School improvement in Oman: Perceptions and practices

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Abstract. School improvement plans and efforts have become the heart of school principals' agenda. Therefore, the perceptions and efforts of school principals are essential ingredients in any attempt to succeed in improving our schools. This paper intends to explore the perceptions of school principals in Oman and assess efforts they make for improvement of their schools. Two research questions were addressed in this paper: First, what are the perceptions of post basic school principals in Oman on school improvement? Second, what efforts do post basic school principals in Oman make in order to improve their schools? A survey instrument in form of a questionnaire will be used. A random sample representing the population of post basic school principals in Oman will be selected. It is found that school improvement is a shared responsibility and principals are actively seeking to enhance the understanding and effectively utilize the broad contribution to achieve the collective goal. It is hoped that finding of this research will contribute to a better understanding of the role of school principals in school improvement in Oman.

Keywords: School improvement, principals, perceptions, efforts, Oman.

INTRODUCTION

There is greater emphasis today than ever before on the issue of quality of education and school improvement has become the focus. Due to the critical role principals play in improving schools, a lot of pressure has been put on principals to successfully implement school improvement initiatives, and therefore an investigation of principals' perceptions and practices is essential. As Miller et al. (2006) stated, "Principals' perspectives … are very important in order to address concerns related to school improvement, social justice and democratic community".

The role of school leaders in implementing and sustaining school improvement has been examined by many researchers. Scholarly and professional journals contain arguments that claim leadership is a critical factor in successful school improvement (Foster and Hilaire, 2013). However, more research that identifies how principals and teachers perceive leadership and understand its relationship to school improvement is needed.

Even when it is difficult to determine the direct effects principals have on student achievement, research supports the notion that principals undoubtedly impact instruction and the success of schools, albeit in indirect ways (Lee and Williams, 2006; Gurr et al., 2005). According to Leithwood et al. (2004), "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school", and is "widely regarded as a key factor in accounting for differences in the success with which schools foster the learning of their students". Gurr et al. (2005) found in their case study research on Australian principals that the principal remains an important and significant figure in determining the success of a school.

Yiasemis (2008) stated that the school improvement movement has expanded mainly during the last two decades. The scope of the term "school improvement" was used and limited to the teacher level and focused on teacher effectiveness, performance improvement and development rather than leadership and the role of the principal. Research on school improvement moved to the
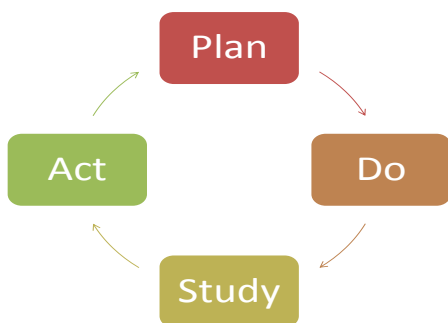
Figure 1. The school improvement cycle.

classroom and the school level. The researchers realized that improvement should involve all areas of schooling giving the chance for all the elements to improve and cooperate. Currently, the notion of school improvement incorporates a wide spectrum: teachers' performance, focus upon classroom and student learning, attempts for organizational and cultural change, involvement of all levels of school and outside agencies as well as students' behavior and academic achievement.

Harris and Chrispeels (2008) also indicated that there is increasing shift from individual school improvement initiatives to system wide change. The concern is the total quality of education at the national level rather than school level. In their investigation of the role of principals of schools that had successfully implemented reform initiatives, Crowther et al. (2002) emphasized the need for further study and research on the perceptions of both administrators and teachers involved in school-based management and school reform. In addition, Hallinger and Heck (1998) stressed the need to search for answers to how principals "create and sustain the in-school factors that foster successful schooling".

