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Administrative Competencies Required for Effective School Management: A Mixed-Methods Study of School Heads in Southern Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

School heads in Pakistan are usually promoted on the basis of seniority and take charge of staff, finances, records, infrastructure and instruction with little formal preparation. This study identified the administrative competencies that school heads consider essential for effective school management and the priority areas for their training. A convergent mixed-methods design was used. A 56-item questionnaire covering seven competency areas was completed by 300 school heads and education managers from eleven districts of Southern Punjab, and two focus group discussions were held with ten heads in Bahawalpur and Multan. The questionnaire showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.944$). All 56 competencies were endorsed at high or very high levels (overall $M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.42$), and every competency area was rated well above the neutral point ($t(299) = 38.61$ to 47.17, $p < .001$). Professional Ethics, Accountability and Technology ranked highest ($M = 4.31$), and Planning and Organization lowest ($M = 4.17$). The lowest-rated individual competencies were mobilising community resources ($M = 3.94$), using digital tools for administration ($M = 4.03$) and emergency planning ($M = 4.04$). The seven areas were moderately inter-correlated ($r = 0.54$ to 0.65). Open-ended responses ($n = 126$) and focus groups added service rules and disciplinary procedures, digital systems, financial management and stress management as priority needs. The findings provide an empirically grounded competency framework for the selection, induction and training of school heads, and a content brief for a practical training manual.

Introduction

School leadership is the second school-based factor after classroom teaching that has an impact on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2008). It does so, largely, through the head's contribution to setting direction, developing people, managing the program, and focusing on teaching and learning (Robinson et al., 2008; Hallinger, 2011). Most recently, a synthesis of two decades of evidence demonstrated that the gains in student achievement from replacing a below-average principal with an above-average one are comparable to those of highly effective teachers, with the added advantage that the head's influence is felt in every classroom in the school (Grissom et al., 2021).

In Pakistan, the head's role is unusually broad. In Pakistan heads deal with staff, budgets, School Council funds, records, the buildings, and relations with the community and are regularly written by monitors and controlled by the department (Simkins et al., 2003). Teacher recruitment to headship in the Punjab public system is mostly by seniority, and the teacher is "expected to learn administration on the job." Formal preparation is minimal, and in-service training is irregular and not focused. The shift to

monitoring online dashboards has added to the administrative burden. Overseas, these pressures have been addressed by developing competency frameworks for school leaders and structuring preparation programs around these (Huber, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al, 2007). For example, England and Australia and the United States have adopted national standards that define what heads should know and do (Department for Education, 2020; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2014; National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015). In Pakistan there are some general statements as to what heads should do but not an empirically validated set of administrative competencies based on views of heads in practice. Selection, induction and training cannot be focused without this.

This study fills that gap for Southern Punjab, which is rural and has lower education indicators than the north of the province, using a large survey of heads and focus group discussions. Because no validated framework of administrative competencies exists for school heads in Pakistan, the study first asked which administrative competencies school heads consider essential for effective school management, so that any framework would rest on the views of those who actually do the job. Since training time and resources are limited, it then asked how the competency areas rank in importance and how they are related to one another; the ranking indicates where emphasis should lie, while the relationships show whether the areas should be developed together or separately. Finally, because a framework is useful only if it informs practice, the study asked which competencies and additional needs should be given priority in training school heads, combining survey ratings with heads' own accounts to identify the areas of greatest need for a practical training manual.

Literature Review

The concept of administrative competency

A competency is a concept of an underlying characteristic (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) of a person that is causally related to effective and/or superior performance in a role (Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Threshold competencies are necessary for all role takers to perform adequately; differentiating competencies distinguish superior from average performance (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). This distinction is helpful in school headship: threshold competencies might include record keeping/ compliance as a matter of routine, while differentiating competencies might include data-based planning or supervision of instruction, which set the most effective heads apart from the rest of the pack.

