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The Role of the Principals in Supporting Teachers' Performance in Enhancing Online Learning in Secondary Schools: Teachers' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a global shift to online and hybrid learning, highlighting the pivotal role of school principals in ensuring educational effectiveness (RAND, 2020). Principals were essential in facilitating teacher readiness, maintaining student engagement, and addressing the challenges of online education. Continuous professional development is considered as important aspect for educators for the integration of advanced technological tools, and prioritizing student well-being to foster academic success in digital environments. Therefore, this study explores the role of school principals in enhancing teaching performance during online learning, emphasizing the provision of facilities, teacher-student engagement, and overcoming barriers in managing online education. The phenomenological method was used under the umbrella of the qualitative approach. The data were collected from teachers of five private English-medium schools in Lahore via semi-structured interviews. The sample was selected with purposive sampling to target those schools that successfully managed online education during the pandemic. The following key themes emerged from the findings, i.e., faculty development, community and student engagement, fostering a positive school culture, and resource management. Principals were central to addressing challenges through strategies like teacher training and resource allocation. Based on the results, it is recommended that ongoing professional development and structured support systems are required to improve future online learning practices.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a global shift from traditional classroom settings to online learning environments, revealing both opportunities and challenges in educational leadership (Collins & Halverson, 2021). School principals, as instructional leaders, played a vital role in ensuring the effectiveness of this transition. In Pakistan, this shift highlighted significant challenges, such as the provision of adequate facilities, ensuring teacher-student engagement, and overcoming barriers to effective online teaching (Yaseen, et. al., 2020; Aditya, 2021). This study aims to explore the role of school principals in enhancing teacher performance during online learning, focusing on their leadership strategies and resource management. The onset of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 precipitated a rapid shift in educational systems worldwide toward synchronous remote online teaching and learning (Azorín & Fullan, 2022; Garcia-Morales et al., 2021). This transition necessitated the swift development of new models and strategies for effective distance education. However, due to the urgency of the situation, decision-makers often didn't allocate sufficient time and resources for structured implementation processes, leaving many stakeholders, especially teachers, partially engaged in the transition (Aditya, 2021; Epps et al., 2021).

The abrupt move to online distance teaching posed various cognitive, social, pedagogical, and technological challenges for educators (Alenezi et al., 2022; Mouton, 2020). These challenges included mastering new technologies, managing social interactions in a virtual setting, coping with increased stress and cognitive load, and handling privacy concerns when teaching from home (John et al., 2022; Costley, 2020; Dong et al., 2019). Additionally, teachers faced criticism from parents, who became more involved in their children's learning due to remote schooling (Picciano, 2018). Amidst these challenges, there was a pressing need for the rapid development of effective online teaching and learning strategies (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Popa, 2022).

School as an organization involves elements that may carry out a cooperative relationship to accomplish aims or goals. In addition to this, the elements in question involve human resources, which may consist of the teachers, principals, students, support staff, and parents. However, several disciplines that have participated in online education programs are attached to virtual schooling since it offers advantages over classroom-based programs.

Principals in the twenty-first century must acquire the abilities and techniques necessary for fostering a positive learning environment for teachers and the student body.

E-learning platforms are incredibly diverse to meet challenges that will arise in the future our society is getting modernized day by day so, technology is fast-paced to facilitate E-learning (Martin, 2015) It uses the term educator performance to describe the visible outcomes of this preparation and advancement, or lack thereof, in the classroom. Shamir-Inbal & Blau, (2021).

That is, the arrangement of activities, perspectives, and behaviors in the educational learning environment leads to the achievement of instruction. In essence, what teachers do or do not do in the classroom significantly impacts how well students progress in their learning. However, teachers need to consider the vision and mission of the schools before addressing their teaching tactics. As a result, they can't emphasize enough how much of an impact an educator's presentation has on a student's scholarly achievement or disappointment. (Nuryani, 2021).

The principal role tends to be one of the most important factors when it comes to education on standards as well performed schools have leaders who may work in a manner that results in schools having a high level of outcome in terms of grades. However, schools are faced with low levels of performance because of a lack of effective management or infrastructure being implemented in the schools. The principals in the modern era have executed multi-aspect roles to accomplish the targeted aims or goals the school expects (Salem et al., 2020).

