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## Reconceptualizing School Leadership Development: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Master Trainers

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### ABSTRACT

*School leadership development programmes (SLDP) have commenced as a critical phenomenon in refining and redefining institutional effectiveness and educational quality. However, lived realities of leadership development programs require to be more focused to underline. This study reconceptualizes school leadership development via a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of master trainers (MTs). By exploring the reflections, challenges, perceptions and cope-up strategies of MTs; the study exposes deeper insights into how leadership development is constituted in real-world contexts. The sample based on criterion purposive sampling (14 MTs) having direct experience of SLDP were selected. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were driven after acquiring prior consent of participants. The self-developed instrument was employed and validated from five experts and a Mock interview practice was conducted. The data were collected personally and by employing thematic analysis themes was generated by the researcher. The findings of the study explicated that SLDP is an essential step in leadership development of school heads and advocate that organized training programme such as SLDP is crucial for school heads. The role of MTs in SLDP is a driving seat and inseparable in making SLDP successful. The study recommended that MTs requires to be well-trained meritoriously selected experienced to get more efficacious results in future.*

**Keywords:** School Leadership Development Programme, Master Trainers, Skill, Leadership, Reconceptualizing. Phenomenology

### Introduction

In the landscape of school leadership development in schools the trainers' professional development, such as teaching skills and knowledge are considered crucible and multifaceted functions (Su & Wang, 2022). Learning is the task of trainers' methodology to foster group members to confront and reach at the solution especially in achieving the cognitive and behavioral objectives (Zulfqar et al., 2021). Consequently, effective master trainers are essential for effective leadership skill transfer (Lucas, 2024).

Therefore, the context-specific facet of the study deals with the actualities and realities of MTs' role in leadership skill transfer i.e. previously less researched area. The study addressed the gap by examining the lived experiences of master trainers (MTs) in School leadership Development Programmes (SLDP), who acted as key position holders in delivering SLDP via a phenomenological lens. The study reconceptualizes how these MTs experience, perceive, deduce, and enact their role in SLDP practices.

Recognition of organized mode of training for aspirant and already performing practicing school leaders with reference to improved effectiveness in school practices has been slower. This delinquent slackness is not only prevailed in developing but also in developed countries (Bush &

Jackson, 2002). The conduct of SLDP is world-wide under the sun as nations are investing substantial amounts in SLDP by transforming and garnering better leaders to get more efficacious school organizations (Bush, 2009).

The plinth of School Leadership Development Programme (SLDP) was initiated by School Education Department, Government of the Punjab with collaboration of QAED, Punjab and British Council to improve the leadership practices of school-heads across Punjab in public sector schools. The SLDP was incorporated with soft skills and technical skills encompassed to augment and ripen knowledge, skills and attitudinal developmental areas of school headship. The particulars of the two genres i.e. Soft Skills and Technical Skills were as follows:

- Soft Skills: entails effective leadership skills, effective presentation skills, efficacious communication skills, social cohesiveness, motivational skills, and improved change behavior
- Technical Skills: entails official and job description, departmental laws and rules, professional liabilities, awareness of educational leadership, administration and management i.e. based on Training Need Analysis (TNA) (qaed.edu.pk).

The role of master trainers (MTs) in this endeavor of SLDP is of great importance as an arbitrator and intermediary role to transmit the entire pursuit to the school leadership. The MTs of SLDP belongs to School Education Department (SED) having school headship background as well as experience of school leaders. The SLDP endeavor hired the school leaders and Subject Specialist (SS) or Senior Subject Specialist (SSS) rendered their duties as MTs. Their reflections and experiences about the initiative and endeavor of SLDP were of greater importance to get an insight about the future orientation of SLDP drive. It is worth noted and pressing need of time to bring this aspect of MTs into limelight as this aspect is overlooked and scarcity of literature was found in this dimension of MTs. The study fulfilled this gap and provided an orientation in this native and particular context as the success of any training depends tremendously on the positive role of MTs.

MTs are described as the persons come up with relevant material in training and caters institution's introduction, core concepts, knowledge about essentialities and also succor in different motivational activities to improve the leadership and professional skills of the trainees. The skills of trainers' substantially matters because the lacking of skills, experience and expertise of trainers will lead towards disastrous and ineffective training (Hasib & Azka, 2020). The MTs requires to be recruited having incentives because the MTs taught the class contains variation while it was not desirable (Hahn et al., 2002).

