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Identifying an educational praxis of culturally relevant female school leadership in urban Pakistani schools

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ABSTRACT

Using a culturally relevant leadership lens, this phenomenological study looks at the lived experiences of two female urban school leaders in Pakistani private schools. It highlights the structural enablements and barriers they faced across two different periods – the 1990s and the 2020s providing reflectively-nuanced insight into female school leadership in a Pakistani context. The findings from this small-scale study recommend further enhancing and developing female school leaders' skills through targeted leadership development programmes and mentoring experiences that assist in developing their strong educational praxis as they create their own practice architectures. The findings contribute towards current educational leadership literature through a feminist approach to understanding how Pakistani female school teachers and leaders can exercise educational praxis within their school systems. It is anticipated that this approach will contribute towards the discourse on improving the working conditions for female teachers and school leaders working within this developing world context.

Introduction

As a nation, Pakistan is recognised as a patriarchal, masculine, conservative, Islamic society (Hofstede 1980), where restricted professional choices for women exist due to strongly embedded social, cultural, political and religious factors. Amongst limited professional choices, school teaching is one of the safest professions for women, leading to a feminisation of this profession (Khan 2016). A World Bank report (WBG 2018) confirms that higher percentages of females in urban and rural settings work as teachers (primary and secondary levels) compared to their male counterparts. The report (WBG 2018) indicates that within urban settings, for teachers with post-secondary education, 27.58%

are female primary teachers, and 4.58% male. Likewise, 35.75% are female secondary teachers, and 5.91% male. In rural settings, 42.92% are female primary teachers, and 16.66% male; 28.95% are female secondary teachers, and 12.01% are male. Ongoing efforts are being made towards directly influencing the teaching profession through Pakistan's development road map – *Vision 2025*, setting an ambitious target of an increase in female labour force participation to 45% by 2025 (WBG 2018) supported by the current national level educational policy that strongly promotes gender equity and parity (GOP 2017).

Having worked as Pakistani female school leaders, our curiosity to interrogate this leadership space led us to collaboratively work on a reflexive paper focusing on culturally relevant female school leadership through an educational praxis lens used phenomenologically. We looked inwardly, narrating our personal leadership stories of becoming leaders, flourishing and challenging leadership experiences and future-thinking possibilities for developing strong Pakistani female school leaders.

Literature review

The importance of school leadership in impacting student learning has been well-established (Bush and Glover 2014; Hallinger and Heck 1996; Heck and Hallinger 2010; Harris 2020; Hitt and Tucker 2016; Waters, Marzano, and McNulty 2003). Within the following sub-sections of the literature review section, the authors have focused on selectively reviewing literature that explores theoretical connections emphasising the need for engendering feminist school leadership practices in Pakistan through culturally relevant school leadership practice and by female school leaders leading their schools through an educational praxis. The authors selected articles relevant to Pakistan or school leadership contexts similar to Pakistan, covering the 1990s to 2020s decades, as this was representative of the time span within which the leadership practices of both participants chosen for this study were situated. Selectively chosen literature focused on the importance of targeted female leadership development programmes was critically analysed to deepen the discussion on the kind of female school leadership development programs are currently needed in Pakistani urban private school contexts with large numbers of female teachers working in that sector.

Engendering feminist school leadership practices in Pakistan

Research indicates inadequate understanding the nuance of gender within Pakistani school leadership due to a dearth of relevant literature (Shah 2018; 2023). Most literature on educational leadership is in Western contexts, with little written about non-Western or cross-cultural contexts (Dimmock and Walker 2005; Hallinger 2011; Showunmi and Kaparou 2017). While teaching has remained a female-oriented occupation (Addi-Raccah and Ayalon 2002),

men have retained dominant educational leadership positions within Pakistani educational institutions (Aziz et al. 2017). Gender continues to impact an aspirant female teacher's promotion to school leadership within the patriarchal mindset found across Pakistan. Familial responsibilities, restricted mobility, and culturally strong societal perceptions make getting educated and professionally certified a longer and more arduous track for females over their more educated and experienced male counterparts (Ashraf 2013). Likewise, there is limited progression for women in educational leadership organisations where reforms on gender equity have focused narrowly on getting women to work *like men,* where emphasis is given to the importance of networking, mentoring, career planning, developing financial and entrepreneurial skills and using assertive behaviours in the workplace over addressing structural and social inequalities (Blackmore 2002). This approach becomes counter-productive in a traditional Pakistani patriarchal society where the familial roles of females are strongly recognised and culturally promoted (Ashraf 2013). Research indicates that non-supportive workplace and organisational structures are recognised as significant structural barriers to the work of female school leaders (Ashraf 2007; 2008; Rarieya 2007).