Many of the research studies are inclined to emphasize the significance of the principals taking on strong leadership in formulating well-occupied schools (Grissom et al., 2018). Online learning is depicted as development opportunities utilizing several electronic gadgets with web access in coordinated or atypical ecological circumstances. Online learning can be a stage that makes the training schemes much more student-centered, innovative, as well as adaptable (Karaoke et al., 2021).

Literature Review

The rapid global shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic marked a significant transformation in education, compelling schools to integrate digital technologies at an unprecedented pace (Clemente-Suárez & González-Moro, 2024). While the integration of online learning technologies has been gradual over the years, the pandemic acted as a catalyst, accelerating their adoption worldwide. The role of school leadership, particularly principals, became critical during this period, as they were at the forefront of navigating

these changes and supporting teachers and students in the transition to virtual learning (Nguyen & Kumar, 2022).

Research underscores the importance of principal leadership in adapting to the new digital landscape. Effective school leadership has been linked to improved teacher performance in virtual settings, as principals were tasked with not only managing the shift to online education but also ensuring that teachers were equipped with the necessary tools and training (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Principals who were able to foster a positive school culture and maintain strong teacher-student engagement played a pivotal role in the success of online education (Chen & Patel, 2023). Their leadership practices during the pandemic provided both moral and practical support to teachers, which was essential in maintaining the continuity of education (Brown & Evans, 2023).

However, despite the rapid technological integration, many schools faced significant challenges in terms of infrastructure and professional development. Prior studies indicate that inadequate digital resources and the lack of proper teacher training were among the key barriers to effective online education (John, Maher, & Browne, 2022). Principals were instrumental in addressing these challenges by ensuring that teachers received the necessary professional development to adapt to the new online teaching environment. Gonzalez (2021) highlights that the leadership provided by school principals directly impacted the success of online education, as they were responsible for ensuring that teachers were well-prepared to engage with students through digital platforms.

The pandemic also emphasized the need for principals to adopt flexible and adaptive leadership styles to respond to the evolving demands of online education. Research by Popa (2022) suggests that leadership styles that promote collaboration and innovation were particularly effective in addressing the challenges posed by remote learning. Furthermore, the ongoing professional development of school leaders themselves is crucial in equipping them to handle future disruptions in education (Costley, 2020).

The literature collectively indicates that school principals played a multifaceted role in enhancing teaching performance during online learning. Their responsibilities encompassed not only facilitating teacher readiness and professional development but also ensuring that schools had the infrastructure and resources necessary for online education (Aditya, 2021). As the education system continues to adapt to the post-pandemic era, principals' leadership will remain central to the success of blended and hybrid learning models (Bernard et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the pandemic has reinforced the vital role that school principals play in supporting teachers' performance in online learning environments. Their leadership, encompassing both moral and practical dimensions, has been key to addressing the challenges of digital education and ensuring the continuity of quality learning experiences for students. Ongoing research emphasizes the need for continued professional development for both teachers and school leaders to adapt to future changes in the educational landscape (Clemente-Suárez & González-Moro, 2024).

Material and Methods

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore principals' roles in supporting online learning during the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers from five private English-medium schools in Lahore. The participants were experienced educators, with teaching tenures ranging from 5 to 10 years. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were actively involved in managing online education. In Lahore about 6000 private schools are catering the educational needs of students. But unfortunately, all schools were not offering online learning in the past

during covid-19 pandemic. Thus, we focused on only those schools who have I.T support and an appropriate E-learning platform for student.

Results and Discussion

Data were analyzed using a combination of open and axial coding, along with conceptual frameworks, to highlight recurring themes.