Hopkins (2001) defines school improvement as a form of educational change that aims to enhance student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change. According to Barth (1990), school improvement is an effort to determine and provide, from within and without, conditions under which the adults and youngsters who inhabit schools will promote and sustain learning among them. In addition, the change which should take place as a result of the school improvement effort should not merely reflect an implementation of policies, but rather, improvements or adaptations of practice which transform the learning process to achieve the maximum impact on students, teachers and schools, (James, 2008).

Smylie et al. (2002:167) argue that "school improvement and the improvement of teaching and student learning depend fundamentally on the development of teachers' knowledge, abilities and commitments". Thus research findings clearly stress the need for further investigation of school leadership and school improvement that link leading to learning, and

identify efforts and effort that can foster and sustain continues school development.

Fullan and Stieglebauer (1991) stated that: "The ingredient that is absolutely necessary for school improvement is the leader's role as change agent in reculturing the school". Louis and Miles (1990) and Hord (1997) also emphasized that leaders who are effective change agents guide the school collaboratively to develop and articulate a shared vision, to learn collectively, to share personally and professionally, and to engage in meaningful long-range planning that provides support for teachers and students.

Rinehart (1993) identified the process effective school improvement as both cyclical and continuous, and labeled it the plan-do-study-act cycle for school improvement as shown in Figure 1. The components of this cycle are:

Plan: Develop a plan for improvement.
Do: Implement the plan.
Study: Evaluate the impact according to specific criteria.
Act: Adjust strategies to better meet criteria.

This model of improvement is reflected by principals who develop school improvement plans and implement them. Feedback is collected and the impact analyzed in order to respond with necessary refinements. The cycle continues with reviewed plans, thus exemplifying the ongoing dynamic process of school improvement.

Zmuda et al. (2004) stated that school improvement requires principals and educational leaders to "assert the importance of changing minds, not just practices, through the messy processes of dialoug, debate, and reflection". In addition, achieving school improvement requires both collaboration and reflection. In reflection, the school community thinks about the collected information and develops plans and takes actions accordingly. "Successful reflection depends on thought-provoking information and time for individual and team study" (Learning Point Associates, 2004).

Leithwood et al. (2004) also examined school and classroom conditions, describing effective leadership practices which have a significant impact on student learning. School conditions meant the school's structure, culture, instructional services and human resources. Classroom conditions included class size, teaching loads, teaching subjects in which teachers have formal preparation, homework practices, classroom student grouping practices and curriculum and instruction.

In sum, research has shown that school principals are integral to successful restructuring, school change and improvement and student learning. Thus, it may be said that one will not find a successful school without discovering a successful principal. Schools will struggle and flounder without effective management and leadership from the school principals. This is not to say that principals do it alone, but their concepts, actions and

efforts they make will guide school improvement plans and successful implementation.

The main objective of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Omani school principals regarding school improvement; and to report on their efforts to improve schools in Oman. The research is framed by two key questions: What are the perceptions of post-basic school principals in Oman about school improvement? And, what efforts do post-basic school principals in Oman make to improve their schools? Research on such issues and their impact on education system in Oman is limited. As part of the efforts to improve schools in Oman and develop its educational system, identification and documentation of perceptions and practices of educational leaders becomes essential

Education in the Sultanate of Oman: A brief background

The Sultanate of Oman is one of the six Gulf Cooperation Council states (United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman Qatar, and Bahrain). Oman is located in Southwest Asia and bordered by the United Arab Emirates in the northwest, Saudi Arabia in the west, and Yemen in the southwest. Oman has a population of about 3.632 million people.

In 1970 there were only three formal schools with 900 students in the whole country. The education system expanded rapidly during the 1970s and the 1980s. In 2006 to 2007 about 560,000 students attended 1053 public schools. The number of students in private schools is about 65,000. There are also extensive programmes to combat adult illiteracy. Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the only national university, was founded in 1986.

