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Perceived Leadership Capacities of Elementary School Head Teachers: Potential Differences of Gender and Experience

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History: Accepted 15 Nov 2020 Available Online 31 Dec 2020	<p><i>Successful leadership mainly depends upon the knowledge and understanding about various leadership skills together with leader's personal capacity to execute these skills efficiently. Elementary school head teachers, therefore, require notable expertise to professionally perform their important administrative responsibilities for achieving the school goals and objectives. In this context, this survey study was mainly conducted to investigate the extent of the leadership capacities of elementary school head teachers' they possessed and differences in their views when grouped by their gender and administrative experience. To achieve the objective, a questionnaire comprising 24-items with six subscales developed by Ng (2010) was adapted with minor changes. The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 363 head teachers randomly selected from 1014 elementary schools of Multan division and finally 336 (92.6%) responded. Results of descriptive statistical analyses suggest that the participants believed with high consensus that they were not well equipped with needed leadership skills in four areas specifically in the area of 'quality assurance and accountability'. Inferential statistical tests revealed no significant differences in participants' perceptions based on their gender. Significant differences, however, were found in their views based on their administrative experience. The conclusions of this study point to the relevant strategies for planning continuous professional development of elementary school head teachers in Pakistan.</i></p>
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1. Introduction

In recent decades the role of school leadership has been studied more extensively with regard to school improvement and school effectiveness (Higgs & Rowland, 2000; Salfi, 2011; Shakeda, Glanzb &

Grossc, 2018). Scholars and experts from the area of school improvement, worldwide, have continuously emphasized the significant role of school leadership for school improvement. (Nabi, Iqbal, Mand & Butt, 2018; West, Jackson, Harris & Hopkins, 2000). Various scholars (i.e., Ahmad, Bilal, Bibi, 2020; Caldwell & Spinks, 1992; Walker & Kwan, 2009; Hayat, Batool, Hayat & Amin, 2019) identified that dynamic leadership plays a central role in school improvement, institutional effectiveness, staff development and sustainable educational reforms. A number of other researchers (e.g., Cheng & Townsend, 2000; Kin, Kareem, Nordin & Bing, 2014) have connected the success as well as effectiveness of school with leadership capacities of school heads. Cheng and Townsend (2000), for example, suggest that the role of principal and/or head teacher is often decisive to school success and for educational change and effectiveness. Similarly, Brenninkmeyer and Spillane (2008) proclaim that school principal has an evident effect on students' learning and their academic performance. Writing in the same vein, Kin et al., (2014) emphasize that dynamic leadership with wide-ranging competencies is needed to introduce real change in schools.

Likewise, studies from different countries and various school systems (i.e., Brenninkmeyer & Spillane, 2008; Hopkins, 2001; West et al., 2000) found that leadership has a substantial impact on school improvement. The head teacher creates a quality culture that penetrates to the smallest elements, processes and finally to the entire system of an educational institution (Sharma, Mannan, & Veeriah, 2016). Successful leaders, according to Sergiovanni (1995), set directions and model practices and values in line with the school vision and mission so that "purposes which may have initially seemed to be separate become fused" (p. 119). Similarly, Sharma, Sun and Kannan (2012) declare that effective leaders seek required assistance proactively and cultivate a school culture and instructional program beneficial for enhancing students' learning and teachers' professional development.

Moreover, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) as cited by Hallinger (2005) stated that school principals' role is three dimensional i.e., definition of school mission, management of instructional programs and promotion of favorable environment for students' learning. While Jantzi and Leithwood (1996) describe six dimensional role of school principal i.e., identification and articulation of vision, nurturing for group goals' acceptance, provision of individual support; intellect stimulation, provision of suitable model as well as high performance expectations. Such models of school leadership role, in view of Sharma (2010) strongly emphasize that successful leadership does not simply result by attaining a leadership position. But rather it depends upon the knowledge as well as understanding about various leadership skills together with leader's personal capacity to efficiently execute these skills. School leaders, therefore, need extensive repertoire of humanistic skills (Sharma, 2010) for providing genuine leadership in varied school settings. These humanistic skills of school leaders mentioned by Sharma (2010) include communication skills, empathy, comfort, influence, commitment, decision making, efficient management of time and self-management. Sharma (2010) further advocated that these humanistic skills of school leaders not only strengthen the principals in executing their routine tasks but also encourage subordinates to follow their vision.