Training and facilities to enhance teaching performance online

All 5 out of 5 school teachers were positive. One of the respondents said that: "*Our organization provided the facilities and the training sessions. Our school trained the teachers both the new and the old ones. They trained every teacher of through WhatsApp, YouTube videos and everything else available. Also, they provided internet facilities to teachers at their home and also, offered feasible timings to our teachers so that they do online learning and teaching in a relaxed environment".*

Similarly, one of the participated responds about the teacher training, *"It was something very new at that time, we were all unfamiliar, so principals provided all the necessary training and tools to help the teachers and the students as well and we have changed several things around our school so we can adapt the new learning methods".*

Respondent three said that her principal and management worked enthusiastically in the uplifting of teachers, according to her "*School heads provided all sort of training to teachers so that we can strengthened the learning during the online classes and they provided us the opportunity and platform to participate in different training sessions and platforms".*

Similarly, Teacher (Respondent 4) added" *Our school has always taken positive steps to equipped teachers with latest technological tools and latest technological techniques as well."* Our IT department conducted different sessions and they conducted zoom meetings and sessions through which we have been taught how to use the gadgets and how we can utilize google classrooms as well. Obviously, our main objective was to take care the needs of the students, we wanted to equipped them with the education and we did not want any gap.

No doubt, online teaching platform was novice for most of the schools thus they faced many challenges in the adaptation process, while discussing on the same issue teacher (Respondent 5) expressed her views in these words, "*online teaching was a new platform for us. Therefore, to do it as a right way we trained our teachers and staff through extensive training and workshops".* Our school has great training staff for training our teachers to become professional academically and training purposes so they teach the best of the knowledge to our students. Also, we have highly qualified staff and teachers from overall Pakistan and Oversees who helped us established the homework and assignments and planned activities for our students during the COVID.

Role of school principals in terms of teacher-student engagement

All participants mentioned receiving training and support from their principal or senior management. This support included relevant training sessions, workshops, and access to resources such as online courses, tools, model lessons, booklets, worksheets, and activities. External experts were also brought in to provide additional training and guidance.
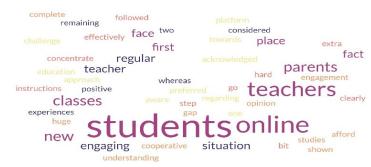
Collaboration among teachers was emphasized by some participants. They mentioned brainstorming sessions and Zoom meetings where teachers collectively discussed and decided on the best approaches for designing online learning content. This collaborative approach allowed teachers to share ideas and experiences, contributing to the development of effective teaching strategies.

Participants highlighted the importance of motivation and recognition from their organization, particularly from the principal. Positive feedback and encouragement motivated teachers to take initiative in designing engaging and effective online learning content. Recognition from the organization served as validation for their efforts and encouraged them to continue improving their teaching methods.

The use of technology was mentioned by several participants as a key aspect of designing online learning content. Training and workshops focused on platforms such as Google Classroom and Zoom were provided to teachers. Additionally, teachers were assigned tasks to create tutorials using these platforms, allowing them to gain practical experience and proficiency in online teaching tools.

 Participant 2 mentioned *"the involvement of external experts, including experts from abroad, to provide specialized training to teachers"* This highlights the organization's commitment to ensuring high-quality online education by leveraging expertise beyond the internal resources of the school.

Participant 3 shared how some teachers took the initiative to create interesting tutorials independently, which was then supported and appreciated by the organization. This demonstrates the importance of fostering a culture of innovation and professional development among teachers.

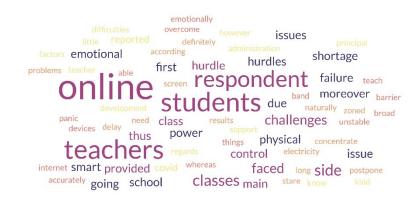**Supervision of online education model as a teacher**

3 out of 5 teachers had positive experiences whereas, remaining two considered it to be *"a challenge at first place and preferred face to face classes over online".* Regarding parents' approach towards online education platform one of the teachers acknowledged the fact that "*Parents and students were also aware of the fact that they cannot afford a huge gap in studies so they have shown their complete engagement in this situation".*

In the opinion of few Teachers, students and parents were very cooperative and understanding the situation clearly and followed our instructions effectively. It was a bit hard for students to concentrate in online so they had to go through extra step and make sure their online classes are as much engaging as possible by using modern methods of teaching through different apps**.**

