The Impact of Empowering Principals on Students' Performance in the Final Exams – An Educational Perspective

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Abstract— *In addition to classroom management, school management plays a vital role in the success or failure of schools (as establishments or educational firms) and students' performance in general. This paper discusses several issues that were put under seven different subtitles starting with "The Transformations of Principals Roles in Iraq" and ending with "Recommendations" for further studies or research in this regard. It (the paper) focusses on the importance of empowering principals and school leaders through providing them with more freedom in decision making. Also, the paper pinpoints how much control we need to have on this freedom. Some of the roles played by principals, in addition to the required qualities, skills and capacities that school principals need to have or acquire if they want to run their buildings (schools) in an effective and an influential way will be tackled in the fourth part (issue) of the paper. These roles, skills and capacities will be highlighted in light of their impact on students' performance in classrooms and in the results of the end of year exams. The questionnaire part of the paper describes the results of the questionnaire (in which a limited number of school leaders participated) and their analysis. The last two parts of the paper describe the challenges that accompanied writing this paper like: the unavailability of resources as it was a bit hard to find resources tackling the issue of principalship and leadership in schools in our libraries, therefore, most of the paper was written according to the American and Australian literature in this field. Also, not many principals agreed to participate in the questionnaire because they thought that it contains an implicit criticism to the current educational system that's why I kept the identity of the participants unknown.*

Keywords— *Empowering principals, student, performance, final exams, an educational Perspective.*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a fact beyond any dispute that any successful establishment requires a wise and a quality leadership. This kind of leadership is represented by principals and principal assistants in educational establishments. This paper focuses on ways of making principals more effective through highlighting the vital roles of principals inside their school buildings. The paper shows the importance of granting principals and assistant principals with a controlled amount of freedom in decision making as well as some other issues related to how to enhance students' performance in the end of year exams.

Autonomy: the quality or state of being self-governing and independent in the process of decision making.

School districts: the educational directorates in our cities.

Superintendents: in the field of education in the US, a superintendent or superintendent of schools is an administrator or manager in charge of a number of public schools or a school district, a local government body overseeing public schools (in Iraq, there is no such position; however, the nearest position to this one is that of the head of the educational directorate).

School leaders: assistant principals, supervisors, school advisors, and HODs (head teachers of school subjects; in

our schools, they are known as head of committees of different school subjects).

Pedagogy: In brief, it represents the art that focuses on how to teach.

Professional Development: Refers to the process followed by a group to gain more training in their profession, and to improve the quality of service provided by this group or by an individual (Hibbard, K, 2016).

Teacher-Efficacy: Refers to "teachers' belief or conviction that they can influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated" (ibid).

Aims & Objectives:

There are two main objectives for this paper:

1. Proving the fact that empowering principals can lead to improving instruction and students' achievement.
2. Discussing how providing principals and school leaders with a certain extent of autonomy in decision making can help principals to impact students' learning and performance.

II.   TRANSFORMATION OF PRINCIPALS ROLES IN IRAQ

How are the roles of school principals and school leaders changing? In a brief comparison between the educational situation now and the one back in the 1980s & 1990s, a big disparity can be diagnosed in many aspects like the mechanism of selecting principals, the power and autonomy in decision making they used to have, and some other differences related to personal and professional issues. In one of the very important steps that our Ministry of Education is taking in the path of making transformational changes in the educational process, they conducted professional development workshops and training sessions to enhance the work of principals and school leaders in light of what is known as the "Developing Principal". In the guide provided for participants who were mostly principals and school leaders, a number of issues were discussed and highlighted. For example, the roles of school principals (in the past and even in the present time) are mainly administrative ones. Some of these roles and responsibilities which have been designed in the Act of 1978 include:

*   Keeping order and discipline.
*   Distributing teachers and students on classrooms.
*   Organizing the schedules and implementing curriculum.
*   Monitoring teachers, students and other staff members attendance.

