regularly observe their students' progress. Additionally, Marks and Printy (2003) mention that instructional leaders emphasise the direction of the teachers, and remain aware of students' and teachers' daily activities.

Leithwood and Montgomery (1992) explain that the involvement of parents and the wider school community can also be potential instruments for reaching the goals of the school. Hallinger et al. (1996) argued that instructional leaders are more active where the parents are involved in the education of their children, while Goodwin et al. (2003) described that instructional leaders take feedback from different sources – such as test scores, or dropout rates – and accordingly identify the change needed to the instructional programme to meet students' needs.

Distributive Leadership

In order to maintain a multiplicity of activities in a school, many leaders prefer to adopt distributive leadership instead of limiting themselves to instructional leadership. According to Goldring et al. (2008), a leader needs to face a fundamental challenge of allocating time to their multiple responsibilities in the school. For this, they are required to coordinate their multifaceted duties and responsibilities for the productive management of their school, while simultaneously achieving the school's goals (Gullatt & Lofton, 1996). Marks and Printy (2003), on the other hand, conceptualise instructional leadership replaced by a hierarchical and procedural notion with a model of "shared instructional leadership". According to them, principals utilise for support the ideas, insights, and expertise of teachers in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment. The principal and teachers thus share responsibility for staff development, curricular development, and supervision of instructional tasks. In a similar vein, Spillane (2012) opines that distributive leadership can be used as a synonym for democratic leadership, shared leadership, and collaborative leadership, arguing that the distributed perspective is concerned with many tasks which should be undertaken by many people.

Methodology

This study is less interested in the size of data than in the depth of meanings of human activities. Indeed, its chiefly focuses on the daily routine activities of one senior leader, and the problems he faces in performing his daily routine tasks within a school. Therefore, this can be well-documented through examination of this particular leader's beliefs about, and experiences and expectations of school leadership. It might also serve as a pathway for further research on making an effective leadership framework required of secondary schools in Bangladesh. Taken as a whole, this study adopts a qualitative methodology following an analysis of the qualitative data obtained from a semi-structured interview. The interview was analysed inductively to investigate the perceived skills and traits a leader should have in a secondary school, the leadership styles primarily followed in secondary education in Bangladesh, the challenges or difficulties a leader faces while working with the team, and the lessons this leader has learnt from his difficulties.

Data Collection

Before analysis, to obtain data, an interview was conducted through digital voice recorder with a set of pre-structured questions. The research aims to explore a senior leader's interpretation of school leadership and its practice, and his reflections on how he considers leadership

(especially decision-making and responsibilities) within the school. The interview was conducted in Bangla (the respondent's mother tongue) and then transcribed into English.

This research investigated the current leadership practice in the secondary schools in Bangladesh through a case study. For this, the following research questions were posited:

1. How is leadership perceived by the senior school leaders in secondary schools in Bangladesh?
2. What are the challenges faced by the school leaders within the school?

Findings

The Understanding of School Leadership
The case study participant was asked about the definition of leadership. In reply, he defined leadership as reaching a common goal working with a group of followers who also hold similar beliefs:

"One who can realize the goal and perform his responsibilities with a group of people having an aim based on principles."

To him, it is quite difficult to be a leader, because in every single step, a leader needs to correlate between the responsibilities of a leader and the principle of the aims of their institution; and at the same time, they need to influence their followers.

In the case of this leader, he has to undertake some routine work relating to the instructional programme of the school. He explained:

"After entering to school, I check if the teachers are doing their duties properly or not; and focus on the percentage of presence of the students […] While observing the classroom, I try to investigate if there is any obstacle faced by the teachers and students in the classroom."

It seems, then, that this leader's leadership style correlates with 'instructional leadership' to some extent, though he did not specifically discuss the professional growth of the teachers in his school as Bush (2007) mentioned. Additionally, Gullatt and Lofton (1996) argue that several factors determine effective instructional leaders, who should (a) possess a practical knowledge in the curriculum, teaching process and evaluation; (b) set goals for school and work accordingly; (c) ensure a favourable environment; (d) maintain effective communication and motivation; and (e) maintain high expectations for themselves, staff and students. This leader did not explicitly confirm most of the attributions of an instructional leader mentioned above. He seemingly depends on the managing committee of the school:

"In accordance with the policies made by the managing committee, the rules are implemented led by the Headmaster and Assistant Headmaster."

The school leaders in Bangladesh, as a consequence, are not largely relationship oriented due to their workload, and they tend to do their regular routine work (Salahuddin, 2012).