Statistically, there have been lower numbers of female literates (51.9%) as compared to male literates (73.4%) (GOP 2022), indicating a lower number of workforce-ready females entering the economy. According to the Pakistan Education Statistics 2020–2021 report (GOP 2023), the total male enrolment in teachers' training institutions was 48,703 (64%), and female enrolment was 27,524 (36%), meaning significantly fewer female teachers are being prepared for the teaching workforce in the current decade. Over 2020–2021, of 1,599,296 teachers, there were 356,432 public school female teachers and 615,455 private school female teachers on the job, totalling 971,887 (60.77%) female teachers; while there were 412,293 public school male teachers and 215,116 private school male teachers on the job, totalling 627,409 (39.23%) male teachers (GOP 2023). In comparison, in 2016–2017 (five years earlier), of 1,582,411 *K-12* teachers, there were 352,199 public school female teachers and 605,811 private school female teachers on the job, totalling 958,010 (60.54%) female teachers; while there were 423,993 public school male teachers and 200,408 private school male teachers on the job totalling 624,401 (39.46%) male teachers (GOP 2023). These five-year comparison statistics indicate more female than male teachers working across *K-12* classrooms, with significantly higher percentages of female teachers employed in the private school sector. This would comparatively indicate that a proportional higher number of female school leaders and aspirants are employed in the private sector, even though no exact figures/statistics have been recorded for male and female *K-12* school leaders in Pakistan. As a structural enabler, the current national educational policy (GOP 2017) strongly supports gender equity and parity in the teacher workforce

and promotes private-sector schooling to meet Pakistan's Sustainable Development Goal of Quality Education for All by 2025.

Pakistani school leaders, male or female, are influenced heavily by their school context (Harris 2020), with some transformational in their leadership approach (Shah 2018; 2023) and others autocratic or paternalistic (Simkins et al. 2003). Pakistani female school leaders prefer maintaining religious and cultural norms and boundaries (Shah 2018). While studying Catholic schools in Pakistan and India, Raftery et al. (2022) found that role models and mentoring were integral, especially when transferring leadership inter-generationally or cross-culturally. This leadership was both participative and transformational, having enabling power structures and caring and collegial management practices (Raftery et al. 2022), and empowerment and solidarity developed within the school culture (Fennell 1999). Pakistani teachers (the majority being female), whenever provided opportunities for independent decision-making and teacher leadership (Afzal and Rizvi 2021), build strong teacher leadership practices (Nguyen, Harris, and Ng 2019) that lead to positive educational change (Rizvi and Elliott 2007). Research indicates that focused learning-centred leadership practices in Pakistani schools involve meaningful professional development of teachers and their active involvement in institutional decision-making while developing collaborative school environments (Akram et al. 2022).

Culturally-relevant school leadership

Research indicates leadership practices are both culturally relevant and culturally specific, with differences found across national cultures (Hofstede 1980; Shah 2023). In their international study on gender, culture and leadership, Van Emmerik and colleagues (Van Emmerik, Euwena, and Wendt 2008) found that above gender, culture strongly influenced leadership practices. Cultural characteristics identified the differences in how male and female leaders used power, superiority and supervision. In a phenomenological study, Stephens (Stephens 2012) emphasises that culture is integral to research since it focuses on how participants in the study think, learn and do.

Female school leadership is culturally- and socially-defined in Pakistan and practised in line with societal expectations of women. This exists within specific cultural ways learnt early in life and determines the level of acceptance and place women have in society (Al-Khatib 2022; Rarieya 2007). Showunmi and Kaparou (2017) found that Pakistani women principals used masculine characteristics of courage, aggression and boldness to position and establish themselves as school leaders. These leaders could not practise authentic leadership due to the constrictions of cultural norms for females. Female school leaders operating in Pakistan's patriarchal society acquired their leadership inspiration from transformational male role models such as their fathers or husbands and

located effective leadership as being within the masculine domain (Shah 2023). Similarly, in a study on two upper secondary school principals one of whom was an American female school principal, felt she was chosen because she had male-like leadership qualities which were being driven and competitive while demonstrating ethical behaviour and using a democratic leadership approach likewise her counterpart in this study, a Swedish upper secondary school principal felt that she led with competency, professionalism and ethics (Murakami and Törnsen 2017). In a Chilean study (Arroyo and Bush 2023), female school leaders identified working in a patriarchal culture like the leaders in this study, facing similar structural barriers making women feel less secure as leaders and lack confidence in themselves. To counteract this cultural mindset; they suggested having female school leaders directly work as role models and mentors to aspirant female leaders. These studies found that women leaders faced multiple levels of inequity, making their work with colleagues, students and parents more challenging, and their leadership precariously positioned (Murakami and Törnsen 2017). These inequities impacted their sustainability as leaders and their job satisfaction due to low perceptions of efficacy, low support from peers and low support from mentors (Murakami and Törnsen 2017).

