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Exploring School Principals' Lived Experiences of Total Quality Management Practices and Leadership Autonomy: A Phenomenological Study of Public and Private Schools in Karachi

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to dig into the reasons behind the waning trust in public school leadership in Karachi, especially when more parents are leaning towards private schools. Drawing inspiration from the Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy that Deming introduced in post-war Japan and successfully applied in its education system, this research looks at how TQM principles can be adapted to fit the educational context in Pakistan. We will be using a qualitative research design, conducting in-depth interviews with six school principals, three from public schools and three from private ones who have been carefully chosen based on their PhD qualifications in Educational Leadership. This method is designed to uncover rich, detailed insights into the principals' autonomy, their leadership styles and preferences, and how they perceive TQM indicators as drivers of school development. By analyzing the interview data thematically, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the leadership dynamics at play and create context-sensitive guidelines for improving schools throughout Karachi.

Keywords: Total Quality Management, School Leadership, Educational Performance Standards, Public and Private Schools, Continuous Improvement

Introduction

While quantitative studies offer solid proof of TQM's effectiveness, qualitative research plays a crucial role in revealing the contextual, cultural, and human factors that influence its application in educational settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Researchers have used interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observations to delve into how school leaders understand, embrace, and implement Deming's (1986) quality principles within their institutions. Notably, Bonstingl (2001) pointed out that TQM in education isn't just a technical process; it's a profound relational and philosophical commitment to ongoing improvement that needs to be viewed through the real-life experiences of educators and administrators. Qualitative research by Greenwood and Gaunt (1994) further showed that principals who adopted a transformational leadership style in line with TQM values were better equipped to nurture collaborative school cultures, minimize systemic inefficiencies, and build trust among stakeholders. In Pakistan, where public and private school leadership faces vastly different levels of autonomy and resource availability, qualitative methods are especially effective in capturing the subtle ways TQM principles are negotiated, resisted, or adapted by school leaders (Siddiqui, 2016). These interpretive insights are essential for crafting culturally responsive and practically relevant guidelines for enhancing leadership in schools.

Literature Review

Deming's approach to Total Quality Management goes beyond just improving operations; it dives deep into a rich, knowledge-driven system that weaves together the human, social, and psychological aspects of organizational life. This qualitative study is rooted in two of Deming's

core theories: the theory of knowledge and the theory of psychology, both of which focus on interpretation and the human experience. The theory of knowledge suggests that understanding within any organization is built through experience, reflection, and systemic thinking. This makes it particularly relevant when looking at how school principals perceive and implement quality leadership in their specific contexts. Meanwhile, the theory of psychology highlights that individuals and groups in an organization are influenced by their intrinsic motivations, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships factors that can't simply be quantified. In the realm of Pakistani educational institutions, which are vital parts of a larger society and mirror the values and aspirations of its people, these psychological and epistemological aspects take on even greater importance. Applying TQM in education, which includes both the quality of education and the quality within education, requires a nuanced understanding of how leaders manage social dynamics, institutional cultures, and community expectations. Thus, this qualitative framework offers a valuable interpretive lens to explore the real-life leadership experiences of school principals in light of Deming's TQM philosophy. Over the past few decades, Total Quality Management (TQM) has evolved from its industrial roots to become a hotly contested concept in educational settings all over the world.