*   Monitoring school exams and writing reports for school results.
*   Organizing school accounts.
*   Maintaining school building and relevant facilities.
*   Observing and evaluating teachers.
*   Maintaining and preparing the required record books.

And practically speaking many principals keep themselves busy doing stuff of less importance like receiving visitors, maintaining record books and dealing with correspondences which can all be transferred to assistant principals or head teachers.

However, the Ministry tries to change this static and traditional role of principals and school leaders into a more dynamic one. The Ministry has a new vision of how these roles should be modified and developed through providing modifying the roles and responsibilities of school leaders and principals. Therefore, in the future, each principal or school leader will be a "developer" who will have more roles and responsibilities than before like:

*   Improving the overall school performance.
*   Evaluating teachers using clear cut standards.
*   Analyzing students' results and observing learning and writing developing plans.
*   Involving parents and members of the local community in school related issues.
*   Conducting personal and self-evaluation and encouraging others to do the same.
*   Running the financial issues of the school.
*   Developing school curriculum and implementing it to ensure meeting students' needs.

These trends are still under the experiment and only 150 principals will get extra training which will enable them to work as a developing principal and will try their new role as school leaders. (Building Capacities Program 2019, p. 4 & 5)

III.   WHY IS AUTONOMY IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IMPORTANT?

In an article by Eck, James & Goodwin, Bryan (2010) about the importance of freedom in decision making in schools, they discussed the issue of how much latitude or independence should be given to principles and school leaders. In a report that was released in 2007 on this issue under the title "The Autonomy Gap", the lack of authority to make decisive decisions especially on which staff members should be hired which ones should leave affected students' performance. Accordingly, as the study states that some school principals who were once so motivated to perform their tasks as principals are

becoming inefficient and unable to really improve students' performance because of the "burden of the accountability systems." (ibid). Regardless of all types of entanglements that could be imposed on principals one way or another, I strongly believe in the power of collaboration to make any change initiative becomes a possibility as stated in the Holy Quraan "... و تعاونوا على البر و التقوى ..." (Al Maeda – Verse 2). Therefore, teachers must work with and support their principals who must build and instill trust and a culture of respect in and out of school building or premises. It is interesting to find that the Ministry of Education is adopting a new approach to improve schools' performance. This new approach is represented in their recent cooperation with the British Council to enhance the performance of school principals through exposing them to workshops that highlight the guidelines and responsibilities of what is becoming to be known as the "Developing Principal". Therefore, the concerned personnel and the decision makers are planning to grant more autonomy to school leaders and principals because they realize how this increase can lead to tangible and positive results in students' performance. (Building Capacities Program 2019, p. 3 & 4). However, autonomy is not always the way out for low performance problems in schools as stated by Tom Vander Ark, the former director of the Gates' Foundation, who made this assumption after visiting 100 schools; he assumed that autonomy could be the answer for a falling school challenges, but he found out that it is not a positive idea to give a "failing school autonomy" Eck, James & Goodwin, Bryan (2010)

The following points can summarize what has been mentioned above in brief:

- "Direct school district staff (or the Directorate of Education personnel) to cooperate with school principals to "screen, interview and select teachers";(Eck, James & Goodwin, Bryan 2010)

- "Establish teacher evaluation as a priority for principals";

- "Develop policies and procedures for rewarding successful teachers and terminating the employment of unsuccessful teachers";

- "Establish strong agreed-upon principles/values that direct the actions of all district staff members; and

- Develop a shared vision and understanding of "defined autonomy" for school leaders, making it clear what principals are responsible for doing and what district office personnel are responsible for doing." (ibid)

- Close attention should be paid to falling schools (that are not achieving any progress in the end of year ministerial exams) and principals of not only this kind of schools, but principals of all schools must be encouraged to share best practices and experiences among each other in periodic workshops where they talk about their challenges and fears to find appropriately doable solutions to them.

