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Perceptions of School Administrators on the Educational Leadership Training Programs in Oman

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate the perceptions of school administrators in the Sultanate of Oman on the leadership training programs offered by the Ministry of Education and Educational Regions.

A questionnaire was designed and distributed to 200 school administrators who attended two leadership training programs implemented jointly by the Ministry of Education and Educational Regions. SPSS and a descriptive analysis approach were used to analyze the collected data. The sample perceived the training programs to be useful and effective in developing their leadership skills. However, more professional training is needed in areas of problem-solving and strategic planning skills.

Keywords - School administrators, training programs, Sultanate of Oman.

Introduction

Facing global, regional and local changes which are taking place rapidly, schools need strong and effective leaders. Education reforms in Omani educational system and the rise of knowledge society have placed new responsibilities on and created demand for effective school administrators in the Sultanate of Oman. The daily operations of school services require effective and efficient school administrators. School leaders, in today's school environment, need to be well prepared and equipped with skills and knowledge to be effective and successful. This is the role of the school leaders' preparation programs.

The process of educational reform and restructuring of educational institutions will put more pressure on school administrators and on educational leaders to develop their skills and acquire relevant knowledge in order to carry out their responsibilities effectively and efficiently. Al Taweel (2001) mentioned that there is an urgent need in developing countries for school leaders who are characterized by good education and the appropriate configuration and the ability to take responsibility and moral depth and genuine sincerity and dedication in the exercise of the requirements of their leading roles.

According to Lashway (2003), by reputation, principal preparation programs are not highly effective. The survey of Public Agenda found that 69 percent of principals and 80 percent of superintendents believed that typical leadership programs "are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school district (Farkas and et al, 2001)".

In a study of professional development needs of secondary school principals, Foley (2001) found that the principals expressed the need for professional development in areas of conflict resolution and development of school-community partnerships. Out of 13 secondary school principals who were interviewed, approximately 40% indicated a need for additional training in method for empowering and supporting teachers in collaborative activities.

Reeves and Berry (2009) argue that it can no longer be expected of "a school administrator to know or understand or all of the complexity associated

with leading an educational organization upon completion of a university-based preparation programs in educational administration".

According to Wong (2004), "The changing context of education creates a need for a different type of school leader and also for more flexible forms of leadership preparation".

In his evaluation of programs for professional development of principals in the United States, Peterson (2002) found that there are many different approaches to training school leaders, but most of these programs are independent and little attention is given to coordinated, long-term learning.

Review of literature on principal preparation programs shows harsh criticism of these programs. Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr. stated that "study after study has shown that the training principals typically receive in university programs and from their own districts does not do nearly enough to prepare them for their roles as leaders of learning (Darling-Hammond and et al, 2008:3)". Studying knowledge and skills which new school principals perceived as important to their success, Petzko (2008) recommended that coursework offered in principals training programs must be linked and interrelated to practical problems.

School Principal training programs in the Sultanate of Oman

In 1998, starting with 17 model schools, the Ministry of Education (MoE) adopted and implemented Basic Education in Oman. Accordingly, the educational ladder is divided into two levels: Basic Education and Post-Basic Education. Basic Education covers a span of 10 years including two cycles. The first cycle lasts for four years and consists of grades 1-4; the second cycle lasts for 6 years and consists of grades 5-10. To be admitted to grade 1 of basic education, the child must have reached age 6 by the beginning of the academic year (MoE, 2001).

Post Basic Education covers a span of two years including grades 11 and 12. The first cohort of Basic Education graduates started Post-Basic Education in 2007.

In addition, recent educational reform initiatives have created significant need for school administrators training programs. Successful implementation of projects such as School Self-Management System, School Performance Development and Schools Management Program (a computing program aims to enhance the use of technology in communication between schools, MoE and patents), require training of school leaders to be able to assume their new responsibilities.

The Ministry of Education in Oman, considering such needs, established the Department of Training, which was later developed and renamed Department of Human Resources Development. The main responsibility of this department is to supervise the main and the regional training centers and develop plans to prepare and train school administrators. The MoE also initiated, in co-operation with Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), a degree program named Bachelor of School Administration. Admission to this program is limited to school administrators and assistant administrators. A diploma program in supervision for school supervisors is also offered at SQU. (MoE, 2004).

Statement of the problem

There is a need today more than ever for highly qualified well trained school leaders. Development of effective school principals training programs is a necessity to provide them with knowledge and skills. Preparing school principal for job has become an important issue for educational systems all around the world. This is simply because effective school principal is the key factors in school improvement and success. However, major questions to be asked in this regard are: how to ensure that the training program is "cost effective"? What is the impact on principal performance? Answers to these questions require the involvement of school principals themselves.