SLDP ensured the schools as 'learning' or 'leadful' schools because training affirmed the escalation of headship capacity (Memon, 2003). Therefore, as a result study accelerated the effort to minimize the literature gap and projected the pivotal role of MTs' reflections and understanding as direct experience leads towards efficacious and effective delivery of SLDP implementations. The SLDP is recognized as pivotal for sustaining the school efficacy (Walker, Hallinger, & Qian, 2007).

The logic behind the phenomenological transcendental exploration was to adopt and adapt the changing scenario under the sun. The paramount position of MTs in SLDP is prerequisite to enrich the domain with effective delivery of mentorship of MTs in SLDP. To accomplish the endeavor of SLDP specific and exclusive content in the form of modules were developed to grapple the knowledge, skills and attitudinal development of SLDP i.e. delivered by the MTs. Therefore the study wrapped up the "effectiveness" of MTs as the peculiarity in which something is prosperous and successful in generating and creating a predicted success and outcomes. The MTs as a nucleus of the SLDP endeavor transmits the entire pursuit with triumph for future orientation.

**Figure 1**  
**The Bridge Role of Master Trainers in SLDP (Source: Author)**

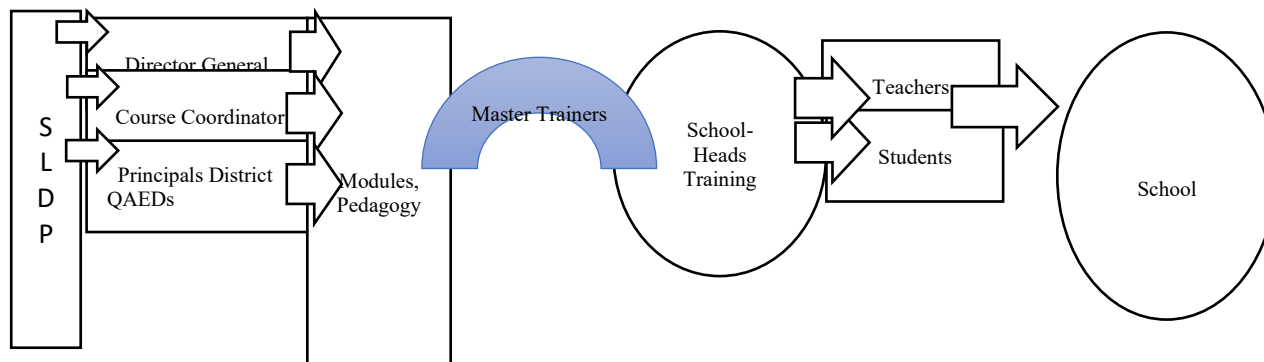


Figure 1 highlights the bridge and channelized role of MTs to impart, deliver and transmit the entire training process to the participants. The Phenomenological inquiry examined the absolute lived experiences of MTs in operational practices of SLDP for prospect implementation and orientations. The exclusive role responsibility of MTs in rendering duties covers as a capsule of the entire training deliverance. Rizvi (2008) enunciated that trainings add betterment in school organizations.

#### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To explore the lived experiences of Master Trainers (MTs) in School Leadership Development Program (SLDP).
2. To investigate the challenges and cope-up strategies experienced by Master Trainers in School Leadership Development Programme (SLDP)

#### **Research Methodology**

Researcher operated Husserl's phenomenological transcendental approach that functions via "consciousness" explicates in words reality denotes real source of consciousness and 'lived experience' of the individuals (Koch, 1995). Hereby the exploration encompassed the essence of lived experiences with interpretive research nature recognizes the phenomenon with the lens of the participants (McMillian, 2004).

The population of the study comprised 383 Master Trainers (MTs) across 36 districts of Punjab. The sample consisted of 14 MTs (7 males and 7 females), selected through criterion sampling i.e. a type of purposive sampling. The selection was grounded on the geographical distribution of Punjab, ensuring representation from central, southern, and northern regions of Punjab. Specifically, the sampled districts included: **(a)** Central Punjab—Kasur, Jhang, and Gujranwala; **(b)** Southern Punjab—Multan and Bahawalpur; and **(c)** Northern Punjab—Jhelum and Rawalpindi.