As regards definition of successful leadership, Marfan and Pascual (2018) found that numerous micro and macro elements i.e., school context, educational policy and elements of the internal complexity of each school influence the definition of what kind of leadership is most effective in varied school and community settings. Leadership is mostly defined as a process of directing and mobilizing others towards achievement of set goals. Kotter (1999) declared that leadership, in this sense, is a process of leading a change. Writing in the same vein, several scholars (Cairns, 2000; Kellerman & Webster, 2001; Zenger, Ulrich & Smallwood, 2000) asserted that a leader challenges the existing state of affairs and, therefore, leadership is always change focused. Bush and Glover (2003) defined

leadership as a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. Efficacious school leadership, based on their individual and professional values, develops a school vision. Such leaders dynamically communicate and share the vision with the staff and other stakeholders. The philosophy behind this vision, school arrangements and all the activities are focused to achieve the shared vision.

Bueno and Tubbs (2004), however, observed that leadership is often discussed in terms of leader's capacities. Cairns (2000) described leadership capacities as a collection of capabilities ready to be used when needed. Competency theory, according to Cairns (2000) is, therefore, "based on studying successful leaders, breaking down their behaviors, attitudes and skills into measurable bits and then putting them together to form beings demonstrating superior performance". In a nutshell, leadership capacities can be characterized as the information, abilities, skills and attributes that a leader possesses and demonstrates to carry out his/her professional roles and tasks proficiently. Competency theory, in view of Intagliata, Ulrich and Smallwood (2000), suggest that leadership can be taught and learned. A number of people can grow into successful leaders by attaining knowledge, expertise and capabilities relevant to leadership field (Tubbs & Schulz, 2006). It is not surprising that leadership capacities are ever more essential for planning, training, assessment, certification as well as implementation of professional responsibilities. Moreover, statements of leadership capacities are needed to determine the types of opportunities for leadership as well as educational growth required for future leaders (Zenger et al., 2000).

Besides academic knowledge and professional skills, it is generally believed that gender and experience are significant factors that shape and refine leadership abilities. The increasing emphasis on educational leadership across the globe has inspired a number of academics to search for and point out school principals' personal attributes that impact their leadership capacities in educational institutions (Goldring, Huff, May & Camburn, 2008; Hallinger, 2011). Especially, some scholars (i.e., Kis & Konan, 2014; Krüger, 2008) found how principals' gender affects their instructional leadership performance in schools. In the same perspective, Hallinger, Li, and Wang (2016) conducted a meta-analysis and found that gender has a small but statistically significant effect on leadership practices of school heads displaying female head teachers as more active educational leaders. A number of other scholars (i.e., Eagly 2007; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt & Engen, 2003; Martin, 2015; Melero 2011) also found that female school heads most surpassed their male counterparts and they achieved higher scores in terms of transformational leadership capacities.

On the other hand, a notable number of researchers (i.e., Grogan, 2014; Matheri, Cheloti, & Mulwa, 2015, Sun, Wang, & Sharma, 2014) found that gender has no significant effect on leadership practices of school heads. For example, Grogan (2014) claimed that the prevailing leadership behaviours of majority of the male and female school principals were equal and no gender differences were found in their leadership skills within the educational leadership context. Likewise, Matheri, et al., (2015) found no significant differences in relation to secondary school principals' gender and demonstration of their leadership capacities in performing their professional responsibilities at schools. Furthermore, Sun et al., (2014) conducted a study with school teachers and concluded that there were no significant differences between and among the participants' views about school principals' leadership capacities in relation to their gender and experience.

The length of administrative experience as a school head is another important factor that has been proved to affect educational leadership styles as well as leadership capacities. Fernandez et al., (2007) found that principal's length of experience was the variable that most significantly affected his/her leadership performance in improving schools academically. Likewise, Williams et al., (2005)

revealed that principal's tenure of experience is highly correlated with improved students' academic achievement. Clark, Martorell, and Rockoff (2009) also found a positive relationship between principal experience and school performance. On the other hand, many scholars (i.e., Ibrahim & Al-Taneiji, 2013; Swati, Anwar & Majoka, 2013) concluded that school principals' leadership styles, their leadership capacities and effectiveness did not differ significantly in relation to their length of administrative experience. Gronn (1986) also supported the view and emphasized that leadership effectiveness is embedded in workplace conditions and less dependent upon lifelong learning or experience.