Katz (1955) defined technical, human, and conceptual skills as important to effective administrators and asserted that their relative importance changes with levels of responsibility. School headship requires all three, the technical in budgeting and record keeping, the human in managing staff and communication, and the conceptual in planning and decision-making. Mintzberg's (1973) studies revealed the fragmentation and reactivity of managerial work: 'there is few time for planning, unless the "manager's" device is to curtail planning time.'

Bush (2008) is not enthusiastic about competency-based approaches: "To reduce leadership to lists of discrete behaviors is to misunderstand leadership." Rather more defensibly, it can be argued that competencies do provide a desirable language for selection, training and appraisal if considered to be interrelated rather than as a checklist and if embedded in the context within which heads operate.

Management, leadership and the work of school heads

In the education literature, leadership (vision, values, and change) is distinct from management (effective and efficient operations) (Bush, 2020). In reality, heads of schools require both. Bush and Glover (2014) summarize major shapes of school leadership (transformational, instructional, distributed, and managerial) and observe that even in systems where resources are low and bureaucratic accountabilities are strong, managerial leadership remains important.

This view is also backed by empirical evidence. Grissom and Loeb (2011) linked surveys of principals, assistant principals, teachers and parents to school performance data and found that principals' ability to manage their organization (budgeting, hiring and managing the school environment) was more consistently associated with school outcomes than day-to-day instructional activities alone. Similarly, Bloom et al. (2015), surveying management practices in schools in eight countries, found that schools with better management practices (operations, monitoring, target setting and people management) had better student outcomes. Thus, good management provides the conditions to enable improvements in teaching.

Leadership for learning

The research over four decades indicates that heads influence learning mainly through instructional leadership that involves setting academic goals, monitoring teaching, providing feedback and using student progress data (Hallinger, 2011). Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) seminal model described three dimensions of instructional leadership: defining the school mission, managing the school instructional program and promoting the school learning climate. Robinson et al. (2008) found that instructional leadership had at least three to four times the impact on student outcomes than transformational leadership alone, with the most effective aspects of instructional leadership being promoting teacher learning and development and active engagement in that learning.

Leithwood et al. (2008) advise that effective principals use common practices rather than specific skills, which Leithwood et al. (2020) later argue is context-specific. Likewise, Fullan (2014) observes that successful principals are data-focused, working on whole-school improvement and embodying the qualities of lead learners, who build the collective capacity of staff. This body of literature taken together suggests that the framework for head competency should also encompass instructional leadership and use of data in addition to the technical/administrative tasks that typically characterize their work lives.

Competency frameworks for school leaders

Professional standards have been developed in many countries specifying what is expected of school leaders. For instance, the U.S. Professional Standards for Educational Leaders describe 10 standards: mission and vision; ethics and professional norms; curriculum and instruction; professional capacity of staff; community engagement; and operations and management (NPBEA, 2015). In Australia also, there is the Australian Professional Standard for Principals. Its five professional practices are leading teaching and learning, developing self and others, leading improvement and change, leading management of the school, and engaging and working with the community (AITSL, 2014). In England, the Headteachers' Standards organize expectations around culture and ethos, curriculum and teaching, organizational effectiveness, school improvement, working in partnership, and governance and accountability (Department for Education, 2020).

Common ground includes the focus on ethics, important responsibilities for people, finance and operations management, and the links between the Head's work, the community, and quality of teaching. The seven competency areas addressed in this study are intended to reflect this common ground, but also to stress features relevant to Pakistan, such as accountability for School Council funds and knowledge of departmental procedures.

Frameworks from Western systems do not transfer so easily. Hallinger and Chen (2015) point to the fact that Asian educational leadership research has, until now largely, based itself on Western models, although the cultural, bureaucratic and resource context of Asian schools differs very much. Similarly, Bush and Oduro (2006) argue that generic models of leadership are not sufficiently sensitive to the challenges of infrastructure, staffing, financing and community relations faced by new principals in chronically under-resourced school systems in Africa. Therefore, any Pakistan-specific framework of competencies should be developed in consideration of the experiences and beliefs of heads here in Pakistan.