The criterion sampling was used because the participants meet the predefined criteria i.e. participant's experience with the phenomenon under study with a view of shared experience, but vary in characteristics and in individual experience.

#### **Research Instruments**

The researcher steered the semi-structured self-developed in-depth interview protocol centered on two segments i.e. the first fragment was encompassed the demographics of the participants while the second fragment capsuled the study relevant queries. The questions also encompassed the probing questions to explore the phenomenon profoundly. Such as the lived experiences of MTs in SLDP, inquiring their personal reflections, notable experiences, and professional insights

while delivering the SLDP, including encountered challenges and cope-up strategies in SLDP effectively.

The validation of the instruments was conducted from five experts including two faculty members of IER, University of the Punjab and a mock interview practice was also ensured. The research ethics were followed in the entire research inquiry and scheduled prior participants' consents were secured. The observance of confidentiality and anonymity was sustained across the research ensuring research trustworthiness.

**Data Collection**

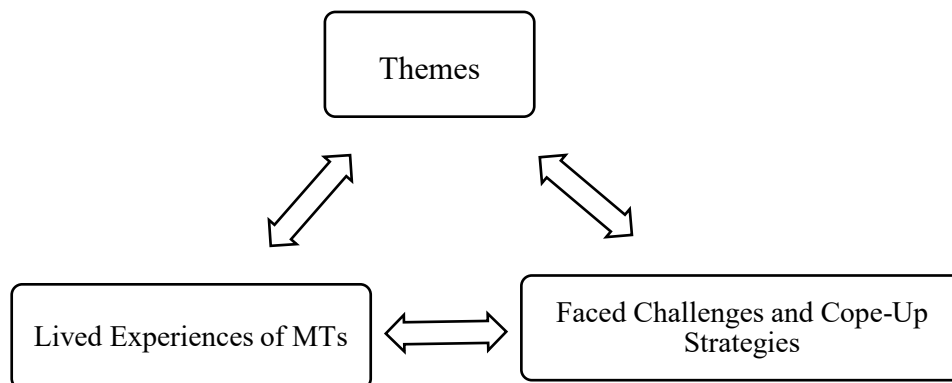
The context of SLDP was kept in view while collecting the data with reference to SLDP practices. The collected data was analyzed employing the steps of thematic analysis as described by Creswell; first the data was organized and prepared for transcribing interviews, sorting and arranging data, secondly, the data was read through in order to make general sense of meaning, thirdly, coding was begun in which segment of information was labeled. Fourthly, categories were generated in order to generate themes i.e. grouping codes into broader themes that represent the themes/descriptions. Finally, interpretations of themes were made and meanings were generated i.e. findings (Creswell, 2013). This data analysis procedure ensured trustworthiness of the study findings through the rigorous procedure. The procedure of trustworthiness increased the evidence of accuracy of information in reporting.

**Findings/Themes**

Following are the findings or essence of the data collected from the lived experiences of MTs in SLDP while transmitting the training as a key component.

**Figure 2**

**Essence from the Data Analysis of Master Trainers (Source Author)**



Findings revealed in the Figure 2 shown in terms of objectives as follows:

**Objective 1:** To explore the lived experiences of Master Trainers (MTs) in SLDP

**Theme: Lived Experiences of Master Trainers**

The theme highlights the personal and professional experiences of MTs while delivering the course of SLDP. It encompassed their high enthusiastic level for participating in the SLDP. The all seven MTs uttered that they work for cognitive and emotional engagement during SLDP sessions. MTs urge SLDP as an essential and efficacious stride for improved leadership practices of School Heads (SHs). They implicitly anticipated the key role of MTs in SLDP from theoretical knowledge into actionable leadership practices. MTs believe that SLDP is an integral part of professional development through which SHs gain better understanding of leadership concepts, improve their decision-making skills, and encourage more teamwork in managing schools.