In 1997, the Ministry of Education began development work on a Basic Education program to gradually replace the three level general education system. The aim of the reform is to create a unified system covering the first ten years of schooling. Basic Education is organized into two cycles: the first cycle covers grades 1 to 4 and the second cycle covers grades 5 to 10. These two cycles are followed by two years of post-Basic Education system (secondary education, grades 11 and 12). The first schools started to introduce the new system in the academic year 1998/1999 (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Issan and Nariman (2010) identified three stages in the development of education in Oman. Beginning in 1970, stage one emphasized the rapid quantitative development of education. Stage two started in the 1980s with focus on the quality. In this stage, the Ministry of Education initiated serious efforts to improve the quality of education by establishing teacher training institutes and developing the curriculum. Stage three started in 1995, after the declaration of "Vision of Oman's economy 2020". A strategic plan was initiated in 2001 to ensure that students will be adequately prepared for the

requirements of higher education and the labor market. Secondary education was restructured and replaced by two years of post-basic education, grade 11 and 12.

Oman has eleven Regional Directorates of Education, comprising: Muscat, Batinah North, Batinah South, Dakhliyah, Sharqiah South, Sharqiah North, Dhahirah, Al Buraimi, Musandam, Al Wusta, and Dhofar. Each Directorate has the authority to administer and manage education at the regional level. Overseen by the Ministry of Education, the government of Oman is committed to school improvement and educational reform as a means toward producing economic growth, transformation and prominence on the regional and global stage.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument and sample

In order to collect data to answer questions raised in this paper, a survey instrument in form of a questionnaire was used. The questionnaire was developed by the authors. The questionnaire was composed of three sections: Section one included demographic information, section two included ten statements about the perceptions and section three included ten statements relating to practice. Respondents were asked to respond to each statement using a Likert scale by choosing from five options (Strongly Agree, Agree, Don't Know, Disagree and Strongly Disagree) which were allocated a numerical value of 5 to 1 for the purposes of analysis. The questionnaire ended with an open ended question requesting specific details about individual school initiatives.

Using a simple random sampling technique, a sample of one hundred post-basic school principals from across Oman was selected. With the help of Sultan Qaboos University students, the questionnaire was administered and distributed. (61) principals responded, a 60% response rate, which is acceptable for the purpose of the study. It is hoped that finding of this research will contribute to a better understanding of the role of school principals in and initiate further reforms for school improvement in the Sultanate of Oman.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Survey responses were collated and analyzed in SPSS to highlight the perceptions concerning the nature of school improvement of post-basic school principals in Oman. Table 1 presents a basic summary of the findings. Importantly, the contribution of teachers (Statement 7) was deemed the most important factor contributing to improvement in schools based on the mean response of 4.77. This suggested that almost all principals strongly agree that the role of teachers was the primary success

Table 1. Principal perceptions on school improvement (N = 62).

No.	Statement	Mean	Std. deviation
1	The school principal is the chief responsible for school performance improvement	3.92	1.144
2	The role of the school principal in improving school performance is clear for me	4.25	.650
3	The school has all requirements needed for improving the school performance	3.13	1.176
4	I have the competences and skills required for improving school performance	4.05	.939
5	The school encounters challenges that make it difficult to improve school performance	3.51	1.059
6	I have adequate opportunities to work on improving school performance	3.74	.982
7	Teachers' participation is essential for the success in improving school performance	4.77	.462
8	I believe that students can contribute in improving school performance	4.38	.986
9	I believe that parents play a vital role in improving school performance	4.39	.822
10	There is clear improvement in the school performance for the last few years	4.00	.837
M1		4.0131	.45551

Table 2. Efforts principal make to improve schools (N = 62).