School leadership in Pakistan

In Pakistan, Simkins et al. (2003) report some hierarchy of compliance enforced and little room for instructional leadership of head teachers. The heads in their study perceived themselves as largely carrying out departmental directives with very little flexibility in terms of staffing and resources. For example, Khan (2012) compared a head of a government and a private secondary school in northern Pakistan and found that the government head spent his time on administrative and external demands with little time for instructional management. Salfi (2011) found that successful head teachers were those who were curriculum leaders, who involved parents and sought to work directly on development with staff.

Bush (2008) noted that in many systems heads are appointed on the basis of their teaching seniority and then left to learn the role by trial and error. This closely resembles public school in Punjab. Heads are expected to handle finance, school councils, staff discipline, infrastructure, and increasingly digital reporting, but their training is brief, generic, and given after appointment. Financial accountability is particularly worrying. In South Africa, Mestry (2004) demonstrated how heads, when financial responsibility was devolved to schools with inadequate training, did not know how to budget, keep accounts and prepare for audits. They are at similar risk to their Pakistani counterparts who are responsible for auditing non-salary budgets and School Council funds. A few Pakistani studies, qualitative studies of small scale, talking about what good heads do. No one has assessed at large regional scale the administrative skills heads themselves regard as important, their clustering, and the focus of training. International frameworks provide useful categories, but these have not been tested against the priorities of Pakistani heads. We

provide such evidence from Southern Punjab, using a 56-item survey and qualitative insights into the training needs and challenges underpinning the ratings.

Methodology

A convergent mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) was used. The importance of each competency was scored through a questionnaire survey, while focus group discussions explored the challenges, gaps, and training needs that supported the rating. The two strands were analyzed separately and then triangulated in discussion. The survey sample comprised heads and managers of education in public and private schools of 11 districts of Southern Punjab (Bahawalpur, Multan, Rahim Yar Khan, Bahawalnagar, Dera Ghazi Khan, Muzaffargarh, Khanewal Vehari, Lodhran, Layyah, and Rajanpur). Their profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of survey respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Categories (f, %)
Gender	Male 172 (57.3%); Female 128 (42.7%)
Designation	Head Teacher/Headmaster/Headmistress 135 (45.0%); Principal 66 (22.0%); Senior School Teacher 60 (20.0%); Education Officer/Deputy DEO 39 (13.0%)
Academic qualification	Bachelor 36 (12.0%); Master 174 (58.0%); M.Phil 75 (25.0%); PhD 15 (5.0%)
Headship experience	Below 3 years 72 (24.0%); 3–6 years 99 (33.0%); 7–10 years 75 (25.0%); Above 10 years 54 (18.0%)
School level	Primary 90 (30.0%); Elementary 75 (25.0%); Secondary 99 (33.0%); Higher Secondary 36 (12.0%)
Location	Urban 132 (44.0%); Rural 168 (56.0%)
Sector	Public 228 (76.0%); Private 72 (24.0%)
Training in school management	Yes 118 (39.3%); No 182 (60.7%)

Focus group discussions from Bahawalpur (H1-H5) and from Multan (H6-H10).

The questionnaire had three parts: Demographics; 56 statements about administrative skills, organized in the seven areas and subscales, on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), and one open-ended question for any other competencies. The seven target areas were (1) Instructional Leadership, (2) Planning & Organization, (3) Human Resource Management, (4) Financial & Resource Management, (5) Communication & Community Relations, (6) Decision Making & Conflict Management, and (7) Professional Ethics, Accountability, and Technology. Items were derived from the Pakistani literature and international leadership frameworks, then cleaned by the experts for saliency and clarity. The internal consistency ranged from 0.737 to 0.782 for the seven areas and 0.944 for the full scale (Table 2), well above the conventional threshold of 0.70. The focus group guide included daily challenges, good head characteristics, competency gaps, useful and useless areas of training, and what they wanted in a training manual. The survey data were analyzed with SPSS with frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, one-sample t-test against neutral mean value of 3 and Pearson correlations. Means were interpreted as: very low (1.00–1.80), low (1.81–2.60), medium (2.61–3.40), high (3.41–4.20) and very high (4.21–5.00). Standardized Cohen's d effect sizes (d) are reported for one-sample tests. Open-ended responses and focus group transcripts were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and the percentage of participants reporting each theme was noted.