Leading with educational praxis

Leading with educational praxis involves purposive action by leaders demonstrating educational conduct directed by strong moral purpose (Kemmis and Smith 2008); rising above notions of educational practice, oriented in being traditional, intentional and socially contextualised within educational settings (Kemmis and Smith 2008). Educational praxis refers to educational practices specific to the profession, morally committed and morally-oriented; and where those practising it are self-aware and conscious of their actions (Kemmis and Smith 2008). Wilkinson et al. (2010) discuss how in determining educational praxis, practice architecture provides 'a useful analytical framework for analysis of collective/individual sayings, doings and relatings in educational settings' (78). Kemmis and Grootenboer (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) discuss how,

> … organisations, institutions and settings, and the people in them, create practice architectures which prefigure practices, enabling and constraining particular kinds of sayings, doings and relatings among people within them, and in relation to others outside them. The way these practice architectures are constructed shapes practice in its cultural-discursive, social-political and material-economic dimensions, giving substance and form to what is and can be actually said and done, by, with and for whom … constructed by people inside and outside an organisation, institution or setting. (57–58)

Wilkinson (2017) discusses how, 'Leading practices – be they formal or informal, school, district or central office-based – both shape and are shaped by,

transform and are transformed by, the site-specific arrangements with which they are enmeshed' (165). At individual or collective levels, this involves moral, ethical and political responsibility and awareness of how our actions change the working environment (Mahon et al. 2017). Raza et al. (Raza, Gilani, and Waheed 2021) identified site-specific arrangements that prefigured educational leadership practices while studying the practices of primary school leaders. The practice architecture within these schools involved: (1) a strong cultural-discursive dimension created through strategic systems for in-house teacher professional development and community building practices; (2) social-political dimensions evident through self-reflection and self-review practices at school-level, connected with the system-wide school evaluation unit and internal school evaluation framework; and, (3) material-economic dimensions set up through their strategic school improvement planning.

Developing female school leadership programmes

Pakistani women face multiple intersectionalities of educational inequality due to patriarchy, politics and poverty (Fernandes et al. 2019); resulting in 25% of the female population participating within the paid labour force (WBG 2018). Professionally, Pakistani schools are spaces where most women are teachers, yet, more men are reported in leadership roles than women (Aziz et al. 2017; Khan 2016). Research indicates that developing female teachers as middle-level and senior-level school leaders in Pakistan (Shah 2023) through targeted leadership development programmes in education is critically needed (Rarieya 2007). In some studies focus is on engendering leadership practices as male or female-orientated (Blackmore 2002; Showunmi and Kaparou 2017; Shah 2023). In others, there is an appreciation of keeping the space of school leadership development both androgynous as well as engendered (Aziz et al. 2017; Bass, Avolio, and Atwater 1996; Eagly 2013; Shah 2018; Zeinabadi 2013) with a context-sensitive (Baig 2011; Harris 2020; Shah 2023; Van Emmerik, Euwena, and Wendt 2008) and culturally relevant approach (Collard and Reynolds 2005; Connell 1995).

In Pakistan, this would include examining existing biases, discriminatory practices, and systemic challenges (Aziz et al. 2017; Shah, 2023) that female leaders regularly face in their selection and development as leaders (Gipson et al. 2017) and developing tailored female leadership development programmes, culturally and contextually-relevant (Baig 2011; Shah 2023).

Research suggests developing a strong coaching approach within school leadership programmes (Sampat, Nagler, and Prakash 2020) that are individualised, intensive, sustained, context-specific and focused (Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan 2018) around the school leader and their school context. Mentoring Pakistani female teachers through on-site mentors and on-site professional learning communities earlier in their careers assists in developing strong teacher-leaders

(Majocha et al. 2017) and prepares them for later moving into middle and senior levels of school leadership (Fernandes et al. 2019).

Research also indicates the importance of developing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of female school leaders outside the western world (Al-Khatib 2022; Lyman, Strachan, and Lazaridou 2012; Shah 2015; Showunmi and Kaparou 2017; Sobehart 2009). This will then assist in developing a culturally relevant approach to female school leadership (Restine, 1993) in nations that identify themselves as being patriarchal. The current small scale-study contributes to this space of limited research and understanding on female school leadership.

Theoretical framework & methodology

This study used rich descriptions that exhibited the complexity of our lived experiences (Creswell 2002) as female school leaders. Our curated narrative vignettes represented deeply subjective temporal constructions of female school leadership based on our own individual perspectives as self-narrators, and our social perspectives localised within similar educational leadership contexts (Elliott 2005). These personal narratives, informed by phenomenological principles (Van Manen 1990) were presented as authentic first-person stories that provide a means of giving voice (Riessman 2008) to our lived experiences. Using the notion of *phenomenology of practice* allowed us to delve into the primal and pre-theoretical dimensions of our educational leadership practice (Van Manen 2007) by grasping our own ontology of being and knowing, unleashing our own pathic knowledge hermeneutically as school leaders through our written accounts. Pathic understanding as described by Van Manen, is relational, situational, corporeal, temporal, actional and without thought driven by theory (Van Manen 2007). This phenomenological inquiry (Van Manen 2016) delving into our lived experiences was part pre-reflective, pre-theoretic and pre-linguistic (Van Manen 2007). By sensing and feeling our way and permitting ourselves to express and orient our experiential and lived sensibility of our leadership lifeworld, we evoked our memories and reflected on our practice, making sense through language. Using *Befindlichkeit* (Heidegger 1962) we reflected and identified ' the way one finds oneself' in our world of educational leadership (Heidegger 1962, 172–188). We perceived the embodiment of female school leadership (Merleau-Ponty 2012) through our lived experiences as female school leaders and reductively (Schmitt 1959) used four writing prompts to draw out our pathic understanding while delving into our phenomenology of practice. In this way, we first bracketed (Epoché) all our notions of school leadership and wrote about our lived experiences curating them into our personal narratives (Puligandla 1970). Next, we used eidetic reduction (Puligandla 1970) to further work on our ontological sense of being and knowing as female school leaders across different time periods. We