They reflected on notable incidents and experiences that shaped their mindset and horn their expertise. MTs talked about how lived experience of SLDP sharpen their sense of examining

aspects about how the mode of delivering the SLDP contributes to their own professional growth as well as of SHs. By highlighting MTs' lived experiences, this theme provides a rich understanding of the human and experiential dimensions of SLDP in the leadership development context. One of the MTs enunciated that *"I recognize that the SLDP has greatly enhanced the leadership abilities of mine and my trainees"*. Even MTs as a team while getting training as "MTs" noted and enunciated an improved capacity to inspire and motivate their trainees, handle conflicts efficiently, and drive strategic changes in their practice districts making them more proactive and creative in tackling challenges. The administrator views the SLDP as an ongoing development process, continuously refined and improved through feedback from both participants and master trainers.

**Objective 2:** To investigate the challenges and cope-up strategies experienced by Master Trainers in SLDP

### **Theme: Faced Challenges and Cope-Up Strategies of MTs in SLDP**

This theme explores the faced challenges, difficulties and adopted strategies of MTs in transferring leadership competencies to SHs. The theme also explores the cope up strategies they manipulate to overcome these challenges. Its unexplored lack of resources at all levels of SLDP primarily organizational lodging and accommodation with minimal resources even in intense and extreme weather. Secondly, the trainees' engrossed engagement and resistance was the issue that arises because of inexpertise of the MTs. As Four MTs openly questioned about inexpertise of MTs while giving examples; one extended that *"It was embarrassing as some MTs were unable to fulfill the requirements of trainees while inducting examples about the different content aspects in the modules as foreign elements. But mostly trainees blamed that the giving examples are not pertinent in our cultural and national context labeling "Alien Examples" with zero implementation"*. Thirdly, MTs brought into limelight the biased selection of MTs based on ineligibility as MTs. One of the MTs uttered that *"Some of the MTs while working in collaboration found as ineligible to fulfill the criteria of being MT, just repetition of the modules and passing time"* stressing merit-based recruitment of MTs.

MTs expressed grave concerns about some of the modules declaring ineffective in meeting the criteria and practical needs of SHs. One MT said, *"It was hard to engage the trainees to connect with real life challenges faced by the SHs"*. The reflections showed that SLDP provides a structured framework, yet MTs bumped into gaps between the recommended content and the contextual realities of school leadership. This deficiency required MTs to adjust or supplement the modules during SLDP sessions. MTs also emphasize the importance of practical exercises and interactive sessions that allow participants to apply the concepts learned but iterate the need of focus discussion. They also point out that some of the MTs only time-pass while indulging superfluous discussions. They appreciate the modules on conflict resolution, team management, and strategic planning but would like to see more focus on emerging issues such as leadership ground realities and SHs empowerment related issues. Furthermore, logistical issues such as limited resources, inadequate training facilities, and futile wastage of efforts need to be improved with provision of facilitation and improved infrastructure for smooth execution of SLDP. MTs also emphasize the need for comprehensive modules and content delivery in national, philosophical and ideological context because the school is a small society and the crust of SLDP is to improve its operational practices.

### **Cope-Up Strategies**

The MTs also manipulated cope up strategies to maintain training effectiveness. MTs manipulated their own expertise and it depends upon the eloquence of each individual fulfilling

the duty of MT. One of the MTs iterated that *“It was the fact that the SLDP modules put forwarded nonnative examples for clarity but somehow the trainees were skeptical’ to tackle the situation MTs inducted self-generated examples in national context’ that created grotesque situation at the moment”*. MTs manipulated their self-eloquence and traits to win the game and to a certain extent the eloquent MTs got survived yet some got really flopped.

The cope-up strategies employed by MTs focuses on experiential and interactive procedures such as case-studies, discussions and problem-solving activities to make learning impactful. They developed supportive relationships building, encouraging trainees, and creating a reflective learning environment. Furthermore, MTs constantly regulate their facilitation techniques established on real-time feedback and classroom dynamics. MTs pronounced their strategies were flexible and apt rather than strictly controlled. One MT enunciated, *“We don’t just follow the modules; we tune it in accordance with the requirements of the SHs sitting there.”* Another MT underlined the value of collaboration and interaction, uttering, *“I try my best to involve trainees via discussion and real-life examples, because leadership is not something to teach through lectures merely.”*

MTs also brought into limelight the relational aspect of their position and work. As one MT uttered that, *“Empathy is an imperative; because trainees feel comfortable only then, they share their real challenges”*. By focusing on SLDP program it emerges how MTs systematically execute, organize and refine the SLDP to maximize its impact on school leadership development.