All in all, the ministry along with the educational directorates and the supervision departments must realize the importance of providing principals with the required authority over certain issues that can directly affect teachers' and students' performance in the school building. In addition to establishing "consistent approaches" to evaluate teachers in the directorate and "preventing arbitrary and capricious personnel decisions and practices". (ibid)

Waters and Marzano support this assumption because they believe that school principals are provided with "defined autonomy" by effective superintendents. Also, they believe that setting "clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction," leads to providing school leadership teams with the required authority for determining how to achieve the required goals." (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty. 2005. p 45).

IV.   EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Why is effective leadership important? According to what has been discussed in the guide (manual) distributed by the Ministry of Education concerning the development of principals and school leaders (p.4), there is an agreement all over the world that the quality of school leadership comes next in importance to the quality of teaching itself. It also affects the outcomes achieved by students and their classroom performances. Also, the guide suggests two important trends in the current school systems all over the world that makes school leadership more effective. First, there is a tendency towards increasing school independence, developing the powers of decision-making, encouraging them to respond to the local needs and developing the school administration in order to enhance students' performance (ibid). In a study conducted by the World Bank states that granting schools more independency to use their resources is a new trend in the international evaluation standards. Second, there is a parallel trend to use a number of performance evaluation measures to question the schools' use of resources as they increase the importance of schools' independence and effective leadership. (Ibid p.5)

V.   LEADERSHIP: ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

In light of the above, granting more freedom to principals will help them perform a number of tasks more successfully; and in order to do these tasks, the roles and responsibilities of principals must change to match the newly established phase of leadership (Neil C Cranston:2002). What comes next will summarize the most important of these tasks:

5.1 Change Agent and Optimizer

It is said that the most important two roles of principals to start with are their being "*change agents and optimizers.*" On one hand, as a change agent, a principal always encourages his staff and empowers them to use innovative ways to implement different teaching pedagogies as well as questioning the validity of certain school practices. For example, a good way to show that a change agent is practicing his/her responsibility is when a question like "Is our homework policy really helping students learn, or is it indirectly punishing those students who don't have much help at home?" is being placed by a school principal (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty. 2005. p 45). So a change agent always positively challenges his staff and tests the practices in his/her school to better the learning environment for students.

On the other hand, as an optimizer, the principal's or the leader's job is characterized by inspiring other staff members and becoming "the driving force when implementing a challenging innovation" (ibid. p. 56). Also, it is principals should play significant roles in reducing tensions between staff members because of devolution or accountability.

5.2 Discipline & Order Keeper:

According to the above two roles, principals are responsible for protecting the instructional time from any potential distractions that may detract from the precious time allocated for instruction in classrooms through: "… creating structures and procedures around the technical core of teaching" (ibid. p. 48). These structures and procedures can be developed in collaboration among all stake holders (principals, assistant principals, administrators, school counselor, teachers, parents, and preferably students); this collaboration could lead to creating a discipline policy in the building.

5.3 Observer & Evaluator:

As observers and evaluators, Marzano, Waters, & McNulty. (2005) note that principals are in charge of establishing a system that provides effective feedback. This responsibility refers to monitoring students' achievement and its relation to the effectiveness of school practices (ibid. p. 55). So the driving point for monitoring and evaluating teachers is to impel the best impact on students' learning and always gives "teachers' efficacy" in classrooms the priority it requires.

5.4 Culture Establisher & Affirmer:

One of the really challenging responsibilities of a principal is his/her role to build a school's culture. By culture, I basically refer to the work environment fostered by the principal. Principals are to encourage collaboration and support relational trust among faculty members. It is their responsibility to instill cooperation and avoid favoritism among staff which is so pivotal to make any endeavor to change a particular practice or to suggest any innovative teaching pedagogy a possibility. Marzano, Waters, & McNulty. (2005) believe that a collaborative culture is a prerequisite to any change within a school; they state that "… an effective culture is the primary tool with which a leader fosters change" (ibid. p. 48). Part of establishing a positive culture in the school building is building relational trust with the working staff because it contributes a lot to the effectiveness of the leadership in that school. In this regard, Bryke, Anthony S., and Barbara Schneider (2003) stated that … the absence of suspicion and distrust … was a key element in their operation and played an important role in their special effectiveness." (2003 p. 7).