No.	Statement	Mean	Std. deviation
11	I prepare an annual plan for improving school performance	4.41	.559
12	All school employees participate in planning school performance improvement programs	4.34	.728
13	There is a committee responsible of implementing school performance improvement programs	4.28	.756
14	All school utilities are made available for the improvement of school performance	4.41	.716
15	I regularly organize programs for professional development of the staff	4.30	.667
16	I regularly organize activities that develop relationship between school members	4.48	.595
17	I encourage school teachers who make efforts to improve their performance	4.61	.525
18	I always communicate with parents regarding improving school performance	4.23	.643
19	I use means of modern technology in improving school performance	4.44	.533
20	I analyze and use students' results and school data in planning for school improvement	4.39	.640
M2		4.3885	.43860

factor, closely followed by the involvement of parents (Statement 9), with the mean of 4.39. The almost identical results to the contribution of students (Statement 8: mean 4.38), supports the vital nature of the relationship between teachers, parents and students.

In contrast, Statements 3 and 5, pertaining to required facilities and resources on or the perception of difficult issues were greeted with ambivalence in general, with means of 3.13 and 3.51, respectively. Whilst outliers indicated individual issues within specific schools, the overall weakness of the response highlights the importance of teachers, parents and students. Whilst principals keenly felt the weight of responsibility for school improvement as indicated by the response to the first statement (mean: 3.92), the result for Statement 2, relating to their understanding of expectations regarding improvement (mean: 4.25) and Statement 4 about confidence in his/her skills set (mean: 4.05), there difference in the strength of the responses, emphasizes the perception and support for collaboration between the key stakeholders within each school community – teachers, parents and students.

Whilst it must be recognized that incumbent principals are unlikely to acknowledge that they are ill-equipped to lead and manage school improvement, their attitudes and perception for partnerships necessary for school improvement are important affirmation of the commitment and capacity of school principals to facilitate ongoing school improvement.

Table 2 summarizes the results relating to specific strategies implemented by post-basic school principals for school improvement and the overall strength of the responses, with means between Agree (4) and Strongly Agree (5), illustrates the range of practical methods and initiatives and reflect contemporary models of leadership and management. In keeping with the recognition of important relationships, Statement 16, with a mean of 4.48 demonstrates a strong link between the perceptions and actions of principals in terms of promoting understanding and involvement by key stakeholders. The use of technology, Statement 19: mean 4.44, was regarded as the second most important mechanism for facilitating improvement, demonstrating the widespread adoption of information and communication technology, as per Ministry of Education policy for an electronic system of management. Statement 18, *I always communicate with parents regarding improving school performance,* has the lowest mean of (4.23), followed by

Statement 13; however, if parents are actively involved as suggested by Statement 16, formal communication may not always be a high priority. Committees appointed to oversee the implementation of improvement programs was the second lowest response, but with a mean of 4.28. It is clear that collaboration and devotion of role and responsibilities is a characteristic of school leadership in Oman.

Responses to the open-ended question seeking clarification for specific school based initiatives revealed that principals in post-basic schools have felt empowered and able to lead and as such have taken steps to:

1. Implement programs for continuous professional development of teachers.
2. Motivate and encourage teachers to make various efforts and do their utmost to be actively involved in all aspects of school improvement.
3. Educate employees about the importance of quality in school performance.
4. Communicate with various local community organizations to engender support for school improvement initiatives.
5. Facilitate teachers' use of technology and modern methods of teaching.
6. Provide human and material resources which significantly contribute to improving school performance.

CONCLUSION

The preliminary findings of this study stress that school improvement is a "shared responsibility" and that principals are actively seeking to enhance the understanding and effectively utilize the broad contribution to achieve the collective goal. Nevertheless, school principals face a real challenge in terms of parental involvement in school improvement plans. Moreover, continuous professional development plans for teachers is a key components in maintaining and sustaining school success. Availability of human and financial resources is required as well. Finally, school improvement is an endless endeavor, and requires high quality teachers, effective principals and parental involvement. In addition, issues of workload and the autonomy of school principals are also issues for consideration. Further research on the relationship between leadership and school improvement is needed. In addition, the role that supervisors in school districts, together with teachers and parents, can play to improve schools in Oman warrants further investigation along with the identification of the specific nature of the main challenges for school improvement in Oman.

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