Previous review of literature revealed that successful leadership mainly depends upon the knowledge as well as understanding about various leadership skills together with leader's personal capacities to efficiently execute these skills. Review of literature further suggested that previous findings are contradictory about the effect of school principals' gender and administrative experience on leadership capacities of school heads. In addition, it is also evident from literature review that most of the studies on leadership direction have been found in Western literature and there is hardly any research found about this key area in Pakistani context. These contradictions in earlier findings and gaps in previous leadership literature point to a dire need for further research in Pakistani context to examine possible differences in elementary school heads' views about the extent of the leadership capacities they possessed.

The present study, therefore, was mainly conducted to address these contradictions and gaps in previous literature. This study examined elementary school head teachers' views about the leadership capacities they possessed in the six core areas of school leadership. This research paper also analyzed significant differences in elementary school head teachers' views when grouped by two substantial variables of gender and administrative experience. Understanding how gender and administrative experience influence or even shape head teachers' views about the leadership capacities they possessed may allow us to use these differences for improvement of our schools. It may help policy makers to define the research based criteria for the selection of suitable candidates for school leadership positions. It may also be useful to identify the leadership competencies needed for both the prospective and in-service school heads.

Following three research questions guided this study.

- How do head teachers in Pakistani elementary schools perceive about the leadership capacities they possessed in the six core areas of school leadership?
- Are there differences between head teachers' gender-based perceptions about the leadership capacities they possessed?
- Are there differences between head teachers' administrative experience-based perceptions about the leadership capacities they possessed?

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Design and Participants

This survey design quantitative study analyzed elementary school head teachers' perceptions about their leadership capacities. All the 1014 male and female school head teachers presently appointed in all the government elementary schools of four districts of Multan division served as the population in this study. Sample for this study was finalized with the help of the table prepared by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) for determining sample size. Proportionate stratified random sampling technique was used due to the diverse nature of population. Subsequently, 363 elementary school head teachers (208 male and 155 female) were selected as a sample keeping in view their district-wise representation.

2.2 Instrument

This study used the 24-item questionnaire developed by Ng (2010) to examine head teachers' views about the leadership capacities they possessed in the core areas of school leadership. Ng (2010) developed these 24-items on six-point Likert scale (strongly agree '6' to strongly disagree '1') for examining the level of leadership capacities of aspiring school principals in Hong Kong. This questionnaire covers six key areas/aspects of leadership capacities of school head teachers with six subscales. Each of the six subscales contains four items. The six key areas/subscales were: (i) strategic direction and policy environment, (ii) teaching, learning and curriculum, (iii) teachers' professional development, (iv) management of resources as well as staff, (v) accountability for quality assurance and (vi) external communication. These six key aspects representing six core leadership capacities were used as the theoretical framework in this study. Two additional questions were also included at the beginning of the questionnaire to collect participants' data about their gender and years of administrative experience.

Minor adaptations were made in questionnaire items i.e., the term "head teacher" was used in place of the word "principal" as this is the nomenclature used in Pakistani context for the post of elementary school head teacher. Content and face validity of the scale and subscales was established with the help of three senior teachers. All the three expert teachers independently evaluated the questionnaire items and provided their suggestions. The comments of all the experts were encouraging regarding structure, language and wording of the questionnaire. To make further improvements, the questionnaire was also pilot tested with 23 head teachers randomly selected from elementary schools of Multan city. The participants representing both the male and female head teachers were particularly requested to indicate any difficulty about wording and understanding of the questionnaire items. Generally, participating head teachers informed that wording of all the items was easy and understandable. The questionnaire was finalized keeping in view the suggestions of experts as well as participants' comments received during pilot study. The Cronbach's Alpha values of the overall scale and its subscales were between 0.81 and 0.86 in final study which is considered highly reliable.

2.3 Data Collection, Response Rate and Analysis

Final version of the questionnaire was distributed to all the 363 sample elementary school head teachers after obtaining permission from the respective Chief Executive Officers [CEOs] as well as consent from sample participants. Participating head teachers were requested to indicate whether they approve that they have adequate competencies relating to 24 items in six key areas/aspects of school leadership capacities. Finally, 336 (92.6%) participants returned properly completed questionnaires valid for analysis purpose. Specifically, among all the 336 valid responses, 42.9% were female (144) and 57.1% were male (192). As regards administrative experience, 25.9% (87) head teachers reported their administrative experience between 0-5 years, 33.9% (114) between 6 -10 years, 11.9% (40) were with 11-15 years of experience while 28.3% (95) participants reported their administrative experience 16 years or more.