### **Discussion**

The study ensures that MTs remain at the forefront of School Leadership Development Programme (SLDP) ultimately benefiting the school heads and the overall effectiveness of the SLDP. The findings of this study provide significant insights into the lived experiences of MTs in implementing the SLDP, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of leadership training in practice. Hence, leadership development is a complex process (Avalos, 2011). The themes reveal that MTs do not function merely as facilitators of predefined content; rather, they actively reinterpret and adapt training processes to align with the contextual realities of school heads. Consistent with contemporary perspectives on professional development, the study underscores the importance of experiential and interactive learning approaches, as MTs emphasized dialogue, real-life problem solving, and reflective engagement over traditional lecture-based methods. At the same time, the findings draw attention to notable limitations within the training modules, which were perceived by participants as, at times, insufficiently relevant or disconnected from practical challenges in school settings. This gap necessitated adaptive strategies, reinforcing the role of MTs as reflective practitioners who continuously modify their approaches in response to participant needs and situational demands. Furthermore, the relational dimension of training emerged as a critical factor, with MTs highlighting trust-building and open communication as essential for meaningful leadership development. Overall, the study contributes to the reconceptualization of school leadership training by positioning MTs as active agents of transformation, whose practices are shaped by experience, reflection, and contextual responsiveness rather than rigid adherence to standardized frameworks.

The role of MTs was declared and asserted as an integral and pivotal as of a bridge to transmit the entire pursuit of SLDP to SHs. While, comparing and contrasting the perspectives of MTs study gain a comprehensive comprehension of the program's dynamics. The participants’ unfolded novel horizon in a manner that played its key role in filling the research gap in this orientation because this field is lacking in attention and not much work has been initiated in this regard. In a nutshell the improved leadership practices are covered in SLDP and this striking initiative carved its niche in revamping, improving and refining the school leadership practices.

It is explicated that continuous conduct of SLDP for learning and improvement of SHs is vital for application of policies (Rowland, 2017).

The role of MTs is an important segment because the entire pursuit is geared through the MTs as a bridge. The role of MTs is central in SLDP endeavor and certain loops were identified and solutions were highlighted to get fullest results from the conduct of SLDP and get command in transferring the training without wastage.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell the study concludes that extensive effectiveness of SLDP emerged vehemently on the expertise of MTs to improve leadership practices at all three levels. The continuity of SLDP was demanded because forgetting is a law of nature and to revive and renew the learning repeated exposures is necessary. This intensively depends on the expertise of MTs as the pivotal feature requires proper training to get best results. MTs' role is the backbone of SLDP as MTs designs the learning environment engages the trainees effectively and maintains environment of growth. The logistic facilitation is prerequisite for smooth conduct of SLDP and accelerating learning in future to get fullest resultant results. Thus, it is required to get a critical outlook on SLDP training programs and reorganize and restructured on the bases of evidence to flourish in future as put forwarded by this study. It is prerequisite to authenticate the findings through implications in order to earn maximum efficacy and to avoid previous omissions and errors in the best interest of the School Education Department and nation. The future wastage of resources and exertions can be avoided to get fullest possible effectiveness of SLDP in future. The study filled in the gap peculiar to the native context and highlights the organization of SLDP initiative in future for provident role of MTs. MTs at the forefront standing of SLDP requires to be updated with cutting-edge techniques, trends and advanced pedagogy to get resultant SLDPs. This study reconceptualizes school leadership development by highlighting the lived experiences of MTs. It demonstrates that leadership development is not merely a structured program but a complex, adaptive, and transformative process. By incorporating experiential insights, the study offers a more holistic understanding of leadership development and provides valuable guidance for future research and practice.

### **Recommendations**

In the light of findings and conclusions the study recommended that:

1. The evidence from the study reflects that in the next preparatory programme the skills of MTs require revisiting in terms of proper selection, grooming and training in order to enhance the expertise in transmitting training.
2. Proper logistic facilitation is required.
3. The modules need to reflect cultural, philosophical and national aspect in content as well as in examples.

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