Some of the characteristics of effective training programs as identified by Peterson (2002) and Browne-Ferrigno (2003) include:-

1. A clear sense of mission and purpose;

2. curriculum coherence and alignment, including integrated sets of topics based on learning objectives;
3. linkages between university programs, certification program curricula, and professional development;
4. instructional strategies related to the nature of the material taught and the learner needs, including: experiential learning, new information technologies, small group work, simulation, videotapes, role-playing, and case study;
5. length and time structure: multi all-day and partial day sessions and multiple-session meetings over the year;
6. learning strategies that motivate through thinking, reflection, and analysis, with a strong component of coaching and feedback.

Recognizing the need to train school principals so that they can successfully carry out their duties and responsibilities, The Ministry of Education and Educational Regions in Oman launched a number of principalship training programs. However, as a number of research findings indicate, the execution of such training programs will not necessarily prepare principals for their job unless training needs and perceptions of school principals is taken into considerations. This paper is an attempt to investigate the perceptions of Omani school principals on their training programs.

Research questions:

This paper seeks the answers of school principals to the following questions:-

1. What skills that principal training programs have developed?
2. What other skills should be included in these training programs?
3. What suggestions that can help in the improvement of these training programs?

Research objectives:

1. Assess the quality of school principal training programs in Oman from principals' point of view.
2. Come up with suggestions that can help improve the quality of principals training program in Oman.
3. Raise awareness and bring attention to issues and training needs of school principals in the Sultanate of Oman.

Importance of the study:

The Ministry of Education in Oman have relied on training programs that can equip school principals with skills and knowledge needed for effective school management. However, it is significant to find out whether these programs need to be redesigned and how to be improved. The perceptions of school principals in this regard are important. This study can also be of importance to other researchers who have interest in issues of educational leaders' professional development.

Methodology

The aim of this research study is to examine perspectives of schools' administrators on training programs offered to them by the Ministry of Education training center and Educational Regions. For this purpose, descriptive method was used to answer research questions.

Population and sample

The population of this study consisted of (617) school principals who participated in two training programs implemented by Sultan Qaboos University in the second semester of 2008 and the second semester of 2009. A sample of 200 principals was randomly selected to take part in the study. A number of 200 questionnaires (32.4% of total 617) were distributed to the sample. 120 respondents completed and returned the questionnaire, showing 60% rate of return.

Data collection

For data collection purpose, the researchers developed and administered a questionnaire to the study sample. The questionnaire included two types of questions: closed and open-ended questions. The closed questions part consisted of 14 statements related to the usefulness of the training programs offered. These statements developed from the content of training programs offered in 2008/2009 by the Ministry of Education and Educational Regions. Each statement was related to one of the following skill domains:

1. Communication
2. Responsibility and accountability
3. Creativity
4. Administration and supervision of learning process.
5. Organizational change
6. School's vision development
7. Team work
8. Teachers' performance assessment.
9. Strategic planning
10. Analysis of educational processes
11. Organizational culture
12. Problem solving
13. Transformational leadership
14. System analysis

Respondents were asked to answer each statement by selecting one of five options: very high, high, average, low and very low.

In the open-ended questions, respondents were asked to suggest skills that the training program should include, and make recommendations for improvement of the programs.

A cover letter explaining the purpose and the importance of the study was sent with each questionnaire. The letter also assured the respondents that their responses will be treated confidentially and will be used for the research purpose only.

Data analysis

Collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Several tests were computed to identify the more adequate findings. The means and standard deviations were calculated. In addition, the percentages of frequencies were reported to identify the variance of each statement and determine any significant differences between the means of opinions of the sample.

Findings and discussions

Skills developed

As (table 1) below shows, the responses indicated that thirteen skills of the fourteen were rated high, with mean score between 3.70 and 4.10. Only one skill (Developed my administrative and supervisory skills on the teaching and learning processes) was rated average, with mean score of 3.33. These results illustrate that the training programs helped the trainees in developing knowledge and skills that are vital for their positions and important to the administrative practices in the schools.

Table (1): Means (M) and Standard Deviations (St. D.) of developed skills as perceived by respondents

Skills	M.	St. D
Communication with both school and local communities	4.02	.89
Importance of responsibility and accountability at the work	3.73	.88
Creative thinking in the management of school	3.92	.85
Supervision of teaching and learning processes	3.33	.96
Organizational skills	4.00	.82
Development and implementation of the school's vision	4.10	.87
Building and leading teams work.	3.97	.68

Teachers' performance assessment	3.97	.87
Strategic planning	3.66	.92
Supervision of educational projects	3.97	.89
Development of the organization culture	3.70	-83
Problem-solving	3.93	.83
Development of transformational leadership skill	3.73	.91
System analysis skills	3.98	.75
Total	3.86	.59

Skills needed

The respondents were also asked, in the open question, to identify the skills that they consider important and are needed but not included in the training programs and important in carrying out their responsibilities.