Both the descriptive as well as inferential statistical techniques were applied to analyze the data collected from 336 sample participants. First, descriptive statistical tests were performed to examine head teachers' perceptions about the leadership capacities they possessed in the core areas of school leadership. Second, Independent-samples t-test was used to analyze gender-based differences between head teachers' views about leadership capacities they possessed. Third, One-way between-groups ANOVA were applied to examine administrative experience-based differences between respondents' views about leadership capacities they possessed. Following section presents the results.

3. Results

The data regarding three research questions were analyzed and results were presented and interpreted in the following three subsections.

3.1 Perceptions of Elementary School Head Teachers about their Leadership Capacities

To analyze head teachers' perceptions about the leadership capacities they possessed in the six core areas of school leadership, descriptive statistical techniques (e.g. the mean and standard deviation) were used and Table 1 reveals the results.

Table 1: Head teachers' perceptions for six key aspects of leadership capacities (N=336)

Sr. no.	Key Aspect/Area	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
1	Strategic direction and policy environment	4	20	3.41	0.92
2	Teaching, learning and curriculum	5	20	3.57	0.90
3	Teachers' professional development and growth	5	20	3.55	0.80
4	Management of staff and resources	4	20	3.39	0.92
5	Quality assurance and accountability	6	20	3.19	0.94
6	External communication and connections	4	20	3.27	0.91
Overall Perceptions				3.40	0.90

Table 1 exhibits that the mean values for the two core areas of leadership capacities, (i.e., teaching, learning and curriculum along with teachers' professional development and growth), were greater than 3.50 but for the other four areas of leadership capacities, the mean values were less than 3.50. Overall, as can be assessed from the mean values for the six key aspects of head teacher's leadership capacities shown in Table 1, participants believed that they have more competency in the area 2 i.e., teaching, learning and curriculum (Mean=3.57) followed by the area 3 i.e., teachers' professional development and growth (Mean=3.55) than all the other four areas. It can be inferred from the mean values that the head teachers tended to believe that they have just reasonable leadership capacities in all the six core areas. Particularly, participants perceived that they were not well equipped with needed leadership skills in the areas of 'strategic direction and policy environment' (Mean=3.41), 'management of staff and resources' (Mean=3.39), 'quality assurance and accountability' (Mean=3.19), and 'external communication' (Mean=3.27). The standard deviation values for the six key aspects of head teacher's leadership capacities along with overall value (i.e., less than 1.00) depict a higher level of consensus of all the participants on all the six core areas.

3.2 Gender-Based Differences between Head Teachers' Views

An Independent-samples t-test was performed to analyze differences between male and female elementary school head teachers' perceived leadership capacities they possessed. Table 2 shows the results followed by interpretation.

Table 2: Independent-samples t-test for gender-based differences (N = 336)

Core Area	Group	N	Mean	SD	Df	t	Sig.
Strategic direction and policy environment	Male	192	11.81	3.53	334	0.02	.983
	Female	144	11.79	3.88			
Teaching, learning and curriculum	Male	192	13.24	3.51	334	0.03	.979
	Female	144	13.23	3.69			
Teachers' professional development and growth	Male	192	12.05	3.12	334	1.02	.307
	Female	144	12.41	3.35			
Management of staff and resources	Male	192	12.18	3.55	334	0.10	.334
	Female	144	11.78	3.84			
Quality assurance and accountability	Male	192	13.01	3.64	334	1.44	.152
	Female	144	12.41	3.93			
External communication and connections	Male	192	13.91	3.38	334	1.74	.084
	Female	144	13.21	3.96			
Overall Perceptions	Male	192	79.81	17.61	334	0.34	.734
	Female	144	80.51	20.04			

Table 2 exhibits results of an independent-samples t-test that was applied to compare head teachers' perception mean scores about the leadership capacities they possessed in the six core areas of school leadership based on their gender. Table 2 also exhibits that the p-values for all the six core areas of head teachers' leadership capacities were greater than .05. These p-values indicate that no significant differences were found between male and female head teachers' perception mean scores about the leadership capacities they possessed in all the six key areas as well as overall perception mean scores. Almost equal mean values of both the sample groups in all the areas also confirm that all the participants equally perceive about the extent of leadership capacities they possessed. As a whole, it can be inferred (from p-values and mean values), that both male and female head teachers perceived the leadership capacities they possessed in the six core areas of school leadership as equal.

