



Empowered or not? Principals' Understanding of Empowerment in the Context of College Administration

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Abstract

Principals are the leaders of the colleges and empowerment makes them effective leaders and head teachers. The study aims to examine college principals' understanding of empowerment to determine the nature of this concept associated with college administration. Phenomenological research approach was used to explore the phenomenon after the literature review. The sample of the study was delimited to twelve principals of the Government Associate colleges, Government Graduate colleges, and Govt. Associate/Graduate Colleges of Commerce in Sahiwal Division. A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data from the principals of each category of colleges who were purposively selected. The emergent themes revealed that the principals were less empowered; they were empowered 'theoretically', and they were empowered 'in papers' merely. It is suggested that the Government should empower the principals in a true letter and spirit so that they can work as 'fully empowered administrators' to run the colleges as per the policies and standards set by the higher education department for quality education.

1. Introduction

Empowerment stands for official power and official authority. It makes the principals keep their subordinates on a right track. It means to release power, knowledge, skills, and information rather than show power or authority to juniors (Wall, 2012). It enables the principals to take decisions independently and confidently to make the tasks done by the subordinates for the welfare of the college. Empowerment is interpreted differently by different people. It's necessary to put a striking definition of empowerment to apply it in various fields of life. It is a kind of self-help to work efficiently (Adams, 2003; Calisici & Kiral, 2022). It refers to users' involvement in services, self-help, and overall improvement. Empowerment makes the officials take good control of their organizational environment and achieve pre-planned aims efficiently (Akbasli & Dis, 2019; Saini, 2018). It is meant to become powerful' but in social work, it has become a very vast and comprehensive term.

The term empowerment has been coined in American community psychology and is associated with the social scientist Julian Rappaport (1981). The term empowerment means to add to the degree of autonomy and self-willpower in officials to empower them and to show their interests in a responsible and self-determined way which ultimately enables them to overcome their sense of powerlessness, and lack of power and to utilize their resources efficiently (Audiopedia, 2017; Calisici & Kiral, 2022). Empowerment is the ability of officers to take control of their organizational environment, use official powers, and complete organizational tasks. It is not only delegating responsibility and answerability for a specific job but also the authority and responsibility to make decisions linked with the assignments (Ahrari et al., 2021 & McGrath, 2007). There are various definitions of empowerment but no single universal definition is found, generally, it denotes an authority or autonomy given to the officers to run their organizations smoothly and to implement the organizational policies.

Principals are the leaders of colleges and leaders always lead from the front. Leaders without empowerment are helpless. Empowerment denotes an official power or delegation of power. With the help of empowerment, principals can influence their subordinates (Wall, 2012). Generally, empowerment is considered a show of power or authority but actually, it means to release power, knowledge, and information from seniors to juniors (Akbasli & Dis, 2019; McGrath, 2007). In this research, study principals mean the heads of the public sector colleges of Punjab, Pakistan, and principals' empowerment means the autonomy, legal power, or authority of the heads of the public sector colleges of Punjab, Pakistan

The assumption to start this research study was that the Higher Education Department (HED) empowered the principals in papers only because they cannot exercise their legal authority or

power due to different challenges such as political pressure, teaching and non-teaching staff pressure, external pressure, blackmailing, shortage of classrooms, insufficient funds, unnecessary delay in approving the proposals and recommendations of principals and many more which result in low-quality education in the colleges. The principals play a key role in improving the quality of education in colleges. They can give quality output and create a conducive environment only if they are empowered in a real sense. As mentioned above empowerment does not merely mean to show power but to release power, skill, knowledge, and information. So, the empowered principals can empower their staff too to have good coordination but if the principals themselves are not empowered then how can they empower their staff? In the same way, if their legal power or authority is challenged by the staff, then too, the end loser would be students, and quality education in the colleges will suffer.

It is the nature of a man that he wishes to buy and use quality products and quality services to avoid any difficulty or disturbance in his daily life because the man gets satisfied by quality products and quality services (Ahrari et al., 2021; Saini, 2014). Quality of services, quality of products, and quality of education are interlinked with quality management and quality management is the result of an empowered manager. If the manager is less empowered or not empowered then his organization cannot produce quality products or quality services. Similarly, the less empowered principals or head teachers cannot produce and maintain quality education, and naturally, people don't like substandard education for their children like the substandard products and services (Celik & Atik, 2020; Kiran, 2016). The more empowered management or educational institution is the more quality products or quality education will be produced.