On the contrary, Waite (2002) disagreed with the many school leaders, policy makers and legislator who determine a school's improvement by seeing only the test scores. According to him, a school's improvement includes the professional growth of staff, improvement of the

physical surroundings, instructional development, curriculum development, and improvement in the structures and policies of a school. In this interview, the leader did not mention any feedback that he takes from the results of the school, nor his involvement in curricular development or any policy making, although he did outline his 5-year masterplan for the betterment of the school. Studying the data, it appears that many typical leaders in secondary education in Bangladesh largely follow instructional leadership, though Hallinger et al. (1996) argued that there is no direct link between a principal's instructional leadership and student achievement.

In this school, shared responsibility is observed when the leader said:

"In teacher meeting, I presented the problems and asked for the opinions of the teachers. Most often I take the help of the experienced teachers."

At one point, the case study leader said that the school takes its decisions democratically, which helps them to implement changes easily in the school. Moreover, Gullatt and Lofton (1996) argue that the effectiveness of a school depends on the shared responsibility between personnel at the system level and building level along with the classroom teachers. They further specify that planning, delivery, and evaluation of programmes and services should be assigned to the teachers.

"In my school, I have made different committees based on academic issues, co-curricular activities and for other situational and subjective issues to make decisions by themselves."

In this school, therefore, there are some teams collaborating with leaders, as Bush (2007) indicated that schools' aims can be achieved working with the senior management team and school governing body. In fact, it is comparatively easy for the leaders in this institution, as it is privately owned and focuses only on the betterment of the school. Here, leader-staff communication and mutual understanding are also obvious because of the shared-basis decision making. Moreover, the heads of department in this school sometimes can take decisions which are mutually agreed upon (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1992). This particular leader said:

"When I remain outside, they can take the decision based on the department so that all the activities of the school run smoothly"

In Bangladesh, the general teachers have very little involvement in decision making. Students are also excluded completely in this process, although in urban areas it can be seen to some extent. Even the general teachers find very few opportunities to engage in leadership activities due to their overstressed workload. Salahuddin (2012) suggests that teachers should be given opportunities to learn through distributive leadership, which is also supported by the leader in this study:

"[…] leadership and power should be decentralised. If decisions are always taken without the consent of all stakeholders, they feel excluded and might not put enough effort for the school."

According to Spillane (2012, p6), "[d]istributed leadership can take the form of spontaneous collaboration, role sharing or institutionalized means of working together, such as a committee or team structures." In light of this definition, it appears that in this school distributive leadership is practiced to some extent, though it differs from most of the theories in literature. In this case, the leader delegates some responsibilities among experts or senior teachers. Thus,

he is performing task distribution. Distributive leadership, however, refers not only to delegating tasks, but also to allowing participation in decision-making at all levels in the system. Bolden explains that distributive leadership is characterised by delegating agreed tasks and roles which can be categorized into three main areas: 'spontaneous collaboration', 'intuitive working relationships', and 'institutionalized practices. This particular leader possesses a good amount of teaching experience, which is deemed necessary to apply effective leadership (Hallinger et al., 1996). He also likes to involve the parents of the students, and therefore organises a monthly meeting with the parents and implements needed changes in instructional programmes in line with parental feedback.

To conclude, it appears that the case study leader applies several kinds of leadership style in different circumstances with a limited understanding of leaders' role and leadership styles. He is not sufficiently knowledgeable in leadership theory and practice. The leader seems to mostly practice instructional leadership styles, with some degree of distributive leadership application.

Challenges in Leadership Practice

A secondary school is a complex structure with stakeholders of different backgrounds. Moreover, the teacher-student ratio, physical facilities, the economy and socio-political environment are not always favourable for a leader to smoothly accomplish their objectives (Salahuddin, 2012). In the present study, the leader perceives the current role of the secondary leader as challenging and highly-pressured due to increased organisational and contextual demands that have the power to diminish the instructional and strategic leadership. In every academic year, the owner of the school expects more students to be admitted and to obtain yet better results in the national exam compared with the previous year. Moreover, the leader finds it difficult to apply task-oriented leadership behaviour continuously over his subordinates. Therefore, while maintaining relationships with the staff, he needs to concentrate on the goals of the school. Indeed, leaders often experience conflict between their perceived roles and the vision of the school (Goodwin et al., 2003). Bush's (2007) argument is applicable in this case, as this scholar questioned whether any particular leadership behaviour may be applicable to produce the most favourable outcome. As the leader states:

"Maintaining the relationship with the teachers, we have to reach the goal but main purpose is to reach the goal anyhow."

Bush (2007) also argues that pressures from the external environment – like the expectations of the government through legislation or formal policy statements – obstruct the achievement of the school aim. A leader thus finds themselves in a conflicting situation due to bureaucratic control:

"At the middle of the academic year, very often the government imposes new rules and regulations that create impediment to work smoothly."

The above quotation of the leader upholds the vulnerable education policy of Bangladesh. Indeed, such changes happen in almost every academic year, and interrupt the leaders' planned governance of schools.