Results

Importance of the seven competency areas

Rating across all areas of competency was very high with effect sizes very large and ratings being above neutral except for Planning and Organization whose rating still fell in the very high band (Table 2). The difference between the highest and lowest areas was small (0.14 scale points), suggesting that heads view all seven areas as part of their role and do not privilege a few.

Table 2. Competency areas: means, reliability and one-sample t-test against 3 (N = 300)

Rank	Competency area	M	SD	α	t(299)	Cohen's d
1	Professional Ethics, Accountability and Technology	4.31	0.48	0.737	47.17	2.72
2	Human Resource Management	4.27	0.52	0.782	42.34	2.44
3	Financial and Resource Management	4.26	0.49	0.757	44.16	2.55

Rank	Competency area	M	SD	α	t(299)	Cohen's d
4	Communication and Community Relations	4.23	0.54	0.782	39.24	2.27
5	Instructional Leadership	4.22	0.53	0.765	39.95	2.31
6	Decision-Making and Conflict Management	4.21	0.52	0.745	39.96	2.31
7	Planning and Organization	4.17	0.52	0.770	38.61	2.23
—	Overall (56 items)	4.24	0.42	0.944	51.44	2.97

Note. All $p < .001$.

Individual competencies

Thirty-four statements were in the very high band and 22 in the high band out of 56 statements. None were in the under high band. Table 3: Top-/bottom-rated competencies Topics The highest rated items are goal setting, integrity, student safety and the lowest where heads have limited experience or confidence (mobilization of resources, digital administration, remedial support, emergency planning, use of data) or communication to staff and financial records.

Table 3. Highest- and lowest-rated competencies (N = 300)

Competency	Area	M	SD
Highest			
Setting clear academic goals for the school	Instructional Leadership	4.45	0.78
Honesty and fairness in all dealings	Ethics, Accountability and Technology	4.44	0.80
Ensuring the safety and security of students	Ethics, Accountability and Technology	4.44	0.83
Keeping accurate financial records	Financial and Resource Management	4.43	0.72
Clear communication with teachers and staff	Communication and Community Relations	4.43	0.68
Lowest			
Mobilising additional resources from the community or donors	Financial and Resource Management	3.94	0.91
Using computers and digital tools for administration	Ethics, Accountability and Technology	4.03	0.94
Arranging extra support for weak students	Instructional Leadership	4.04	0.82
Preparing plans to handle emergencies	Planning and Organization	4.04	0.85
Using school data for planning	Planning and Organization	4.06	0.90
Finding the root cause before solving a problem	Decision-Making and Conflict Management	4.09	0.96

The lowest-rated items also had the largest standard deviations (0.82 to 0.96), indicating greater disagreement among heads about their importance.

Relationships among competency areas

All domains were significantly positively correlated ($r = 0.54–0.65$, $p < .01$). The strongest correlation was between Planning and Organization and Professional Ethics, Accountability and Technology ($r = .65$), while the weakest was between Decision-Making and Conflict Management and Instructional Leadership ($r = .54$). All areas correlated well with the total score (0.79-0.82). Thus, the areas are intercorrelated but separable: they're reasonable combinants into an overall logically coherent construct of administrative competency but each also adds something the other doesn't.