3.3 Administrative Experience-Based Differences between Head Teachers' Views

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with administrative experience of the head teachers as between groups variable (4 levels: 1, 2, 3, 4) and entire observed score as within groups variable (1 level: head teachers' perceptions of the leadership capacities they possessed) was done to illustrate between groups and within groups differences. Figure 1 and Table 3 present the results.

Figure 1: Line Chart of the Means Presenting Differences in Respondents' Experience Based Perceptions

Difference in respondents' administrative experience based perceptions of the leadership capacities they possessed is significant statistically, $F(3, 332) = 5.02$, $p = .002$. To point out the direction of the variances among head teachers' perceptions based on their administrative experience, Tucky's Post-hoc Test was applied and the Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3: Tucky's Post-hoc Test showing trend of differences regarding experience

Experience in years (I)	Mean (I)	Experience in years (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
0 - 5	83.60	6 - 10	1.05	.978
		11 - 15	4.03	.660
		16 & more	9.40 [*]	.003
6 - 10	82.55	0 - 5	-1.05	.978
		11 - 15	2.98	.813
		16 & more	8.35 [*]	.005
11 - 15	79.57	0 - 5	-4.03	.660
		6 - 10	-2.98	.813
		16 & more	5.37	.406
16 & more	74.20	0 - 5	-9.40 [*]	.003
		6 - 10	-8.35 [*]	.005
		11 - 15	-5.37	.406

**The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.*

Table 3 exhibits the calculations of post hoc Tukey's HSD test that was applied to analyze administrative experience based differences in head teachers' perception mean scores about the leadership capacities they possessed in the six core areas of school leadership. Table 3 further indicates that newly inducted head teachers with 0-5 and 6-10 years of administrative experience perceived the leadership capacities they possessed significantly better than their senior most counter parts having highest administrative experience i.e., 16 years or more. Table 3 also portrays that there were not statistically significant differences in participants' perceptions regarding the leadership capacities they possessed in all the other comparisons on the basis of their administrative experience.

4. Discussion

This quantitative survey design study mainly focused on understanding the extent of the leadership capacities of elementary school head teachers' they possessed and differences in their views when grouped by their gender and administrative experience. Previous studies offer contrary findings, with some concluding significant differences in head teachers' perceptions while others the converse. This study revealed no significant differences between male and female head teachers' perceptions about the leadership capacities they possessed in all the six key areas. This result from Pakistani context is aligned well with the results of studies conducted by a notable number of researchers (i.e., Grogan, 2014; Matheri et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2014) who found that gender has no significant effect on leadership practices of school heads. This result, however, is contrary to the findings of a number of previous studies (i.e., Eagly 2007; Eagly, et al., 2003; Hallinger et al., 2016; Martin, 2015; Melero, 2011). They found that gender has a statistically significant effect on leadership practices of school heads displaying female head teachers as more active educational leaders.

Findings of this study, however, showed significant differences in experience based perceptions

of head teachers about the leadership capacities they possessed. Remarkably, newly inducted head teachers with less years of administrative experience perceived the leadership capacities they possessed significantly better than their senior most counter parts having highest administrative experience. These results are in agreement with the findings of several previous researchers (i.e., Clark et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2005). These results, however, are in contrast to the findings of many previous scholars (i.e., Ibrahim & Al-Taneiji, 2013; Swati et al., 2013; Gronn, 1986) who emphasized that leadership effectiveness is embedded in workplace conditions and less dependent upon lifelong learning or experience.

5. Conclusions

This study examined elementary school head teachers' perception in relation to their own leadership capacities in Pakistani context. The results of this study clearly suggest that the head teachers believe that they have just reasonable leadership capacities in all the six core areas of school leadership. Particularly, participants perceived that they were not well equipped with needed leadership skills in the areas of 'quality assurance along with accountability' and 'external communication'. Following two important conclusions were drawn in terms of gender-based and administrative experience-based differences in participants' views. First, no significant differences were found between male and female head teachers' perceptions of the leadership capacities they possessed in all the six key areas. Second, this study revealed significant differences in experience based perception of head teachers about the leadership capacities they possessed. These conclusions point to the relevant strategies for planning continuous professional development of elementary school head teachers in Pakistan. This article contributes to the knowledge and understanding of leadership capacities of elementary school head teachers based on extensive review of literature along with evidence found in this study.

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