

Quality Learning Circles as a Catalyst for Teacher Leadership Skill Development

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the role of Quality Learning Circles (QLCs) in developing leadership skills among secondary school teachers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study was conducted at Government High School Badhber, Peshawar, where 12 teachers were purposively selected from a teaching staff population of 40. A QLC was established and twelve weekly sessions were held. Data were generated primarily through non-participant observations of the sessions, supported by session records and field notes, and were analyzed thematically. The findings indicated that teachers initially tended to understand leadership as hierarchical and associated with formal authority, often relying on the facilitator for direction. As the sessions progressed, participants increasingly took initiative, shared responsibility, and engaged in collaborative decision-making and problem-solving. The observed changes included greater confidence and self-efficacy, improved facilitation, stronger teamwork, more evidence-informed decisions, better use of time and resources, and a stronger orientation toward continuous learning and adaptability. The study also identified implementation challenges, including time constraints, limited resources, initial resistance, and administrative hesitation. Overall, the findings suggest that QLCs can provide a practical, collaborative, and context-sensitive opportunity for nurturing teacher leadership. Schools and policymakers may consider incorporating QLCs into professional development initiatives, while ensuring adequate time, facilitation, and institutional support.

Keywords: Quality Learning Circles, teacher leadership, professional development, collaboration, qualitative case study

Introduction

The traditional view of school's leadership in schools is centered on principal who give directions, supervise academic activities and evaluate students' and teachers' performances (Dickson, 2022). In modern view, leadership is not restricted to specific people or hierarchical in nature. Studies on teacher's leadership have recognized the central role of teachers in the improvement of instructional technique, innovation and change in curriculum, and decision making in schools (Wenner et al, 2017). Teacher leadership is regarded as a set of practices that

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any teacher can possess and perform irrespective of his position, role and responsibilities (Warren, 2021).

Leadership skills are playing an important role in making a teacher effective, successful along with enhancing his instructional quality (Warren, 2021). Leadership skills of teachers are the triggers in motivating teachers to work with high energy and produce desirable output. Leadership skills of teachers perform role of mediating variables between motivation at work and teaching performance (Soim et al., 2022). Leadership skills of teachers also motivate teachers to improve their skills for the improvement in the learning outcomes of students (Naz & Rashid, 2021). And a teacher's leader is the prime factor in the determination of the growth of students (Warren, 2021). Leadership skills are vital for the promotion of collaboration (Asha et al., 2022) and facilitation (Kroll, 2023) among teachers and students during the process of learning. Leadership skills of teachers are also vital for the enhancing the culture of mutual trust among teaching community (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). It is the leadership skills that enable teachers to build teams (Wang et al., 2025) and take right decisions that ensure success (Warren, 2021). Leadership skills are also triggers for motivating teachers to improve their professional skills and opt for life-long learning (Kilag & Sasan, 2023).

Despite the dynamic changes in educational sphere, the experiences of teachers are shaped by rigid and hierarchical culture of schools in which teachers play role of implementer only (Bashir et al., 2023; Poloyapoy et al., 2024). In the existing rigid structure of schools, teachers are not getting opportunities for practicing their leadership abilities (Carswell, 2021; Shuaib et al., 2024). But the existing gap in literature on teacher leadership and its associated constraints raises concerns for getting practical solutions to the existing challenges in front of practicing leadership by teachers.

There are variety of techniques and strategies through which professional skills and competence of teachers can be enhanced. Quality learning circle is an innovative approach for teachers' professional growth and development (Bergmark, 2023) through their self-motivation, engagement and collaboration in small groups (Arumugham, 2015). The approach of quality learning circle is based on free will and volunteer participation of teachers (Arockiaraj, 2020; Lovett & Verstappen, 2004). The working, interventions and structure of quality learning circle is based on collaborative participation (Wilks et al., 2012) in which teachers share their knowledge, experience and reflections with their fellow-participants for enhancing understanding and skills.

So viewing the positive impact of interventions and collaboration of teachers in small groups on their professional competence and development (Admiraal et al., 2021), this study is aimed to explore the role of quality learning circle in developing leadership skills among teachers at secondary school level through the conduction of a qualitative case study.

Statement of the Problem

Teachers at the secondary school level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are subject to work in a rigid, centralized and bureaucratic educational systems with a narrow view of leadership. This rigidity of the system is limiting the willingness of teachers to take initiatives and helps their colleagues, which in turn limits distributed leadership skills of the entire school. Similarly, most of existing professional development programs are targeted towards content mastery and instructional

techniques of teachers while neglecting the development of leadership behavior through sustained opportunities. There is also a dire need of examination of the role of quality learning circle in shifting teacher's behavior towards leadership skill development within parameters of schools. This study is aimed at exploring the role of quality learning circle in building the leadership skills of teachers at secondary school level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Objective

To investigate the role of the Quality Learning Circle in developing leadership skills among teachers at secondary school level.