The results, as shown in table (2) below, explains that some skills are important for school administrators but are not included in the training program. From the respondents' perspectives, the training programs should focus on the development of skills such as: research methods, system analysis and design, schools management program, the development of critical thinking, planning, and strategic planning, evaluating the performance of teachers and deal with them, problem solving skills, and using of computer and electronics portal.

Table (2): Needed skills and frequencies

The needed skills	F	%
Using of computer and electronics portal	24	20
Evaluating the performance of teachers and deal with them	24	20
The development of critical thinking	25	21
Strategic planning	25	21
System Analysis and Design	30	25
School Management Program	27	22.5
Training in Research Methods	33	27.5

There are some skills that need to be included in the school principals training programs in Oman as identified by the principals themselves.

The use of technology in school administration has become extremely popular. Nowadays, computers are used in school administration. For example, Admission and registration, digital library, internet, record keeping and financial management are some of the areas in which computers can be used. With the introduction of an electronic Educational Portal in 2007, (an electronic communication system that enables quick transmission of information, ideas, experiences and views on various aspects of the educational process), it has become a requirement for principals to develop their computing skills. The Ministry of Education in Oman relies heavily on the portal to improve the efficiency of educational administration system in the country. Therefore, principal training program need to focus more on the development of school principals computer competencies so that they are able to use information and communications technology for all administrative purposes in schools. As Al Shabibi (2007) has indicated, the weaknesses in principals ability to use computers hinder the Ministry of Education efforts to expand the use of technology in education .

Suggestions to develop the principals training program

Respondents were asked to write suggestions in order to improve the training programs. These suggestions are listed in Table (3) below.

Table (3): Suggestions to improve the program and frequencies (F)

Suggestions	F	%
Suitable time and duration for the training programs	34	28.3
Use of expertise in the field of training for the implementation of the program	27	22.5
Have opportunity to see local and international experiences	26	21.7
Propose topics are related to the latest educational issues.	25	21
Training Follow-up impact.	24	20

The respondents suggested a number of recommendations which they consider valuable to improve the training programs. 28.3%, of sample see "choosing the right time for training in terms of timing and duration of the program" is important. Other suggestions included the use of expertise

in the field of training for the implementation of the program; provide opportunities to be exposed to local, regional and international experiences in school administration; address current issues and topics which are related to the field of educational leadership; and conduct scientific research on and evaluation impact of the school administrators training programs.

Researchers observe that the suggestions from perspectives of sample are significant. The respondents expressed their concern about time restrain which results in stress to complete the training assignments. The content of the program was noted to be of high load, and part of it was irrelevant to their needs. This raise the concern about the mismatch between the principals needs and the training programs materials. Another concern was related to the trainers. The respondents suggested that international dimension need to be added to the training programs. They emphasized the need to and importance of exchanging ideas and experiences with other in time of globalization. These concerns raise the worry about the program quality and the call for further investigation of the usefulness and impact of these training programs.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the perspectives of school administrators on the training programs offered by the Ministry of Education and Educational Regions. It reports the findings of a survey of school administrators who attended two training programs conducted in 2008/2009. The research participants were asked to identify skills they perceived to develop as a result of the training they received, the skills they think were neglected and provide suggestions and recommendations to improve the training programs. The results showed that school administrators programs in Sultanate of Oman are useful. However, there is a need to consider trainees perceptions and recommendations in further development of the training programs.

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برنامج تدريب القيادات التربوية في سلطنة عمان من وجهة نظر مديري المدارس

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الملخص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة وجهة نظر مديري المدارس في دور برامج تدريب القيادات التربوية التي تقدمها وزارة التربية والتعليم في سلطنة عمان في تطوير مهاراتهم القيادية. استخدم الباحثان استبانة لجمع البيانات اللازمة للدراسة؛ وذلك بتطبيقها على عينة مؤلفة من 200 مدير مدرسة من بين الذين شاركوا في هذه الدورات التدريبية. وللإجابة عن أسئلة الدراسة فقد حُسِبَت التكرارات والنسب المئوية لكل فقرة من فقرات الاستبانة. وأشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن الدورات التدريبية التي تنظمها الوزارة لمديري المدارس تسهم بشكل فعال في رفع مهاراتهم في قيادة المدرسة، وإلى أن هناك حاجة لمزيد من التدريب في مجالات حل المشكلات والتخطيط الاستراتيجي.