Total Quality Management (TQM) is a term associated with the organization or institutions concerning the proper, effective and conducive organizational environment. The term TQM has been coined in the fifties and became a widespread term in the eighties. TQM is a demonstration of the organizational environment, culture, workplace relationships, attitude, cooperation, and coordination among the personnel to provide the best services and productions with zero flaws that satisfy their pre-planned aims and goals. The organizational culture and atmosphere need quality in all dimensions of the institution (Akbasli & Dis, 2019; Oakland, 2014). TQM is an approach by which management and employees can continuously produce quality products and services. The more empowerment is exercised the more the TQM is effective.

The total Quality Management approach also plays a vital role in educational settings to have quality products and services. It entails a collaborative, cooperative, and participatory approach and if it is applied in public sector colleges then definitely there will be quality outcomes and services. TQM cannot be effective without organizational empowerment. The principals of

public sector colleges are supposed to create an environment of total quality management. By exercising their powers and following the principles of TQM the principals of public sector colleges can lead and produce quality education. They are empowered by the government to apply the concept of TQM in the colleges for better management, and administration and ultimately to produce quality education.

The principals are the heads, educators, leaders, administrators, managers, and supervisors. They can only perform the above-mentioned roles and perform their responsibilities effectively if they are empowered in a true letter and spirit and their legal authority and powers are not challenged internally or externally. But the fact is that most principals complain of less empowerment or disempowerment by their department or challenges to their legal authority within and outside the staff and resultantly quality education is not produced in the public sector colleges (Kusumaningrum, 2018; Calisici & Kiral, 2022). These challenges and hurdles can be removed only by empowering the principals as much as possible to have quality education in public sector colleges. Without empowerment the principals are helpless and they cannot produce and maintain quality education.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The Purpose of this research study was to examine whether the principals were empowered or not and what is their understanding of being empowered or what is empowerment in their perspective. As the researchers were working in higher education institutions (HEIs) and had the experience of observing how much the principals and administrators were supposed to be empowered and how much they exercise their power to ensure their empowerment, researchers' personal experiences, and observations were the main motivation to choose this topic. The purpose of this research study was to examine and determine the nature and scope of the concept of empowerment in colleges experienced by the principals for having a broad understanding of the context of higher education in Pakistani colleges. It also aimed to recommend workable suggestions for principals to exercise their powers and for the prospective researchers for further research.

1.2 Research Questions

- What are principals' understanding of being empowered or empowerment in the context of college administration?
- How do principals perceive or experience empowerment for bringing change in a college education?

2. Methods

In this research study, phenomenology, an approach of qualitative research method was used to explore the phenomenon of empowerment. The main aim of the phenomenological approach

is to examine and explore the phenomenon through how they are understood by the participants in a specific situation. It is used to study the experiences from the viewpoints of the persons about a particular situation. The phenomenological research approach examines lived experiences and observations to have a deeper understanding of how people perceive particular experiences and observations (Flood, 2010). It helps us to better understand what people have experienced and how they perceive it. As this research study was about the phenomenon of empowerment, the phenomenological approach was a more suitable approach to examine this phenomenon than any other approach of qualitative research method.

The researchers were interested to explore the understanding and thinking of the principals of public sector colleges from their lived experiences related to their legal powers/empowerment or authority, whether they are empowered or not, what challenges they had to face in exercising their powers etc. (Dowling, & Cooney 2012). Phenomenology was the approach that could give a better depiction of the principals' understanding of the above-mentioned phenomenon.

2.1 Data Collection

All 749 principals of public sector colleges of Punjab were the population of this research study but the study was delimited to all the principals of the public sector colleges of Sahiwal division. There were 16 female and 18 male public sector colleges in the Sahiwal division. The sample size was 12 principals. The sample consisted of three male principals of Govt. Associate Colleges (boys), three female principals of Govt. Associate Colleges (women), three male principals of Govt. Associate Colleges (Commerce), (there was no women associate college of commerce), one male Principal of Govt. Graduate college (boys) (Commerce), one male principal of Govt. Graduate College (boys) and one female principal of Govt. Graduate College (women) purposively.

A purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data from the sample. The purposive sampling technique is a non-random sampling technique and the reason to use purposive sampling technique was to attain diverse and experienced viewpoints of the principals of different categories of colleges. Based on past experiences, the researchers assumed that some categories of principals might have a distinctive and important viewpoint on the phenomenon in question and these categories should be included in the sample (Robinson, 2014). Thus, purposive sampling was considered the most suitable approach to data collection for this research study.