Additional competencies from open-ended responses

Another 126 (42.0%) listed other competencies (Table 4). The most common were knowledge of the rules of service and of disciplinary and legal matters, and digital skills for online government systems (reported by almost one-third of these respondents each).

Table 4. Additional competencies named by respondents (n = 126)

Theme	f	% of respondents
Knowledge of service rules, disciplinary procedures and legal matters	41	32.5
Digital skills and use of online government systems	37	29.4
Stress management and emotional intelligence	29	23.0
Counselling and guidance of students	26	20.6

Theme	f	% of respondents
Inclusive education and support for children with special needs	22	17.5
Time management and handling of non-teaching duties	21	16.7
Disaster preparedness and crisis management	18	14.3
Gender sensitivity and prevention of harassment	14	11.1
Action research and evidence-based improvement	11	8.7

Focus group findings

Work is characterized by paperwork and data reporting (90%) on a daily basis, staff shortages, teacher absenteeism (80%) and delayed, inadequate funds (70%), the ten focus group participants stated. Good heads were described as having integrity (90%), communication skills (80%), knowledge of rules (70%) and leading by example (90%). Heads were adequate in routine administration (70%) but poor in financial management (80%) and supervision and feedback (60%).

The priority trainings needed were budgeting and financial management (90%), instructional supervision (70%), computing and knowledge of information and communication technologies (70%), and school planning and use of school data (60). Preferred manual formats included checklists and templates (90%), case studies from real schools (80%), simple Urdu or bilingual language (70%), and modular design, activities, and self-assessment (60%). Traditional training had been described as being based on lectures with minimal follow up in terms of a list of skills.

Discussion

Headship as a multidimensional role

Thus, the heads of schools in Southern Punjab are assumed to be in need of all the managerial skills, thus portraying headship multitasked. The seven areas reflect Katz's (1955) technical, human and conceptual skills, and the moderate intercorrelations further support Leithwood et al.'s (2008) observation that successful leaders draw upon extensive repertoires. This pattern is also consistent with international standards that mix ethics, instructional leadership, people management, operations, and community engagement (AITSL, 2014; NPBEA, 2015). Therefore, training should relate the areas rather than deal with them in isolation.

Ethics and accountability

For the focus groups, the key characteristic of a good head was integrity, then ethics and accountability. This resonates with the moral purposes of headship in Pakistan and also with the audit-rich world of inspections and audits as described by Simkins et al. (2003). This environment also partly explains the heads' impression of their work as dominated by paperwork and limited scope for academic leadership. This mirrors closely Mintzberg's (1973) picture of managerial work as fragmented, with directors' days taken up by information requests, visits, and directives, while (planned) supervisory tasks requiring continuing effort get squeezed.

The gap between endorsing and practising instructional leadership

The highest-rated skills in instructional leadership included setting academic goals. Conversely, remedial support for weak students and classroom observation received low ratings, and supervision was limited to checking attendance and diaries. This gap between endorsement and practice is significant because leadership impacts learning mainly through direct involvement in teaching (Hallinger, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008; Salfi, 2011). In one of his studies in a government secondary school, Khan (2012) showed a similar pattern of administration crowding out instructional management. Thus, instructional supervision training should be practical with tools for class visitations, feedback dialogs, and remedial support planning rather than reiterating the need for instructional leadership in general theory.

Planning, data use and emergencies

Planning and Organization was the weakest domain, with some of the weakest items including review of plans, planning based on data, and planning for emergency. Thus, heads appear to be more preoccupied with daily running than they are with strategic evidence-based planning. Fullan (2014) notes that good principals use data to drive improvement; however, heads in Southern Punjab have not yet been trained as such (but they gather and produce them in vast quantities). Bloom et al. (2015) found monitoring and target setting to be among the managerial practices most strongly related to school outcomes. Other competencies cited by respondents were disaster preparedness and emergency planning (especially in view of the floods experienced in the districts in 2022).