However, TQM's conceptual foundation is still inseparably linked to the ideas of W. Edwards Deming, whose System of Profound Knowledge (SoPK) presents a complex, interrelated explanation of how organizations use human agency to learn, grow, and survive (Deming, 2018). The theory of knowledge and the theory of psychology, two of the system's four pillars, have a particularly qualitative quality. They are not just focused on numerical results but also on how people understand their surroundings, what motivates them internally, and how relationships, culture, and meaning influence institutional life. The outcome is a rich, interpretive landscape that requires careful academic attention when these pillars are applied to educational leadership research and the unique social and cultural realities of Pakistani schools are included. This assessment of the literature places the current qualitative investigation in that context. It combines studies on Deming's SoPK in educational settings, the psychological and epistemological aspects of quality leadership, the particular difficulties Pakistani school principals face, and the more general theoretical discussions around TQM in education. The objective is to trace the philosophical strands that give the current study its purpose and urgency, rather than just cataloguing what has been published. Deming's SoPK is not so much a technical toolbox as it is a philosophy of organizational life. The system incorporates four interconnected lenses appreciation for a system, knowledge about variation, theory of knowledge, and psychology because no single lens is adequate for comprehending the complexity of human organizations, as Deming (2018) himself argued in *The New Economics for Industry, Government, and Education*. These components come together to create what Mauro (1999) called a framework that tackles "both the behavioral and technical dimensions of leadership simultaneously" (p. 33). Deming argued that poorly understood systems, misaligned incentives, and leadership lacking the theoretical foundation to recognize and address complexity are the main causes of organizational failure rather than individual employees (Deming, 2018). This realization is both liberating and challenging when applied to education. Because it transfers accountability from specific educators or students to the institutions and cultures in which they function, it is freeing. It is challenging because it calls on educational leaders, particularly school administrators, to cultivate a level of systemic, reflective thinking that extends well beyond daily operations (Evans, 1996). The SoPK offers a "distinctive map of theory for people in all organizations to continually improve, with the aim for everybody to win" a vision that resonates deeply in the context of schools, where the stakes of quality include nothing less than the futures

of children and communities according to the Deming Institute (2023), which has reaffirmed this point in modern terms.

Methodology

This study took a qualitative approach to dive into the real-life experiences of school principals as they applied Total Quality Management (TQM) principles in their schools in Karachi. Drawing on Deming's theories about knowledge and psychology, we opted for a qualitative design because it allows us to capture the rich, detailed, and context-specific insights into leadership practices that numbers alone just can't convey (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six school principals, three from public schools and three from private ones who were chosen through purposive sampling based on their PhD degrees in Educational Leadership. This method was ideal because it enabled us to select participants who had valuable insights and extensive professional experience, making them well-equipped to discuss TQM implementation and leadership autonomy (Patton, 2015). Each interview was recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed word-for-word, and then analyzed thematically using the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This structured analysis helped us uncover recurring themes, patterns, and differences in how principals viewed TQM practices in both public and private school environments, ultimately enriching the overall findings of the broader quantitative study.

Results

The thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with six school principals three from public schools and three from private schools in Karachi uncovered four key themes that shed light on the intricate and context-specific nature of implementing Total Quality Management (TQM) in educational leadership. The first theme, Conceptual Understanding of TQM, highlighted a significant difference between the principals of public and private schools in how they grasp and interpret Deming's TQM philosophy. Private school principals showcased a deep and comprehensive understanding of TQM as a systemic, knowledge-driven approach to leadership, often emphasizing the links between continuous improvement, stakeholder engagement, and the culture of their institutions. In contrast, public school principals tended to have a more fragmented and limited view of TQM, frequently confusing quality management with mere bureaucratic compliance instead of seeing it as a pathway to real institutional change.

Discussion

The four themes emerging from this qualitative study invite rich and layered discussion in relation to existing scholarship on TQM, educational leadership, and institutional quality in developing country contexts. The pronounced divergence and Contrasting Perspective in principals' conceptual understanding of TQM between public and private schools, identified as the first major theme, reflects a fundamental epistemological gap that extends well beyond mere technical knowledge of quality management procedures. As Greenwood and Gaunt (1994) observed, genuine TQM transformation in educational institutions requires leaders to internalize quality as a deeply held philosophical commitment rather than an externally imposed administrative requirement. The tendency of public school principals to equate quality management with regulatory compliance rather than continuous institutional improvement suggests that TQM has been superficially introduced into Pakistan's public education discourse without the accompanying philosophical reorientation that Deming's (1986) knowledge-based system demands. This finding resonates with Siddiqui's (2016) broader critique of educational reform efforts in Pakistan, which have historically prioritized structural and regulatory changes over the cultivation of genuine quality cultures within schools.