A leader's role in school betterment can become difficult because of the context and culture of the school (Waite, 2002). In the context of Bangladesh, leaders give priority to maintaining a good relationship with the governing bodies which secure their jobs (Bush, 2007). As a result, they spend a good portion of their time and intelligence in order to avoid any job hazards. This

consideration appears to be strong when the leader questioned mentioned the control over the school staff:

"The managing committee make policies aligned with the government direction for the management of the school […] there are some policies made by the managing committee that all have to follow without saying anything."

Waite (2002) also points out that a leader needs to deal with different issues like gender, race and class, and with psychological issues such as envy, ego and jealousy. He further adds that cliques and power blocks, or departmental and disciplinary loyalties can weaken the fabric of the school and create more impediments for achieving the ultimate aims of the organisation. In this school, ego and cliques sometimes generate challenges for the leader:

"There are two blocks of teachers in my school: senior teachers and junior teachers. Sometimes it becomes very challenging to work together by satisfying all of them."

The relationship between senior teachers and junior teachers is hardly harmonious in secondary schools in Bangladesh. The senior teachers often exhibit ego with the junior teachers, while junior teachers present themselves as hardworking and more concentrated on the activities of the school. This often creates a rift amongst the staff and obstructs the improvement of the school.

It can be said, therefore, that secondary school leaders face several contextual and political challenges within their schools. Very often they sacrifice the principles of leadership theory, being required to adjust their practice for job security and harmonious working.

Discussion

This study plays a small-scale research role in respect of the leadership situation in Bangladeshi secondary education, as there has been a relative lack of investigation on school leadership in this country (Salahuddin & Conner, 2015). Here, leadership is perceived as administrative or managerial work, although there is in fact a sophisticated difference between leadership and management; Dunford et al. (2000) further distinguished leadership as the ability to move the school forward, whilst management is concerned with the procedures necessary to keep the school running. However, both of them are necessary for a school to be effective and to achieve its objectives (Bush, 2013; Dunford et al. 2000). It appears that Bangladeshi school leaders practise a leadership role having a limited understanding of the theory and application of leadership.

By analysing the data, it can arguably be said that this case study leader seems to have insufficient theoretical knowledge in terms of leadership styles in school management. However, the data generated from the interview indicate that he tends to apply mixed leadership styles considering the situations which emerge at different times. In order to achieve the goals of the school, he is required to apply different leadership styles irrespective of having leadership-style knowledge. His leadership seems to cover instructional, distributed, democratic, situational, and transformational leadership styles. Since he has to work under the supervision and instruction of the management committee in this private school, he appears largely to be goal oriented rather than relationship oriented.

Indeed, all effective leaders bring a variety of styles on a regular basis suitable to the justification of task and scheme (Dunford et al., 2000). This leader has seemingly validated the

importance of distributive leadership along with instructional leadership. Since Bangladeshi private schools are not completely controlled by the government in all respects, the school leaders enjoy more power than those in public schools. As a consequence, distributive leadership is mostly practiced in the private schools in Bangladesh.

In addition, the senior leaders face some challenges in the context of Bangladeshi secondary schools regarding school management. More specifically, in private schools, a leader experiences some additional stress to achieve the target of the owner (i.e. the management committee). Furthermore, the gap between senior and junior teachers also creates some impediments to reaching a school's goals, and exerts a negative impact on novice teachers. In terms of proportion, moreover, there is a large mismatch between the number of students and teachers for effective teaching in the classroom. The poor infrastructure of the schools also limits institutions in their pursuit of improvement. All these factors impact the effective outcome of the leadership styles applied by the leaders. To sum up, policy makers should rethink the role of school leaders and leadership styles for a better management of secondary schools.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The purpose of the case study is to explore the leadership behaviour of a senior leader who works in an urban secondary school in Bangladesh. By collecting data through a phone interview, the study reveals that despite instructional leadership being quite strongly prevalent at secondary education in Bangladesh, the features of distributive leadership seem to be present to a limited extent. It also appears that the case study leader is more goal oriented than relationship oriented, and he tends to apply instructional leadership style in most cases with a little understanding of distributive leadership. While performing his duties and responsibilities, he faces some challenges which often seem to be unfavourable to reach the goal of a school. He must also make some extra effort because of the gap in understanding between the senior and junior teachers in his school. Moreover, the sudden rules and regulations imposed by the government are sometimes problematic to implement.

It is, therefore, strongly suggested that senior school leaders should be brought under short-term and long-term leadership development programmes. For this, an effective framework can be developed considering the cultural and political context of Bangladesh. In this case, the Ministry of Education has a significant role to play in detecting the difficulties faced by senior leaders in secondary schools. Accordingly, a suitable plan should be made immediately and implemented to see better outcomes in leadership practice within secondary schools.

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