developed our transcendental reduction by discussing our new phenomenological understandings emerging from the analysis of each other's vignettes and our discussion together of our new consciousness of school leadership brought about through our intentional and constitutive analyses. Puligandla (1970, 21) elucidates that, 'acts of consciousness are acts of meaning-giving and are thus constitutive of objects … the so-called intentional and constitutive analyses … are concerned with grasping the meanings and essences of objects as they present themselves to the primordial intuition.' These conscious meanings emerged through the reflective connexion between our embodiments, our internal states and our perceptions as female school leaders (Sheets-Johnstone 2015, 2020).

The following research question framed our phenomenological inquiry,

How can female school leaders lead with educational praxis within a Pakistani private urban school context?

Critics of autoethnographic studies have usually raised issues of a lack of 'value-free neutrality' (Cuenca 2020, 464) in such studies, and have outlined how these studies can be 'self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualised' (Stahlke Wall 2016, 1). However, the aim of this research study has been to produce personal practical knowledge of the two leaders situated within the nineties decade and the twenty-twenties decade, hence having value-free neutrality is inapplicable to this autoethnographic study as it becomes unnecessary within this research paradigm (Berry and Loughran 2002). As Cuenca (2020, 464) discusses, 'the validity of self-study research is not found in its objective distance but instead in its transparency about the role of the practitioner/researcher in naturalistic settings'. This was the researcher stance undertaken by the authors of this autoethnographic self-study into the lived experiences of female school leaders.

In order to build up rigour within this study (Stahlke Wall 2016), we personally and collectively investigated ourselves, sharing and expressing what school leadership is as lived experience for us through the use of phenomenological principles and practices of inquiry. Through curated narrative vignettes (Hughes and Huby 2012), we crafted our combined experiences and leadership perspectives across two periods, the nineties and the twenty-twenties, in urban Pakistani contexts. Vignettes within educational leadership research follow as elsewhere, a phenomenological research tradition through lived experiences of field participants and are used as tools for studying phenomena (Ammann 2018). Van Manen suggests, 'the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence' (Van Manen 1990, 36). Curated narrative vignettes gave us the freedom to have autonomy as individuals over the sharing of anecdotes of our lived experiences (Van Manen 1990) while setting boundaries on what we wrote

through four writing prompts and set word lengths for our vignettes. Our four writing prompts were:

a. Becoming a school leader …
b. Thriving as a school leader …
c. Challenged as a school leader …
d. Developing strong Pakistani female school leaders …

We used collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013) to combine our individual views as a collective depiction of female school leadership within non-western contexts. Using this personalised process of individual and collaborative autoethnography (Chang 2021) in our narration of lived experiences was distinctly insightful while we reflectively interrogated the space of female school leadership within a Pakistani context. Collaborative autoethnography provided a formal self-exploratory framing of ourselves, even though each of our narratives was related to mutually selected and specific areas of leadership experiences, leadership practices, leadership interests and leadership concerns (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Lowery 2018).

We formed and curated our narrative vignettes using the following process to ensure 'quality, rigor and usefulness of academic research' was maintained (Stahlke Wall 2016, 2):

(1) *Collaborative Initial Discussions*. We met together three times via Zoom to initially discuss our experiences as senior-level school leaders and find relevance in looking at a gendered perspective on school leadership. We agreed that our personal narratives presented as written text would emphasise an engendered school leadership perspective across a three-decade gap in our lived experiences.

(2) *Agreed Writing Approach*. Using a shared Google folder, allowed ease of access to each other's thinking, writing and sharing of reflections while initially drafting our leadership stories. We agreed on a timeline for writing and a schedule of meetings for the in-between writing times. We gave ourselves an approximate 1000-word limit for our final curated leadership vignettes framed through four writing prompts. We agreed to write separately to each prompt and on our own, and in the absence of providing ourselves more prescriptive framing of the writing structure or approach, as we wanted this reflective process to be unique, distinctive and deeply personal.

