

# Principal Leadership Challenges in Schools and Colleges in Bangladesh: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** - Principal leadership being the single most important factor for school effectiveness and academic performance is a much talked about issue in the world perspective. But, in Bangladesh, the field is yet to be explored. In this article, a study was carried out to identify principal leadership challenges in schools and colleges in Bangladesh. A qualitative study represented by a case study revealed the leadership challenges principals in schools and colleges in Bangladesh are facing. Ten principals were selected for an interview to prepare this case study. The principals were selected on the merit of eight years' Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSC) and Higher Secondary School Certificate Examination (HSC) results from a total of 1226 combined schools and colleges in Bangladesh. Moreover, this was a part of a bigger study where two quantitative surveys were conducted. In addition to that, the author's personal experience working as a principal for last seven years in two renowned Public School and College gave an insight into this study. The findings of the study showed that principals in schools and colleges in Bangladesh have limited training, understanding and scope of practicing leadership. The challenges they face mostly emanated from the top-down authoritarian attitude and practice in educational administration that curved their leadership and pushed them to settle in management. In the national and global context, educational requirements have been changed. In the face of the growing demands, principals are fighting at both the end. On one hand, their leadership is not acknowledged. On the other hand, they are asked to fulfill the educational demands of the stakeholders. At this backdrop, principals' predicaments coupled with the traditional educational and administrative challenges cause education in Bangladesh, especially in schools and colleges, suffer.

**Key Words:** Principal, Principal leadership, Principal leadership challenges, Schools and Colleges in Bangladesh.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership of a principal is the single most important factor that influences the school effectiveness. It is his or her leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for learning, the level of teacher professionalism and morale, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become (Zame et al, 2008). Kotler (1996) argued that successful school improvement is 70-90 percent leadership and only 10-30 percent management. As the leader, the principal must understand the complexities of the school culture and be able to establish support which will work toward student achievement. In most of the schools in Bangladesh, leadership is seen as positional leadership; the

leadership style is based on the authority and power given by the position of principal. Principals are accountable to the authorities and to school communities by virtue of their position (Salahuddin, 2010).

Besides, the education system of Bangladesh is beset with numerous weaknesses and problems which have been identified by Pradhan (2016). These includes: lack of unity of the curriculum, qualification of teachers, school fee, infrastructure, teacher student ratio, enrollment and retention, method of teaching and evaluation and bureaucracy in education. But, for this particular discourse, the major challenges a principal encounter is the attitude. From Kudrat-i-Khuda to the latest Dr. Kabir Choudhury commission in 2010, and from Education Ministry as the decision-making authority down to the School Management Committee, everywhere it is seen that the idea of principal leadership is ignored. The general attitude is that principal is more of an administrator than a leader. As a result, principals are facing more challenges which are mainly due to attitudinal and then due to the growing demands of the stakeholders in the national and global context.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Principal leadership and principal leadership challenges are two very closely correlated issues. To understand principal leadership challenges, it is imperative to understand leadership of a principal. Actually, all efforts in this study have been directed towards understanding and uncovering leadership challenges of a principal in schools and colleges in Bangladesh. As such, as a part of a qualitative study, a case study was carried out to meet the core issue of this study, that is, principal leadership challenges in schools and colleges in Bangladesh. Moreover, the study is a part of a bigger study in which two surveys were conducted. The first survey was conducted on 1200 respondents of which 400 students, 400 parents and 400 teachers. The respondents were selected from 40 secondary and higher secondary schools situated all over Bangladesh. Out of the 40 schools and colleges, each five were selected from eight divisional districts of Bangladesh on the merit of eight years' SSC and HSC results. The second survey was conducted on those 400 teachers who participated in the first survey. The first survey was conducted on the transformational leadership model to find out principal leadership styles in secondary and higher secondary schools in Bangladesh. The second survey was conducted to justify the correlation between teachers' job satisfaction and principal

leadership style and, thereby, to strengthen the finding of the first survey. Ten principals out of forty combined schools and colleges were selected for these case study. These forty schools and colleges were selected on the merit of eight years' SSC and HSC results from a total of 1226 combined schools and colleges in Bangladesh. The ten principals along with their institutions were given pseudonyms. In addition, the forty selected schools and colleges along with the respondents of the two surveys helped collect the data for this case study. Principals were interviewed on a written questionnaire supplied to them beforehand. There were as many as thirteen questions. These questions and variables were mostly related to principal leadership challenges which the principals encounter as being administrative, academic or as a policy matter or from the respondents like, students, parents and teachers. Data collected were also cross-checked in an informal way while conducting the two surveys. Moreover, the author of this study being a serving principal put a cutting edge on the whole process.

### III. CASE STUDY: CHAIRMAN BOX

Mazharul Islam (pseudonym) is the founder principal of a Public School and College in a divisional district of North Bengal in Bangladesh. He has been serving as the principal for last one year. The school started its journey with 36 teachers, 31 staff and 1100 students.

In its second year the school has already bid farewell to two of its chairmen. Now the third chairman has joined. Today the principal has got an appointment to meet the chairman in his office. The chairman welcomed the principal very warmly. Over a cup of tea, he appreciated the principal for his excellent performance in last one year. The principal reminded the chairman that being the chairman he should visit the school at his convenient time. The chairman advised the principal that he should make a schedule for his visit talking with his staff officer.