3. Analysis of Data and Results

After collecting the data through semi-structured interviews, the researchers transcribed it, coded the data, and developed themes and sub-themes which helped the researchers to have a clear description of the participants' responses and experiences. The researchers developed core themes to examine the understanding of empowerment in the context of college administration and the following themes emerged:

3.1 Understanding of Empowerment

There are various types of empowerments such as employee empowerment, workforce empowerment, women empowerment, and teachers' empowerment. There is no single universal definition of empowerment; during the interviews, the researchers' very first question was "What is your understanding of empowerment in the context of college administration?". This question was asked to explore the principals' understanding of empowerment. In reply to this question, the principals defined "empowerment" in the context of college administration. According to them, empowerment is the delegation and decentralization to run the organizations successfully and to produce quality education. According to most principals, empowerment is just like an instrument/tool in the hands of principals to direct their staff in the desired direction. Participant 1 (P1) who was a principal of Govt. Associate College for boys and associate professor of Chemistry having a degree of M.Phil in Chemistry with 7 years of administrative experience described his views as follows.

It denotes the delegation or decentralization of powers to the principal level to run the college successfully. Mainly empowerment is of two types; the first one is the general administration which deals with the monitoring of academic activities like teaching and learning and the second one is concerned with the monitoring of financial activities. The principals feel less empowered in both of these categories.

While analyzing the data, the researchers came to know that empowerment doesn't mean merely the authority or powers of principals but it possesses the meaning of empowering teaching staff too. Concerning this situation, Participant 3 (P3) who was a principal in Govt. Associate College for women having 16 years of teaching and three years of administrative experience explained that.

Empowerment is not just to show authority and powers but it means to share powers with his staff too, empowerment in the context of college administration is not merely the authority and powers of principals but it is concerned with the powers of staff also.

While replying to a question, "What do you think is empowerment in the perspective of college administration?" most principals remarked that it was the process of delegation or decentralization of powers. In this situation, Participant 7 (P7), who was a principal in Govt. Associate College for boys and who was an assistant professor of English, possessing 14 years of teaching and 3 years of administrative experience, articulated his personal experiences:

Empowerment is the delegation or decentralization of powers from higher to lower levels. It is the process of decentralization of powers to lower-level management to run the organizations (colleges) efficiently.

Most of the principals were of the view that empowerment can be taken as a device or tool of principals to direct and mold their subordinate staff towards the desired direction. Another participant 10 (P10) who was a principal of Govt. Graduate College for boys and professor in Education, having qualification of PhD in Education and 21 years of teaching and 5 years of administrative experience reflected that.

Empowerment possesses much symbolic value. It is a symbol of power, it can be used like the “stick of a shepherd” which helps to direct his herd towards his already desired direction, a stick is a symbol of power for a shepherd, and without it he is powerless. Similarly, the principal without powers is helpless.

In view of the analysis of the transcripts, the participants’ understanding of empowerment can be categorized into the following themes:

3.2 Powers in ‘Papers’

Empowered principals play a key role in the smooth and proper functioning of public sector colleges. While exploring the research questions the researchers came to know that most of the principals feel less empowered and even, they cannot exercise their power freely due to many challenges and issues, and if they cannot exercise their legal powers, then how can they produce quality education? Most of the principals were of the view that they were merely theoretically empowered which means that they had powers in papers only.

Concerning the above-mentioned situation, Participant 1 (P1) who was a principal of Govt. Associate College for boys, having qualification of MPhil in Physics and had 25 years of teaching and 5 years of administrative experience, described that.

I feel dissatisfied with the authority and powers given by the department. We the principals had powers just in papers in other words we are merely theoretically empowered.

Almost all the principals agreed on the point that empowerment plays an important role in tackling different situations, removing undesirable behaviors, and upholding discipline in any institution. Most of the principals remarked that even the head of a family cannot run the home properly if his/her dependents have no fear of his/her powers then how can a principal can run the college without powers or authority in a “true letter and spirit”? Many principals expressed that empowerment is a tool in the hands of principals to mold their staff in the right direction. Referring to this situation another participant 12 (P12) who was a principal of Govt. Graduate College for women and Associate professor in zoology described her personal experiences:

Listen, you know even a shepherd is unable to keep his herd on the desired track without a stick, the stick is a symbol of power. Whenever he shows his stick to the herd or hit them even slightly, they run towards the track without any delay of time. So, empowerment for a principal is just like the “stick of a shepherd which enables the principal to run the college successfully and uphold quality education. But we have no stick and have powers in papers only.