(3) *Inter- and Intra-discussions while writing*. We met online as the narratives around the four prompts took shape, sharing our experiences through inter-discussions after writing short personal accounts for each prompt on our own. Later, we individually revisited and rethought our primary data as a collective of four personal accounts (De Vries 2012) on our own and,

through intra-discussions within ourselves, reshaped these accounts into our 1000-word individually curated narratives presented.

(4) *Phenomenological Analysis.* Next, we analysed each other's curated narratives together. This included using phenomenological analyses of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Moya 2014) to interrogate the notion of Pakistani female school leadership as lived experience (Merleau-Ponty 2012) with an educational praxis lens applied to it. We agreed to provide individual analyses for each other's vignettes, beginning with a concentrated reading of each other's vignettes while using hermeneutical phenomenological practices (Van Manen 2016), analysing and interrogating emerging notions of gendered educational leadership within them. We discussed our analyses of the curated vignettes and further refined the analyses together. We thus affirmed the importance of the individually curated vignette and engaged each other in drawing out individual and collective interpretations from the vignettes in our discussions (Chang 2021).

(5) *Researcher's Position.* Both researchers (one novice and the other experienced) in this study have worked as female school leaders within the private school sector of Pakistan. As female school leaders, the researchers recognised common intersectionalities used, as an autobiographical lens, such as their religious beliefs, Anglo-Indian multi-ethnic cultural backgrounds, gender and middle-class socio-economic status, to present their lived experiences through mutually selected and specific areas of leadership experiences, practices, interests and concerns (Holmes 2020). This collaborative enterprise through two curated leadership vignettes and its analytical and interrogative discussion provides a close-up personal glimpse into the socio-cultural values of middle-class female school leaders and their educational leadership mindsets within Pakistani urban schools.

This process allowed us to have our individual voices as Pakistani urban female school leaders amplified while textually forming our collective understandings together. It provided a breadth of thinking, individually and collectively, on female school leadership and a depth of reported lived experiences with points of difference and junctures of commonality drawn out. One limitation of this study is that it is focused on the narratives of two leaders in Pakistani urban schools in two main cities, Karachi and Islamabad, and is therefore not representative of all middle-class urban private schools across Pakistan.

Findings

The 1990s curated school leadership vignette

Becoming a school leader ...   In the 1990s, I was appointed as Vice-Principal at an urban school in Karachi. I could not believe that the Principal and the Director felt I

was a good option. I was in my twenties and thought one needed to be much older before joining senior leadership. Having previously been a teacher and middle-level leader coordinating Science or Mathematics faculties, I was now in senior leadership. In Pakistan, school leaders usually get selected or nominated by others more experienced or above them. My principal was a great mentor, using a shared leadership model, she was constantly guiding me in developing my leadership skills while we developed an instructional model across primary and secondary levels, annually lead and managed teaching and learning processes, annually reviewed the assessment process, engaged in teacher recruitment and appraisal, timetabling, resource management and revising the co-curricular activities across the school amongst many other responsibilities that emerge within a school year. Young leaders, if chosen for a role, need to be given the space to grow their own capabilities, but they essentially need mentors. I had three: the principal and director at the school and my own mother, who was a school principal. These mentors helped me shape my leadership philosophy early on, so I felt less like an impostor and more like a leader. Their encouragement, support, and advice proved invaluable for me as an early-career principal. I remember often discussing with them how to deal with teachers, especially older experienced teachers who felt I was still green behind the ears, and also how to mentor younger teachers. We had mostly female teachers on staff and a handful of male teachers. I remember creating a new participative managerial system that helped my team envision ways in which we could become a strongly-positioned school. I remember my first year, I was given fewer leadership responsibilities and got more modelling on how to lead. It takes time to grow a leader in their roles and it needs to be nurtured, not rushed, if we want them to grow in these roles.

Thriving as a school leader ... I got to hire a brilliant female Secondary teacher and then mentored her regularly. She was intelligent and talented but lacked self-confidence. She sat in the interview, putting herself down. I remember going over her Master's thesis that she brought to the interview and thinking about her amazing research skills. I asked her if she enjoyed being creative and inspiring others, and her eyes lit up with enthusiasm. I asked if she wanted to turn around two subjects – Geography and History, by transforming our students into active learners using a project-based approach. She was very keen. The principal and director agreed to appoint her. She turned out to be one of our best teachers on staff, doing wonders in Geography and History through active learning methods employed in her teaching practice, motivating students to learn. I had seen my mother encourage new teachers to be great teachers, not just good teachers or even ordinary teachers. I had seen the principal doing the same, and, through this experience, I felt like a leader because I had encouraged a young capable person to have hope and self-confidence in herself becoming an outstanding teacher-leader. This experience earned me my stripes as a school leader. We often spent time together working on how she wanted the curriculum taught and how she wanted

actively engaged students through no-cost-low-cost innovations she created. She rewrote assessments and worked with the Art, Mathematics, English and Science teachers building up cross-curricular enquiry projects for our students. Through her initiatives, the students became more inquisitive and resourceful in their own learning. By adopting a participative managerial approach, my teachers were empowered to dream, explore, experiment, and grow their own teaching pedagogies and beliefs about learning. And as their mentor leader, I was learning just as much from them.