High importance, low capacity: the profile of training needs

Financial management is a pattern. In focus groups, young people rated the skill of keeping financial records highly but identified financial management as their weakest area and their #1 training need (i.e., service rules, and disciplinary procedures were the competency they added most often). The combination of such a high importance and low perceived capacity is a profile of a priority training need. This same combination was found in South African principals in schools where financial responsibility was assigned without adequate preparation (Mestry, 2004). The same scenario applies to low ratings for digital administration, which is often an additional need, and increasing online reporting requirements, again in the absence of trained personnel, particularly in rural schools.

Community resource mobilization was given the lowest rating. This may be a function of the inexperience of heads with School Councils, philanthropists and local organizations, but also due to the low resource base of many communities, especially in Southern Punjab. All the models considered stress the importance of involving the community and so this should be part of the training.

Implications for a training manual

The results inform an overview training manual focused on the above seven areas and biased toward the above high-importance, low-capacity heads, formatted as requested. Such preferences suggest research on leadership preparation centered on real problems and follow-up support, not one-shot lectures (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Conclusion

The study aimed at identifying the critical administrative skills perceived by the school heads of Southern Punjab and identifying the area of their training needs. Survey results of 300 heads and education managers, supported by two focus groups and open-ended comments, suggest that heads view their role as complex and demanding. The high reliability of the instrument and the moderate associations between areas imply that these seven areas together provide a coherent picture of what it takes to be an effective head and school manager (all 56 competencies in the seven areas were considered important).

Professional ethics and accountability were rated as top priorities by the heads, with close associate rankings for management of people, as well as of finances. Therefore, integrity, fairness, student safety, and accurate record keeping are seen as the foundation of a head's authority. Instructional leadership was also highly supported, but the heads themselves explain that their supervision of teaching rarely goes beyond occasional checks, mainly because their time is taken up with paperwork and reporting data.

The study also identifies areas of least confidence for heads. Weaknesses revealed in the ratings, open-ended responses, and focus groups were strategic and data-based planning, digital administration, financial and legal procedures, instructional supervision, and community resource mobilization. These are areas of low confidence/high importance competence areas and training priority areas. Needs beyond the scope of the questionnaire (e.g., rules of service, managing stress, guidance to students, inclusive learning, and disaster preparedness) were also emphasized by heads.

The study's main output is an evidence-based competency framework, which was scarce in practice from heads. This underpins the selection, training and appraisal of school heads and offers a clear content brief for inclusion in a training manual. However, the enhancement of these competencies is not an end in itself but a means to allow heads to focus on teaching and learning in their schools.

Recommendations

- Prepare a training manual based on needs. QAED should work with district training institutions to develop a modular manual based on the seven areas, with most time devoted to financial and legal procedures, instructional supervision, digital administration, and data-driven school development planning.
- Embrace a provincial competency framework. The School Education Department, Punjab should adopt seven competency areas as common norms for hiring/selection/induction/appraisal of school heads to ensure that their appointment is based on their readiness for the post and not their seniority.
- Ensure that training materials are practical and accessible. All modules to be bilingual/Urdu with models of ready-made templates, model letters, model budgets, design, and checklists of classroom observation and case studies of real schools of Southern Punjab.

- Broaden the scope of training topics. The additional modules on stress management, student guidance and counseling, inclusive education, and disaster and emergency preparedness have been self-selected by the heads.
- Heads should be freed from paperwork. Provide clerical or computer-operator assistance to schools (particularly rural schools) for data entry and online reporting to free up more time for heads to provide teacher supervision and support.
- Follow up training. Formal training must be underpinned by structured follow-up (cluster networks of heads, mentoring of new heads by experienced heads, regular review of school development plans) to ensure application of the new competencies into schools on a day-to-day basis.
- Monitor and evaluate the program. Periodically review the framework and training, taking into account the feedback of heads, teachers, and supervisors to reflect on their impact on school management as well as to maintain the relevance of content to be covered against the changing demands.

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