Research Question

What is the role of the Quality Learning Circle in developing leadership skills among teachers at secondary school level?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for teachers and schools' leaders by offering practical and low resource model for developing leadership skills through context-oriented peer intervention mechanism of quality learning circle. This study is also significant for policymakers for giving practical models and solutions to existing lack of leadership skills among teachers at secondary school level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Leadership and Teacher Leadership

The research on the phenomenon of leadership is spread over centuries in which it is invented and re-invented in different forms (Wilson, 2016). The period of industrial revolution has marked the birth of the early leadership definition in which leader is defined as a person who has great qualities (Hunt & Fedynich, 2018). Although there has been the availability of abundance of literature on leadership, scholars, researchers and educators did not come up with an agreed definition (Dahri, 2015). The number of definitions of leadership are as many as the number of scholars who worked on developing and explaining the phenomenon of leadership (Dickson, 2022). The coined definitions of leadership are based on western ideologies (Moten, 2011) and universal phenomenon (Pressentin, 2015). In defining leadership the specific characteristics, hybrid nature and evolutionary context of the eastern countries has not been entertained (Moten, 2011).

Academic leadership is the process in which academic institutions received guidance and directions for the achievement of their mission, vision and future academic endeavors (Detsky, 2011). The core components of academic leadership are strategic planning, research, decision making and mobilization and allocation of resources that promotes academic excellence, innovation and student success (Chavali & Rath, 2024). The role of an academic leader is crucial for building the culture of collaboration and facilitation for attaining an inclusive learning environment within the parameters of the institution (Yadav et al., 2025).

Teachers are regarded as the single most significant indicator for the success and growth of students in terms of academics and for that reason teachers need to perform as leaders (Warren, 2021). Teacher have always been leaders (Helterbran, 2010). Teacher's leadership is defined as the collective form of leadership in which teacher develops expertise related with instructional strategies and work dynamics through collaborative work (Muijs & Harris, 2003). Teacher's leadership is also regarded as the responsibilities beyond conventional classroom activities that includes teacher's professional development, learning from colleagues, influence on policy and decision making (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Leadership skills are developed among teachers through the conduction of professional development programs for teachers in which teachers develop their leadership skills (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017).

Importance of Teacher Leadership

Teacher's leadership has positive effects on the improvement of school and teacher's effectiveness, motivation and retention (Muijs & Harris, 2003). The ultimate goals of developing leadership among teachers is to improve learning of students (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). The effective leadership of teachers that is characterized by collaboration, risk taking and support of management improves the achievement of students through the provision of supportive school climate (Helterbran, 2010). The role of a teacher as a leader is driven by the desire of improving the learning of students and their academic success and the leadership tendencies of teachers, students always get academic success (Warren, 2021). As leadership is a distributed phenomenon, both principal and teacher's leadership are the significant factors for teacher's learning and development along with creating greater impact on the school learning environment (Pan & Chen, 2020).

For the accomplishment of school goals, teacher's leadership is a famous strategy for school improvement which is indirectly related with student academic achievement (Williams et al., 2014). The engagement of teachers in action research program has positive association in building teacher's leadership skills which in turn boost the learning of students and their academic development as well as it develops professional development of schools (Hunzicker, 2020). Teacher's leadership is playing a significant impact on the influence of teaching practice, curriculum development and collaboration at the level of classroom. It supports the innovation of pedagogical process through the foster culture of continuous learning and development (Miramon et al., 2024).

Quality Learning Circles

The idea of establishment of quality circle in education was brought by Jagdish Gandhi of City Montessori School Lacknow India after getting inspiration from Kaizan's philosophy of continuous improvement during his visit of Japan in 1992. The promotion, organization and implementation of student quality circle has greatly facilitated by Professor. Dinesh P. Chapagain of Nepal by writing a guide book for conceptualizing the rationale of student quality circle along with giving proper guidelines for its implementation. This book is titled "A Guide Book on Students' Quality Circle: An Approach to prepare Total Quality People" (Chapagain, 2022).