Challenged as a school leader ... I had three female senior teachers who challenged my decision-making on a regular basis. I found they would bypass me and go to the Principal with negative feedback on initiatives that I had taken in curriculum, assessment, staff selection, or even time-tabling. They would use their previous relationship with the Principal to try to undermine my leadership of staff. These experiences left me feeling like an impostor on the job because I found it unnerving to find this constant dismissal of my expertise as a leader and the high level of gossip-mongering. Over time, I learnt through my principal how to involve these teachers as critical friends in decision-making processes. By continuing to open up spaces for collaborative decision-making in consultation with the principal and director and by giving them voice and agency, we were able to maintain a certain level of positivity and help them develop their trust in my skills as an educational leader. I don't think this would have been possible without the support of my senior leaders, and I think this mentoring helped me grow as a leader.

Developing strong female Pakistani school leaders requires ... Pakistani female school leaders to develop assertive skills; exercising their voice and agency. There is a wider patriarchal system that women find themselves subjected to and one that has strong uncrossable boundaries. This system affects female school leaders as they exercise authority within their schools, especially those working just under the principal or in middle leadership roles. These female school leaders and teachers need to develop their skills in both being assertive and in effectively using distributed leadership practices at the organisational level so that there is a shift from a person-centric leadership approach to an organisation-centric leadership approach that supports females in their educational leadership roles. Finally, building up the skills of female school leaders in learning how to strategically plan, administer and manage their organisations is essential as well. This is strongly connected with how much social and psychological capital they have developed within themselves as well as within other early and mid-career female teachers and leaders.

Analysis of this curated narrative

The lived experiences of the 1990s leader indicate how in Pakistan many female leaders are nominated by senior school leaders into their leadership roles,

indicating this as a strong structural enabler. The findings suggest that mentoring new leaders and aspirants into their leadership roles is developed through a strong educational praxis allowing cultural-discursive dimensions of mentoring to be set up within schools where the creativity and innovation of new teachers get nurtured. Within a strongly patriarchal society, the power hegemonies of senior teachers and leaders influence and potentially become structural barriers for early-career leaders as the 1990s leader discusses in her vignette. By developing a strong positionality of moral purpose and collaboratively-active environments, female school leaders are able to engineer meaningful transformations through their leadership practices. This occurs more purposefully when operating in environments where their leadership skills are continuously mentored and nurtured as the findings indicate for the 1990s leader. This directly impacts the social-political dimension of practice architectures collaboratively developed by these teachers and leaders through the moral purpose of their educational praxis. The findings indicate how female school leaders have previously been teachers, bringing their pedagogical understandings into their leadership roles. The findings identify that the material-economic dimension of practice architecture may be considered so that these leaders can develop managerial skills as private school leaders, leading their schools with moral purpose and strategic intent, proactively addressing internal and external patriarchal norms that are traditional, intentional and socially contextualised.

The 2020s curated school leadership vignette

Becoming a school leader … It was my first job and I had completed my undergraduate degree. I started as an information technology teacher at a school in Islamabad. I was there for about 2 or 3 years and would help out whenever with issues related to computers, networking or the Internet. And you know, go the extra mile. I had been at the school for three years when the Principal and middle school coordinator informed me that they would like me to become the high school coordinator. During the interview, they felt I was right for the role. I was shocked at their choice of me to become a senior leader. As a high school coordinator, I would coordinate and work with a wider group of senior teachers. I was just in my twenties and wondered how I would tell them what to do, ask for their results, or, you know, call for their class attendance and conduct coordination meetings with them. Looking back, I was fortunate because I had these two excellent mentors. I remember I would sit with them often, and they would encourage me and guide me. They would always listen to what I had to say, and through their belief in me, I was able to lead and stay on for 6 years. I was the third highest-paid leader on staff. It was also encouraging that the teaching staff were happy with my leadership. I still have former colleagues tell me they missed me and my way of getting things

done, having meetings and running things at the school. This recognition by colleagues helps me affirm that I'm a good school leader.