The role of an affirmer is very much connected with transparency and sharing of data. Schools are similar to organizations and establishments because they have their strengths and weaknesses. These strengths and weaknesses must be acknowledged and addressed with the same amount of importance because both of them can be very crucial to students' learning and achievement. Therefore, as an affirmer, "… the leader recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures… one of the biggest challenges facing school-level administrators is directly addressing performance issues— both positive and negative" (ibid. p. 41, 43, 44).

4. 4 Involvement in Instruction & Assessment:

This is one of the defining responsibilities of a school leader or an instructional leader; it shows to what extent a principal, at the level of a classroom, is participating in designing and implementing various school activities like: instruction, and assessment (ibid. p. 54).

In addition to that, Mathew Lynch notes that having a good and an influential leader contributes a lot to the effectiveness of a school as a whole. He summarizes the attributes of the effective school leader as the one who is able to collaborate with other teachers and subjects' teachers to achieve the school's goals and visions

successfully in the hope of enhancing their skills and finding solutions to their potential problems (Lynch, 2016, third paragraph).

However, a school leader might not have all of them; still, he/she can be so effective in his/her school building. For example, Mr. Clint Wilson (the principal at Glencliff High School – a public school in Nashville, TN in the US) developed a culture of collaboration that he established at Glencliff; the assistant principals report to the principal about the performance and progress of teachers in the school on a weekly basis; Mr. Wilson allowed assistant principals to design their rubrics of performance and they have to self-evaluate their performance based on the set of rubrics they established for themselves (the same procedure is applicable to other leading personnel in the school). The atmosphere of relational trust that Mr. Clint established at the school might continue even if he is not there due to the resilient and servant leadership policy, he established at Glencliff. Thus, Mr. Wilson's success in building a professional learning community (PLC) in his school led to the success of the whole school and eventually led to students' growth in the school.

Part of the assessment process is evaluating the working staff at the school. In order for principals and school leaders to be effective and positive to their staff, they need to develop a good evaluation system that needs to have some room for development scale that can be used to "track teachers' skill development." In a developmental scale, levels like "not using, beginning, developing, applying and innovating" need to be used (Marzano, 2012, p. 18).

Finally, a new perspective to leadership has been suggested by the Wallace Foundation, which is mainly the "empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement" (Wallace Foundation, 2013. p. 5). According to the Foundation, leadership is viewed as being "second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that affect student learning in school" (ibid) because they are the ones who have the required potentials to "unleash latent capacities in organizations" (ibid, p. 6).

VI.   QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

In an endeavour to find out more about freedom and autonomy in schools and how much is needed and whether or not the current freedom given to principals and school leaders is sufficient to make the required positive changes and transformations that can lead to a more stable working environment and better atmosphere for students that can lead to tangible improvement in their scores in the end of year ministerial tests, a questionnaire was conducted in

some schools. Unfortunately, not many participated in it because they thought that it has a direct criticism to the current educational system. Therefore, the names of school and principals were kept confidential in the questionnaire.

The results were as follows:

1. 50% of participants selected "Unsatisfied" and 50% selected "Absolutely Unsatisfied" for the first question.

2. All participants selected "Absolutely Unsatisfied" as an answer for the second question.

3. 50% of participants selected "Absolutely Satisfied" and 50% selected "Absolutely Unsatisfied" for the third question.