Another teacher admitted "During COVID, we were working like we did physically in institutions. *We supervised students by taking their attendance on regular basis and after that whole day teachers were communicating with the students and our heads were in contact with us and everybody was vigilant".*

"Our principal also arranged many certificates and acknowledgement for teachers who performed well to increase our motivation level." Another respondent described their effective monitoring as well as engaging techniques used for students

"*We asked students to turn on their cameras, take the regular classes to keep the online record of the students of who is attending the class and we just kept a check on them. In this way, we were able to supervise the students better*". Another teacher shared her concerns in this way that, *"It was not easy at first place. We have to learn so many new things that were new to us like online educational technology that was new for us".*

Challenges and Hesitations

All 4 out of 5 respondents reported about several challenges, faced by them, throughout their online education journey during COVID 19 pandemic. Respondent1 reported "*In regards to teacher development, our principal and administration provided all kind of support thus, there were little to know difficulties".* However, some factors were out of control like electricity problems which results in the delay and postpone of online class. "*Also, students didn't concentrate on online classes because naturally, they zoned out and can't stare at screen for too long which was the main hurdle".*

According to respondent 2 **"***Definitely, there were so many challenges and we need to overcome it accurately because there were so many things going on side by side because all teachers and students were emotionally unstable and panic. Thus, teachers were not able to teach online. Shortage of internet broad band and smart devices was also a physical barrier.* Whereas, Respondent 3 who was unfamiliar with the use of latest online technology at school, faced many challenges for teaching online as she had no idea where to start from and how to switch online "*It was my first experience so when I made my first tutorial it was very*

hard for me as I searched many apps, websites online tutorials, while making my lesson. But with the passage of time, I have learnt and my school also provided me guidance on zoom classes and trained me." There were physical barriers like shortage of smart gadget, provision of laptops and high-speed broadband at every house hold. Moreover, in many places there was unannounced power failure going on. Due to all these hurdles students and teachers had connectivity issues which lead to poor class attendance and engagement from both sides. Respondent 4 expressed similar issues*" Some of our teachers and students could not afford to buy the expensive gadgets which was the hurdle. It was the issue for teachers and student both, WIFI demand was also there, moreover, there was power supply failure issue which was beyond our control."* Respondent 5 discussed on the emotional side of the picture*, "One of the hurdles that we faced was emotional strain on students and teachers due to COVID, so the biggest thing to battle was trying to understand the psyche of my students because this was the main reason behind their being demotivated".* It was a challenge for all of us to think about the strategies on how to motivate them for attending online classes.

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Discussion

This study aimed to explore the role of school principals in supporting teachers' performance to enhance online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interviews with principals and teachers, the study sought to understand their experiences managing teaching performance and the factors affecting teacher effectiveness during this

unprecedented shift to online learning. The findings revealed several key challenges and opportunities in this context.

The pandemic forced a sudden transition to online learning, which was unfamiliar to both teachers and students. This disruption highlighted the lack of preparedness in the education sector, with most teachers not adequately trained in virtual teaching methods. Many lacked the technical skills and resources needed for effective online instruction. This aligns with previous research, which noted that teachers globally were underprepared for the rapid adoption of digital learning tools (Azorín, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). The shift demanded not only new technological competencies but also a reevaluation of traditional teaching methods to fit online platforms (Costley, 2020).

A significant barrier identified was the absence of professional development opportunities that specifically targeted online teaching. Teachers struggled to adapt, and the lack of training exacerbated their challenges during the pandemic. This is consistent with the findings of Bhujel (2021), who emphasized the importance of continuous teacher training for the adoption of new teaching practices. The need for targeted professional development became even more crucial as the education system transitioned from in-person to remote learning.