Thriving as a school leader …   A few years ago, I joined an elite private school network following the Cambridge education system as a senior leader and worked with high school students. When the pandemic hit in 2020, all teachers at the school had to switch to online teaching. I had a unique experience of showing highly experienced teachers how to use technology and to use online teaching tools. These were highly experienced teachers but transforming face to face skills to online teaching was a novel experience for them and they felt daunted by this task. Before I could rapidly train the entire high school staff on conducting online classes, I had to first train myself and go through appraising multiple online learning management systems on my own as I was the information technology teacher at the school and the proverbial in-house IT expert. We had a very short timeline to figure out how we would roll out online teaching because the yearly schedule, including examinations, was set by Cambridge in the United Kingdom and we had to follow them. Of course, this was when the pandemic was at its strongest. I remember, in the beginning, having numerous conversations with my teachers, who felt they did not fully know if they could teach online classes. I remember gently walking each teacher through detailed consultations, helping them set up their online classes, and helping them learn firsthand how to take attendance, manage online classes and upload teaching resources. We worked together as they learnt how to share information with their students and peers, track their student's work, and utilise technology to continue educating our students and not have them fall behind. During the lockdowns, I was on standby all five days of the week in trouble-shooting any arising issues faced by the teaching staff or by the students. There were many days when I found this situation challenging, but having my principal's support and high appreciation by our teachers for this support kept me motivated to lead them through the length of the lockdowns over 2020–2022. I led and carried out this support independently for over sixty teachers in the school, along with students and parents. Sharing my knowledge of technology and helping my staff, students and school community when they most needed my help was, for me as a senior leader, an equally rewarding and humbling experience, and while it was challenging, I felt that I had thrived in this leadership role as we got through a crisis.

Challenged as a school leader …   I had been in my senior leadership role for three years when my supervising leader left for personal reasons, and the leadership role became vacant. This leader had been a wonderful mentor going out of her way to develop and grow me into a leader. We worked respectfully and collaboratively together on school improvement projects. After she left, when I asked if I could be promoted and take on her role at my annual performance review meeting, I was refused because I was not popular enough with

those in the main office as my work was not visible to them and credit for my efforts were given to my supervising leader. This dismissive response deeply hurt me. It was challenging to hear that because I had worked very hard over the pandemic and expected they would have noticed that for themselves or asked the teachers at my school to vouch for my efforts over the pandemic. They stated that they needed a more experienced and seasoned leader in the role. This floored me as I had now been leading for almost ten years. They felt I could only be promoted if I worked on visibly showing myself to be a better and more competent leader than the one above me. I felt this jarred my moral compass as I believed in working as a team and not in conflict with the person above me. However, having previously seen this political tension happen across different campuses, I realised first-hand how deep-seated and rooted this problem was across this school network. So, while the main office was highly satisfied with my performance and wanted me to continue in my current leadership role, there was no succession planning or career growth ladder developed within this school network for the kind of career progression that I had anticipated. I felt discouraged. I resigned from my position in 2023. After ten years, I needed a break and time to reassess my priorities. For now, this pause to reflect on things achieved and things that I have chosen to leave behind feels great.

Developing strong female Pakistani school leaders requires … Pakistani female leaders require focused mentoring. Females prefer teaching as it has shorter working hours and is more family-friendly. The way leaders are currently chosen is based on their years of experience but that means they bring fewer leadership and management skills necessary for schools today. I had a postgraduate degree in leadership which helped me in my leadership. Education-focused degrees focus more on learners and the teaching and learning process. School leaders need to know more about human resource management, strategic planning, succession planning and customer relations. For example, how to deal with our diverse groups of parents coming in from the elite to those from regional areas or a broad range of teachers with those new to the profession and those that are well-seasoned. These foci are not covered in education-focused degrees, whereas school leaders need these skills to lead good schools. Mentoring by more experienced school leaders is very effective to onboard new leaders. However, it should be backed with actual skillset development tailored around the needs of the individual leader. If in-service training focuses on compliance, it will not nurture and build leaders who, in effect, will be unable to nurture and build the next generation of school leaders.

Analysis of this curated narrative

Female school leaders in the 2020s have a number of common structural enablers like those in the 1990s. They are still being nominated as leaders by

those above them who again are mostly female leaders and their leadership potential gets recognised and developed over time through role models and mentors who take the time to work with them and guide them in developing their leadership praxis. This leader has found that in her time, information technology plays a major role in how practice architectures are created, especially within urban private schools. The cultural-discursive influence of mentoring was seen in this narrative as she finds herself being supported throughout her career by female mentors. Likewise, the social-political challenges of private schooling in Pakistan has emerged as a structural barrier, where career progression and development get stymied by traditional and conventional paternalistic archetype roles ascribed to senior leaders within private school settings. These archetype leaders are popular and know how to play the political game within school networks where hegemonies of power and politics may constrict early-career female leaders in developing an ambitious career track for themselves, especially if those hegemonies are misaligned with their own moral purpose of leading with others. The danger of this power struggle is that a number of capable young female leaders might leave the profession due to the patriarchal forces embedded within these organisational assemblages in private schools. The fact that teaching remains a feminised profession within the current decade garners support for what this leader also discusses as the importance of targeted professional growth for female school leaders, especially when considering the material-economic dimensions of female school leadership in this context such as developing their management skills. A culturally relevant leadership praxis may provide enabling agents and practices for early-career female school leaders to develop aspirational career tracks. The findings identify that this generation of female professionals consider career progression, competitive wages and potential promotions as essential professional enablers. If strong and caring female school leaders are to remain longer in this profession, workforce policies and practices may consider the provision of professional assemblages that give them due recognition and equitable fair endowments for the efforts they put into their leadership practices. As discussed in this vignette, these early-career female leaders have strong moral purposes that orient how they move through their professional careers and how they engineer their career tracks. However, the findings suggest that if they are not looked after, burn-out and leaving the profession are grim realities that may be faced in this decade of high complexities.