The second theme around leadership autonomy and decision-making highlights a major structural hurdle to implementing Total Quality Management (TQM) in public schools in Karachi. Public school principals have shared their experiences of working within rigid, centrally controlled administrative systems, which starkly contrasts with what Deming's optimization theory suggests is essential for effective quality management. According to Deming (1986), leaders need the ability to make responsive, systems-oriented decisions based on real-time data and their professional judgment. This observation echoes the findings of Murgatroyd and Morgan (1993), who pointed out that TQM can't be effectively put into practice in educational settings where principals do not have the authority to adapt quality principles to fit their specific contexts. In contrast, private school principals reported having significant freedom in making decisions about curriculum, staffing, and resource management. This difference highlights how governance structures in institutions can either facilitate or hinder the practical application of TQM leadership philosophies, ultimately impacting school quality and the trust parents place in these institutions.

The psychological and cultural aspects highlighted in the third theme might just be the most compelling findings of this qualitative study, especially as they relate directly to Deming's psychological theory. Deming (1986) always stressed that people are the most vital asset in any quality management system, and that leaders have a crucial role in fostering the psychological conditions of safety, recognition, intrinsic motivation, and collaborative trust. These elements allow individuals to contribute their best to improving institutions. The observation that private school principals are more deliberate and organized in nurturing these psychological conditions among their teachers, while public school principals encounter significant structural challenges, indicates that the quality divide between public and private schools in Karachi is as much about psychological and cultural factors as it is about material or administrative issues. This finding builds on Bonstingl's (2001) assertion that fear-driven and punitive management cultures clash with TQM values, showing how broader socioeconomic and institutional factors like chronic underfunding, low teacher pay, and lack of professional recognition create and sustain psychologically disempowering school environments that resist meaningful quality change.

The fourth theme highlights TQM as a process of building knowledge, which is rooted in Deming's theory of knowledge. This perspective provides a rich framework for grasping the reflective and experiential aspects of quality leadership. Interestingly, the observation that private school principals are more engaged in reflective practices, peer learning, and making decisions based on evidence indicates that the idea of knowledge construction defined by Deming as continuous learning from experiences and feedback is more ingrained in the professional culture of private school leadership in Karachi. This aligns with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) broader insight that organizational learning and quality improvement are closely linked processes, both relying on institutional cultures that prioritize inquiry, reflection, and the strategic use of knowledge to inform practices. On the other hand, the limited access to professional development and knowledge-sharing opportunities faced by public school principals highlights a significant systemic gap that educational authorities need to tackle urgently. Without ongoing investment in the professional knowledge of school leaders, the transformation of TQM in Pakistan's public school sector will likely remain a distant goal rather than a reality.

Conclusion

The qualitative insights from this study provide a rich and human-centered perspective on how school principals in Karachi's public and private secondary schools experience, interpret, and implement Total Quality Management (TQM) principles. Rooted in Deming's theories of knowledge and psychology, the findings highlight that the educational quality gap between

public and private schools isn't just about differences in resources. Instead, it's significantly influenced by varying leadership philosophies, institutional cultures, professional autonomy, and the psychological engagement with quality improvement efforts. The experiences of public school principals reveal a challenging reality, marked by limited autonomy, scarce professional development opportunities, and work environments that can feel disempowering. These factors create significant structural and cultural hurdles that hinder effective TQM implementation in Pakistan's public education system. To address these issues, it's crucial to empower public school principals with more institutional autonomy, allowing them to make quality management decisions that are sensitive to their specific contexts. Additionally, establishing structured mentorship and professional learning communities can foster the reflective, knowledge-driven practices that Deming advocated for. Furthermore, educational authorities need to prioritize the psychological well-being and professional recognition of public school teachers and leaders as a foundational step toward any meaningful TQM transformation. This study contributes uniquely to the qualitative literature on TQM in education by amplifying the voices and experiences of school leaders in a largely overlooked postcolonial urban setting, urging a culturally responsive rethinking of quality management frameworks that truly respects the complex human realities of educational leadership in Pakistan.

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