Quality Circle represents a group of employees who are engaged in same place of work for carrying out task based on promoting quality (Rohrbasser et al., 2018). The engagement of these

employees is based on volunteer participation (Chapagain, 2022). The number of participants in a quality circle varies depends upon the nature and objective of task under consideration. The number of participants is ranged between 4 to 12 persons (Okpu & Jaja, 2014). The group members perform their tasks on their selves without the interventions of management (Arumugham, 2015). Targets are achieved through self-developed practices and mutual collaboration through the use of quality control tools and total quality management (Rohrbasser et al., 2021). The working mechanism of the members of quality circle is autonomous while observing the company's overall quality control mechanism (Kirsan, 2013). The use of statistical techniques, tools of quality and improvement mechanisms are ensured for bringing innovation in working (Desai, 2010). Quality circle works on the philosophy of bringing continuous improvement and innovation in workplace for better quality as well as creating a workplace that bring value and respect to the employees (Wolniak & Grebski, 2023). Quality circle is a platform where people are given autonomy to show their full potentialities that is beyond the working nexus of the organization (Kirsan, 2013).

The method of quality learning circle is based on innovation and creativity in which teachers are supported in a formal academic environment (Kitazawa & Osada, 2012). It follows a structured format which is based on collaboration and participation of teachers (Fahmi Dajani & Yousef, 2014). This collaboration proceeds in a guided and reflective manners (Lovett & Verstappen, 2004). Quality learning circle is helping teachers in shifting their attitude towards their responsibilities and making them active practitioners through the improvement of everyday tasks (Campbell et al., 2022). Quality learning circle gives a supportive academic culture to teachers for their professional development and improvement of the quality of teaching (Fahmi Dajani & Yousef, 2014). The change in the teaching methodologies and professional development is often for short term in the traditional professional development program that are stemmed from top to down hierarchy while the quality learning circle approach generates long lasting impact of the teaching methodologies and professional development due to its approach of indulging teachers into ownership of the teaching learning process in a non-hierarchical and collaborative manners (Lovett & Gilmore, 2003).

Methodology

Research Design

Exploratory qualitative case study design is adopted for the in-depth and contextualized understanding of the bounded system of quality learning circle and its effects on the leadership skills of participants (Yin, 2021). This research design allowed the researcher to use multiple sources of evidence such as interviews of respondents, observation and document analysis (Coombs, 2022). This study follows the guidelines of constructivist philosophical worldview that regards the construction of knowledge through social experience and reflections. , which holds that knowledge is constructed through individuals' social experience and reflection. (Kusuma, 2021; Pilarska, 2021).

Research Site

The research site for this study was Government High School Badhber, Peshawar which is a secondary school of Elementary & Secondary Education Department, Peshawar. The selection of

research site is based on the diversity of teaching staff, availability of infrastructure and resources and presence of trained facilitator for quality learning circle.

Population and Sample

All teaching staff of Government High School Badhber Peshawar represented population of research. It comprised of 40-teachers of various cadres from which 12-teachers were purposively selected as per standard sample-range of quality learning circle of six to twelve members (Rohrbasser et al., 2018). The selection of teachers is based on balanced cadre-wise division, teaching experiences, subject specialization, volunteer participation and openness to reflective and collaborative interventions.

Formation of Quality Learning Circle

Quality learning circle was formed at the research site after taking formal permission from respective authorities and total of twelve weekly sessions were conducted. During the sessions, the researcher carried out observation as non-participant observer. Researcher also recorded sessions as well as have taken filed notes that focused on the leadership behavior of participants. The collected data is thematically analyzed by following Brown & Clarke (2006) six steps process.

Data Analysis and Findings

Baseline: Hierarchical and Authoritarian Perceptions of Leadership

Prior to the intervention of quality learning circle, the collected data from observation reflected that participating teachers possess converged, narrowed and hierarchical conceptions of leadership. Observational data captured participants repeatedly deferring to the facilitator for direction in early sessions. They are repeatedly using language such as "power," "authority," "obedience," and "dependence on the head" that showed centralized and internalized view of leadership that is exercised by central and superior positions rather than teachers.

Shift in Self-Perception as Instructional Leader

The observation of the QLC sessions made by the researcher as non-participant observer has led him to a noticeable change in the perceptions of participants as instructional leaders. In the initial sessions, the participating teachers were showing hesitation in taking initiatives and were looking towards the facilitator and group leader for guidance and instructions on given and assigned tasks. But as sessions progressed, participants started their active engagement in discussions and leading tasks voluntarily. The participants who initially viewed leadership as the sole responsibility and authority of principal have gradually embraced their role as guide and leader in giving support and inspiration to their participating peers. The observed mutual collaboration of participants through joint work, reflective practices through feedback, encouragement and inspiration of peers in the accomplishment of tasks has also reflected their growing identity as instructional leaders. This shift implies an introspective reevaluation of self-perception, where teachers motivated themselves to overcome initial doubts, perceiving leadership as a personal, achievable attribute rather than an external imposition.