The day before the visit, the principal reviewed his overall plan discussing with the key appointment holders. On the following day, the chairman was given a formal reception. As he got down from the staff car, a tender girl handed over a bouquet of flower to him. After the presentation, the chairman commented with utter surprise that how within a short span of time the principal could make it possible to raise the school. To him, it was really a colossal task. He was echoing the principal's words - teachers and staff recruitment, students' admission in class nursery to class seven, class room arrangement, collection of text books, teachers training, receiving parents and students on the very first day of the school with a formal assembly followed by a cultural program, presenting a policy guide approved by the governing body for the school before the school starts, and so on so forth. He also expressed his deep satisfaction as he knew that last year in Primary School Certificate Examination, in short, PECE the school made a golden feat in which 93 out of 93 students got A+. The chairman once again appreciated the

principal and his team of teachers and staff for everything they have achieved.

A social evening was arranged in the chairman's bungalow. Along with the local elites, the governing body members were also invited. One of the governing body members is Professor Ahmed (pseudonym). He is a retired person. Sixteen years have passed since he took his retirement from Bangla Department of a renowned college in North Bengal. He is also a renowned personality for being a connoisseur and writer, especially on Rabindranath Tagore. He is also a columnist on education matters in daily newspapers. The chairman knew about him. He took him by the hand and sat him beside. While the cultural program was in progress, their conversation shifted to the school. Professor Ahmed said that in his forty years of teaching experience, he never came across such a dynamic principal who has by one year or so wins the heart of the parents. He is a kind of principal who knows the art of leadership. He is a visionary principal. His team work is simply outstanding. His teachers and staff are very satisfied working with him. Moreover, the parents are very happy. He kept on saying, "He should remain here for couple of years so that the school gains a solid ground".

On the following day, an intelligence officer visited the principal. His two sons have been studying in class two and class four respectively. He explained that he came just to see the principal how he was in his office. As a parent the officer was very respectful to the principal. The officer gossiped for some time and shared a cup of tea with the principal. He took leave. The principal accompanied him onto the car to see him off. Before he left, he gave a piece of advice to the principal in saying, you have been discussed among the officers for being too much inclined to the parents. Immediate after his leave, the principal was called upon from the office of the chairman. The chairman in a cold voice proposed him the idea of the Chairman Box. He explained the very idea of the chairman box to the principal. Making some administrative query about the shape, size, placement of the box, the principal begged his leave from the chairman. On returning, he summoned the administrative officer and instructed him to fix a box the next day with the writing chairman box on it as desired by the chairman.

Next to next day morning, while approaching towards his office, the principal stopped momentarily and looked at the box. He felt something has entered into his territory. This is nothing but a trespass which will surely disarray his dreamland. Someone has come to challenge his authority. He pined for a second. He murmured in a soliloquy, a principal is next to none when his leadership is taken off.

### IV. DISCUSSION

Leadership of a principal is multidimensional. And so are the challenges of a principal. In the socio-cultural and political context of Bangladesh, the meaning of principal leadership and its challenges are different to that of Organization for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries.

Mulford (2008) highlighted the core issues the school leaders are challenged with; and, at the same time, it focused on some new thinking and development of school leadership. Criticizing the compartmental thinking, that is, the particularity of leadership issue, he rather focused on the full range of issues as school leaders encounter different stakeholders like, parents, students, staff, government authorities, local elites, and so on.

Zame et al. (2008) delineated leadership as a key commodity in twenty-first century school organizations. The paper clearly evidenced the leadership importance of a principal and its impact on school effectiveness. The objective of the study was to survey principals at primary and junior secondary schools in the Greater Accra region of Ghana to see their current status of effective leadership proficiencies. The sample size was selected 350 out of which 224 respondents participated in the survey. Total six questions about principals and principal leadership were served to the respondents. The basis of the research was that principals of the basic schools in Ghana lacked leadership development training resulted in lack of professional preparation in leadership. It so happened because in the name of quality education system, Ghana focused more on principals' management and administrative behaviors than leadership. The finding of the research indicated the leadership needs of principals in the Ghana education system. The finding was an eye-opener to the policy makers of the Ghana education system to focus more on principal leadership aspects to promote school effectiveness and academic success in primary and junior secondary schools in Ghana.

Smith & Holdaway (1995) in a research on the constraints on the effectiveness of schools and their principals explored that a barrier to the leadership function has been an overemphasis on the importance of the managerial function; despite the fact that the instructional leadership function in terms of school board policies and the School Act is the one we are accountable for, unfortunately the managerial role tends to take up the time.

Understanding principal leadership and its recognition as to put it into practice is a major setback in Bangladeshi context. In schools and colleges in Bangladesh, the prevailing culture is to regard a principal as an administrator or a manager. Principals as leaders is a far away idea that did not come into play to bring about a qualitative change in education in schools and colleges in Bangladesh. This has happened because the age-old educational administration is bureaucratic in nature which did not allow academic leadership to grow. The educational administration being top-down has become

counter-productive and posed a threat to the bottom-up system. It resulted in a gamut of activities tempered by an authoritarian attitude where even a field education officer in Bangladesh like, Thana Education Officer (TEO) is thought to be the boss of the principal. In this study, the symbolic presentation of "Chairman Box" is the symbolic representation of the whole educational administration functional in schools and colleges in Bangladesh. It is obvious that as the head of the institutions, principals are the leaders. But their leadership is not recognized. The top-down attitude prevailing in the educational administration compel principals to limit themselves within the scope of managers.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensuring quality education is a present day commitment. For last one decade, Bangladesh made a commendable progress in school level education. The yearly educational budget, investment in teachers' professional development training, lesser percent of dropout in primary education, higher percent of literacy, all these indicators tell of moving towards achieving a particular agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Principal leadership is the timely issue understanding and implementation of which would make the progress in education, especially in schools and colleges in Bangladesh, a leap forward.

To harvest quality education, principal leadership has to be given proper attention. Educational administration has to be made bottom-up instead of top-down. Whoever sitting at the top of the principal should work as a facilitator and it is none but the principals, the real change makers, who will bring quality changes in education in schools and colleges in Bangladesh.

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