4. All participants selected "Absolutely Unsatisfied" as an answer for the fourth question.

5. All participants selected "Absolutely Satisfied" as an answer for the fifth question.

6. All participants selected "Absolutely Satisfied" as an answer for the sixth question.

Two different copies of the actual questionnaire papers were attached to this paper for your reference.

VII.   POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

In addition to the ones mentioned at the beginning of this paper, granting more freedom to principals and school leaders in decision making requires asking them to perform more tasks and responsibilities. This issue makes it inevitable for them to perform these tasks without needing to develop a set of skills and capacities that is more complex than the ones already practiced (Cranston 2002, p. 5). Therefore, principals and school leaders will be in need to be responsible for responding appropriately to the new roles and responsibilities that must address specific deficiencies in these new skills and capacities (ibid p.11)

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to make the issue of granting more freedom and autonomy in decision making to principals a possibility, more concerted efforts need to be exerted and more cooperation needs to be conducted between the Ministry, supervision departments, educational zones (directorates) and school leaders and principals themselves. I highly recommend conducting more studies in this regard to finally become able to develop clear cut sets of standards and guidelines before the final approval on granting more authorities and autonomy to principals and school leaders.

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| Unsatisfied | Very Unsatisfied | Satisfied | Very Satisfied |

APPENDEX

Interview Questions (Questionnaire):

1. As   an

| Unsatisfied | Very Unsatisfied | Satisfied | Very Satisfied |

educational leader and a school principal, are satisfied with the current amount of freedom in decision making?

2. Are you with the outer interferences in the decision-making process that belongs to the school and students' benefit?

| Unsatisfied | Very Unsatisfied | Satisfied | Very Satisfied |

3. Do you think that the current support you get from your staff and the educational department necessary to make important and independent decisions for the school and students' interest?

4. As a school leader and a principal and according to the currently followed and valid rules, are you with the currently given freedom in the decision making without returning to the educational department, the supervision department or the Ministry

| Unsatisfied | of Very Unsatisfied | Satisfied | Very Satisfied |

Education?

5. Do you think that principals and school leaders should be granted more authorities and powers in the decision-making process?

Unsatisfied	6.	Very Unsatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied

Successful leadership is centered on building teachers' capacities and independence not on contributing to his/her

Unsatisfied		Very Unsatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied

dependence on others, comment.

1. كقائد مدير مدرسة هل تربوي و مقتنع الحرية بمقدار بإتخاذ

مقتنع تماما	مقتنع	أنت	غير مقتنع تماما	غير مقتنع

القرارات التي تتمع بها حالياً؟

2. هل أنت مع التدخلات الخارجية الحاصلة

مقتنع تماما	مقتنع	غير مقتنع تماما	غير مقتنع

في عملية إتخاذ القرارات التي تخص المدرسة و مصلحة الطالب بالدرجة الأساس؟

3. هل تعتقد بأن المساندة التي تحصل عليها من الكادر العامل معك و مديرية التربية التي تنتمي إليها ضرورية لإتخاذ قرارات مصيرية مستقلة لصالح المدرسة و الطالب؟

مقتنع تماما	مقتنع	غير مقتنع تماما	غير مقتنع

4. كمدير مدرسة و بحسب التعليمات المتبعة حالياً هل أنت مع الصلاحية و الحرية الممنوحة لك في إتخاذ القرارات دون الرجوع ألى الإشراف أو المديرية و الوزارة؟

مقتنع تماما	مقتنع	غير مقتنع تماما	غير مقتنع

5. هل توافق على منح المدارس و التربويين صلاحيات إتخاذ مدراء القادة في أكثر

مقتنع تماما	مقتنع	غير مقتنع تماما	غير مقتنع

القرارات المصيرية للطالب و المدرسة؟

6. القيادة التربوية الناجحة تتمحور في المدرس و بناء قدرة

مقتنع تماما	مقتنع	غير مقتنع تماما	غير مقتنع

إستقلاليته و ليس الإسهام في إعتماده على الغير، ما هو تعليقك؟