The role of the principal was central to addressing these challenges. Principals who provided both moral and physical support to their teachers were instrumental in maintaining the continuity of education. Their leadership, particularly in creating professional learning networks, played a vital role in fostering collaboration and improving teacher performance. Leadership styles significantly influenced the success of online education. Principals who adopted a more facilitative and collaborative leadership approach were better able to support teachers in navigating the complexities of online learning (Azorín, Harris, & Jones, 2019). Furthermore, principals took proactive steps to mitigate the impact of the technological divide. Many schools created digital classrooms and e-libraries to ensure that teachers without the necessary equipment at home could still deliver quality education. Some schools provided laptops and other devices to teachers, reducing the physical barriers to online instruction. This initiative was critical in enabling teachers to overcome the challenges posed by the lack of personal technological resources. However, infrastructure issues such as unreliable internet access and power outages presented ongoing challenges. These barriers, particularly prevalent in Pakistan, hindered the smooth implementation of online learning. The need for government intervention to improve digital infrastructure is clear. Without adequate internet and power supply, the effectiveness of e-learning is severely limited, as noted in several studies on the global challenges of online education during the pandemic (Azorín & Fullan, 2022).

Conclusion

It is concluded from the result that the emotional toll of online learning on both teachers and students. Online learning was widely adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, marking a significant shift for both teachers and students. Teachers reported high levels of stress and anxiety due to the abrupt shift in teaching methods, compounded by the pressure to engage students effectively in a virtual environment. Students, too, struggled with maintaining concentration and motivation in online classes. Counseling and emotional support, therefore, became essential for both teachers and students to cope with the demands of online education.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the crucial role of school principals in enhancing teachers' performance during the shift to online learning. Principals who provided strong leadership, combined with targeted professional development and effective management of technological resources, were instrumental in improving teaching effectiveness and student engagement. The findings suggest that a blend of leadership styles

helped navigate the complexities of online education, confirming previous research on the significance of adaptive leadership during educational disruptions. Moving forward, the sustainability of online education depends on prioritizing teacher training, strengthening digital infrastructure, and offering ongoing emotional and professional support for educators. Teachers faced major challenges, including limited professional development for virtual teaching and a lack of familiarity with modern online methods. Technical issues like electricity, internet access, and the availability of devices for underprivileged students were significant barriers. Both teachers and students also experienced emotional stress and motivational challenges. Professional development was crucial for equipping teachers with the necessary skills for online education. Various regions, such as Taiwan and the U.S., adapted their teacher training programs to focus on knowledge acquisition and the specific demands of online learning. School principals provided both moral and physical support, helping teachers stay motivated and adjust to the new online teaching methods. Leadership also initiated professional development programs to help teachers enhance their performance in virtual classrooms. Principals demonstrated innovative leadership by providing technical training and tutorials, helping teachers manage the challenges of online education. This leadership played a critical role in improving student learning outcomes during the pandemic. IT departments offered support, it was often inadequate. Principals and senior staff stepped in to provide emotional and technical assistance, and some schools supplied teachers with necessary devices like laptops to conduct effective online sessions.

keeping students engaged during online lessons was more difficult than in physical classrooms. Initially, parents were skeptical about the value of online education, considering it ineffective. Teachers and principals had to work hard to convince them otherwise by making lessons more interactive and engaging.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of online learning in schools:

- Teachers, education departments, principals, and relevant institutions may prioritize the development of online learning, particularly at the foundational level. A strong emphasis on early-stage training for both students and teachers will contribute to creating a more efficient future for e-learning learners.
- The government may take necessary measures to improve essential infrastructure, such as power supply and internet access, particularly in underserved areas. Ensuring these resources are available for students and school staff will significantly enhance the effectiveness of online learning, especially in Pakistan. Governments may take steps to develop and support online learning platforms and courses, making them accessible to students and teachers alike. Providing such platforms will ensure smoother transitions and reduce challenges in the future.
- School management, along with principals, should ensure that teachers receive ongoing training on the latest technologies and tools for online teaching. This includes organizing seminars and workshops to help teachers and students better understand and adapt to online learning. Schools may invest in creating modern electronic libraries and digital classrooms equipped with necessary gadgets. This will provide teachers with access to resources and space, especially if they lack proper equipment or space at home for conducting online classes.
- Schools may arrange regular counseling sessions for teachers and students experiencing stress or demotivation related to online learning. These sessions will help boost their motivation, confidence, and overall engagement in the learning process. By implement these recommendations, the transition to online learning can be made more effective, ensuring long-term success for both teachers and students.

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