The majority of the principals argued that they were not fully empowered to run the college and maintain quality education and they were empowered partially. Refereeing to this situation, a participant P4 who was a principal of Govt. Associate College for women and qualifying M.A. in Education and has 19 years of teaching and 4 years of administrative experience remarked that.

Neither I am disempowered nor I am fully empowered but I am partially empowered and how can a partially empowered principal produce quality education? The partially empowered principal will show partial results too.

The majority of the principals complained of not being empowered so to give immediate and on-the-spot punishment to the persons who are involved in malpractices, and irregularities, even to recruit the ministerial staff, CTIs, and construction/maintenance of classrooms They argued that they were merely playing the role of a postman and dispatch proposals /reports to high ups. Most of their proposals and reports become a victim of red tape or get rejected, these things dishearten the principals.

Most of the Principals described that they were financially less empowered too. They cannot utilize even the available funds for the welfare of the students and the institution independently. They have to go through a long procedural delay in utilizing the funds to provide the missing facilities in the colleges. There are many kinds of funds in colleges like a general fund, computer fund, welfare fund, library fund, electricity fund etc. A principal can only utilize these funds in their respective domains but they cannot utilize the amount of one head into the domain of another head. To do so they have to adopt the long process of re-appropriation of funds.

The view which emerged from most of the participants' interviews was that they were theoretically empowered or they had powers in papers. The principals have to face many challenges while exercising their little bit of power such as political pressure, staff pressure, departmental delays etc. Another participant P10 who was a principal of Govt. Graduate College for boys and professor in Education having 20 years of teaching and 6 years of administrative experience reflected that:

We the principal are merely theoretically empowered but in a real sense, we have a little bit of power. Theory validates its claim with the help of practical evidence, without practice it is nothing, similarly, if the principals are not empowered to exercise their powers, then these powers are useless.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

This research study is an endeavor of researchers to examine principals' understanding of empowerment in the context of college administration The researchers assumed that principals were empowered in papers only, they cannot exercise their powers practically, due to many challenges which affect quality education. Almost all the principals agreed on the point that empowerment is a sharing, participation, and delegation of powers from higher authorities to lower levels and for better administration and management it is necessary to authorize the principals and empower them in a real sense (Akbasli & Dis, 2019; Celik & Atik, 2020; Nawaz, 2013). As all the research study revolves around the personal experiences of the participants so the researchers applied the phenomenology approach of qualitative research which is an approach that examines and explains the personal experiences of the participants about a certain phenomenon.

To examine the phenomenon the researcher used a purposive sampling technique to collect data through a semi-structured interview. The purposive sampling technique is also

called the judgmental sampling technique, in which researchers select the members from the population relying on their judgment (Ahrari et al., 2021; Rai & Thapa, 2015). After the analysis of data, some of the main findings were that principals are less empowered or theoretically empowered, and they have to face many challenges.

Principals play the roles of managers and leaders in the colleges. They have to perform many administrative and academic duties simultaneously. To perform these duties, they must be empowered fully so that they can exercise their legal power and authority to influence the subordinate teaching and non-teaching staff. The researchers found that principals were only theoretically empowered or they had powers in papers merely, in this case, they cannot maintain quality education in colleges. Two out of 12 principals described during the interviews that empowerment is just like the “stick of a shepherd”, without a stick they cannot direct or mold them to their herd towards the desired direction. It means the stick is a symbol of power for the shepherd. Quite similarly, the principals cannot influence their staff without power or authority. So, to produce and maintain quality education in public sector colleges the government must empower the principals in true letter and spirit.

The research findings show that almost all the principals have a clear understanding of what empowerment is meant in the context of college administration. All the principals described it as a necessary tool to run the colleges successfully. All the principals had a unanimous viewpoint that empowerment is a process of decentralization of powers. Concerning college administration, it is the legal power or authority to run the college’s matters smoothly and to maintain a quality education.

The findings of the research study revealed that the researcher’s assumption that principals were less empowered or they had powers in papers only and they cannot exercise their powers due to many challenges which resulted in poor quality education is almost true. This research study proves that this phenomenon exists and the principals are really less empowered or theoretically empowered according to the data provided by the principals through semi-structured interviews. They had to face many challenges while exercising their legal power or authority. The principals cannot maintain quality education if their power is challenged. They had no power to give immediate and on-the-spot punishment to negligent and irresponsible employees. They didn’t have even the powers to transfer any of their subordinate officials. They didn’t have the courage even to mark the absence of an employee who is not present on the duty because of political pressure and lack of departmental support.

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