Increased Confidence and Self-Efficacy

The observation made during the QLC sessions by the researcher has also revealed that the participants have showed great improvement in their level of confidence and self-efficacy through open and free conversation, discussion and joint problem solving with full assurance. The researcher also noted the enhanced level of confidence through the risks taken by participants while formulating and implementing innovative strategies in their classroom. The researcher has also noted great improvement in the body language during the conduction of activities that showed their improved self-belief and self-efficacy in leading the tasks as emerging leaders. These improvements and changes among the participating teachers reflected deep rooted personal motivation for self-empowerment and self-improvement.

Decision-Making and Innovation

The observations of the activities, engagements and discussions have revealed that the participating teachers showed great improvement in making decisions. During the initial sessions, the participating teachers were hesitant in taking initiatives. The proceeding of the sessions and engagement has brought marked changes in their participation's style. The participating teachers started exploring things systematically and devising strategies scientifically for resolving issues. The observation of researcher is also evident that participants have improved their decision making skills through the provision of evidence in the form of data. The improved decision making is also the result of culture of feedback during quality learning circle that enable the participants to move beyond their intuition and to incorporate evidence based on data. During the observation, the researcher noted the revision of lesson plans by the participants through the inclusion of hands-on activities for ensuring the active participation of students in classroom, after discussion on lesson plans and getting feedbacks from fellow participants. During the sessions, the researcher has observed that the refinement and enrichment of decision making skills of participants is also accompanied by improvement the level of shared accountability. The participating teachers identified, discussed, planned and solved issues faced by them through the efficient utilization of time, resources and shared wisdom.

Enhanced Collaboration and Teamwork

The observations of QLC sessions made by the researcher have documented a major shift and transformation in the level of participation, collaboration and teamwork of the participating teachers. The researcher also observed that their initial interactions and discussions were based on personal challenges and perspectives with minimal sharing of ideas or collective problem-solving. The researcher noted that with the proceeding of the journey of QLC, the participants started proper engagement through active listening, interactions and giving attentions to the views of fellow participants. The researcher observed the true curiosity of participants for opting new and newer teaching strategies due to progressive knowhow and willingness for the exchange of innovative methods of pedagogy with their fellow participants. With the proceedings of the sessions, the researcher observed improvement in the group discussions in the form of openness, inclusiveness and palpable energy. During the group discussions, vibrant questions were raised that were taken respectfully and were addressed through mutual and shared cognition. The researcher observed the shift in used language during discussions and interactions that revealed collaboration. The participants frequently used phrases such as "let's try this together," "let listen

to each other and decide mutually”, “support each other in this approach,” and “how about combining our ideas?” The articulated and reflected language by participating teachers is evidence of teachers’ transformation from being isolated individuals to collective problem solvers and team-based mindset. Teachers began to view challenges as shared opportunities, fostering a sense of mutual accountability.

Improved Facilitation

The researcher also observed that the sessions of quality learning circle were based on mutual interaction and peer-based problem solving that have enhanced the facilitation skills of participating teachers greatly. The improved facilitation skills of participating teachers have enabled them to lead group activities effectively. The initial sessions of quality learning circle were new experiences for participating teachers due to which they were hesitant in their approaches and were relying on external guidance in carrying out different tasks. However, with the proceedings of the sessions of quality learning circle, all the participating teachers were given different facilitative responsibilities through their encouragement for active participation, discussions and effective time management. The researcher noted that participants were regularly adopting different strategies such as using summaries, taking feedback and building close coordination among the members of the circle for the promotion of collaboration. The researcher also noted that the abilities of participating teachers were enhanced in the creation of inclusive working environment in schools. This shift, transformation and enhanced facilitation of teachers has emerged them to be effective leader who provided guidance, facilitation, inspiration and empowerment to fellow-participants.

Better Time and Resource Management

The observation of the conducted sessions of quality learning circle has also led the researcher to note the significant improvement in the efficient utilization of time and resources. The initial struggling of participants in managing time and allocation and utilization of resources as a result they were facing intrinsic as well as extrinsic pressure in balancing their approaches while participating in quality learning circle. But the proceeding of the sessions enabled participants to adopt strategies based on efficient planning and execution. The researcher noted that participating teachers were using tasks gradation strategy for the prioritization of tasks and designation of responsibilities for efficient utilization of time and resources. During the sessions, researcher noted the reuse of stationary and learning resources through innovative and creative ways for getting maximum benefits of it. As the researcher noted that scrap paper was converted into bookmarks and origami for classroom activities, binders and rings of books were converted into mini tool kit and folders and notes were converted into mini portfolios. This shift is the reflection of enhanced discipline, strategic management and leadership as the direct result of quality learning circle.

Continuous Learning and Adaptability

The researcher also noted the development of intrinsic motivation for the development of strong orientation for lifelong and continuous learning and adaptability. The researcher noted that some of the participating teachers remained engaged in the discussions for sharing strategies and ideas even after the completion of the session that indicated the development of intrinsic motivation and self-initiated behavior for learning. The researcher observed clear adaptation of volunteer

participation, learning from peer, sharing of experiences, open discussion of issues, mistakes, revision of strategies and planning. This highlighted the enhanced confidence of participating teachers. The shift of participants towards adaptability is the reflection of improved resilience, enhanced reflective strategies and evolved skills of leadership as results of their participation in quality learning circle. This orientation reflects deep personal motivation, as teachers introspectively viewed adaptability as integral to their self-perception of resilience, motivating ongoing self-reflection and growth.

Summary

The findings of data analysis reflected the convergent, narrowed and hierarchical views of leadership prior to the participation of teachers in quality learning circle. Their engagement in the sessions of quality learning circle has transformed their views of leaderships toward a collaborative, self-efficacious, and proactive leadership identity. Findings reflected improved decision-making, collaboration, facilitation, resource management, and adaptability of participating teacher that is the indication of improved leadership skills of teachers.

Discussion

Thematic analyses of both types of data as well as their triangulation revealed that prior views and perceptions of participants regarding leadership was based on narrowed, hierarchical and centrally constrained with one-way directed communication and individually focused, reactive and short-term problem solving. These findings are similar to the leadership traits in an organizational structure that are similar to the findings of Aggarwal, (2022) that showed formal position, authority and hierarchy prevails as early perception of people in organization. This finding is also similar to the findings of Poloyapoy et al., (2024) that in traditional educational structure, teachers are relegated to the role of implementers and is delegated limited opportunities for decision making and instructional leadership. The achievement of this objective has highlighted a critical gap at the secondary school level in Pakistan, where a culture of hierarchy (Bashir et al, 2023) restricted the development of 21st-century skills (Shuaib et al., 2024). This finding suggests that the activities like quality learning circle are essential for reframing the perceptions of teachers through the promotion of inclusive and dynamic paradigm of teaching.

The findings of this research are also evident that quality learning circle had multifaceted and positive role in the enhancement of leadership skills of teachers. These findings are aligned with the findings of circle way of learning as source for the enhancement of collective intelligence, strengthening innovation and promotion of leadership skills (Lombard, 2016). Similar results of developing leadership skills through learning circle were obtained by Menegola, (2025). This study has also revealed the shifts of teachers from hierarchical views of leadership to shared and collaborative interventions through enhancing the motivation, confidence, teamwork, decision-making and adaptability of participating teachers. These findings are aligned with the findings of Kaplan, (2024) that learning circle is collaborative learning model that facilitate a shift from hierarchical followers to collaborative educators through sharing of practice and experiences for mutual learning in workplace. Similar results were obtained by Saaid, (2020) that quality learning circle improve critical skills of decision making and problem solving of educators at higher education level.

Conclusion

The findings of this research is evident that quality learning circle (QLC) served the mechanism of collaboration and participation for the enhancement of leadership among teachers at the secondary school level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The findings obtained from thematic analyses of non-participant observation showed that the prior understanding of leadership skills of the participating teachers were hierarchical and narrowed. The thematic analyses and discussions revealed the development of leadership skills of participating teachers through the enhancement of teacher's self-efficacy, improvement in making decisions, building teams, improved facilitation, managing time and resources efficiently and continuous learning. So from these findings, it is concluded that leadership skills were developed among participating teachers through their participation in quality learning circle. From the above discussion, it is concluded that quality learning circles acted as a catalyst for teacher's leadership skills development at secondary school level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Recommendations

1. For the promotion of volunteerism and motivation among teachers in availing professional development opportunities, the academic leaders may arrange awareness sessions in schools for highlighting professional development opportunities and their professional benefits.
2. For the promotion of collaboration and mutual support among teachers, school leader may establish subject-based quality learning circle for their teaching staff in order to achieve academic excellence in their schools.
3. It may also be recommended that the highlighted engaging strategies may be incorporated in the curriculum for secondary schools for bringing mutual support, cooperation, team-building and critical thinking among students.
4. It may also be recommended that quality learning circle may be included in the module of pre-service and in-service training programs for the development of leadership, communication and problem solving skills among teachers.

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