Discussion

In examining the lived experiences of these two female leaders, it is evident that leading with educational praxis within self-managed urban private schools in Pakistan is enabled through practice architectures that address the inequalities

and inequities faced by female school leaders in their roles as educational professionals. In examining educational praxis within this study, the practice architectures framework (Wilkinson et al. 2010), discussed earlier, was used for the analysis of the sayings, doings and relatings of both these leaders. This, provided the basis for phenomenological considerations to be made across the three dimensions of this framework to explore and better understand the phenomenon of culturally relevant female school leadership within urban Pakistani school contexts.

First dimension of the practice architecture framework – the cultural-discursive dimension of educational praxis

Both leaders found that female teachers such as themselves were nominated to senior leadership roles by other senior leaders in this context. However, due to a shortage of female school leaders, those who remain in this role require strong role models and mentors as a regular part of their ongoing leadership development. These participants had been trained as professional teachers in patriarchal organisational assemblages, where most females do not have assertive personalities that will challenge the status quo where needed (Blackmore 2002). Instead, an acquiescence to the cultural-discursive (Wilkinson et al. 2010) status quo is immanent within female school leaders working in urban private schools or school networks, eventually resulting in burnout as in the case of the 2020s leader. These findings have strong organisational implications, research also indicates that Pakistani female school leaders continue to require structural enablers such as strong inter-generational mentors (Raftery et al. 2022) and professional learning communities to help them feel more professionally secure and build their confidence as leaders (Arroyo and Bush 2023), especially when they are early-career school leaders (Majocha et al. 2017). Through provision of enabling power assemblages and caring and collegial management practices early-career female school leaders, such as the 2020s school leader, may flourish within nurturing spaces of empowerment and solidarity. This provision comes in the form of strong coaching approaches (Sampat, Nagler, and Prakash 2020) for teacher leadership practices (Majocha et al. 2017; Nguyen, Harris, and Ng 2019) that are individualised, intensive, sustained, context-specific and relevantly focused (Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan 2018) within their school contexts (Harris 2020). The findings across both vignettes suggests that a cultural-discursive dimension allowing both these leaders to lead with educational praxis was enabled through their strong mentors who had worked with them in shaping and structuring their educational praxis so that they lead through it. Their early experiences of being closely mentored by their principals helped them to courageously navigate through cultural-discursive structural barriers and find their own leadership praxis in their roles as educational leaders.

Second dimension of the practice architecture framework – the social-political dimension of educational praxis

Both leaders experienced strong patriarchal structures that disabled their leadership and challenged their educational praxis. For the 1990s leader, this emerged as other senior female teachers found dismantling the practice architecture she used to transform educational practices within her school as she led with educational praxis (Kemmis and Smith 2008). For the 2020s leader, this emerged when she was asked to position herself as a popular (charismatic) leader within her school network. These lived experiences are similar to the findings discussed in another study (Murakami and Törnsen 2017), where structural inequities challenge the sustained success of female educational leaders. The female leaders in the current study faced inequity structured against them at many levels, making their work with colleagues and supervising leaders much more challenging and their own leadership position precariously positioned along this socio-political dimension of their practice architecture (Wilkinson et al. 2010). These leaders found that existing inequities with organisational assemblages (Raza, Gilani, and Waheed 2021) directly impacted their job satisfaction, with one feeling like an impostor and the other strongly discouraged by the experience and convinced to pause her educational leadership role while she re-grouped her own self-worth and identity. In both cases, this led to lower perceptions of efficacy amongst these leaders.

Third dimension of the practice architecture framework – the material-economic dimension of educational praxis

The importance of developing individualised female leadership programmes for early-career educational leaders came across both the narratives while examining their doings, sayings and relatings along the material-economic dimension of educational praxis (Wilkinson et al. 2010). The findings suggests that this may be done by redressing existing biases, discriminatory practices, and systemic challenges (Aziz et al. 2017; Murakami and Törnsen 2017) faced by female leaders during selection or promotion and during their development as leaders (Gipson et al. 2017). As both leaders identified, how culturally relevant (Baig 2011; Shah 2023), morally purposed and collaborative practice architectures (Akram et al. 2022), through tailored female leadership development programmes (Rarieya 2007) may assist in nurturing and developing female school leaders within urban private school contexts. As this small-scale study identified through its findings material and economic resourcing that may be presented through focused female leadership programmes, may assist many female leadership aspirants in finding opportunities for independent decision-making and growth of their teacher leadership skills (Afzal and Rizvi 2021) and practices (Nguyen, Harris, and Ng 2019). These findings across lived experiences in the

1990s and 2020s also indicate, that this consideration may better assist the next generation of female school leaders to build a strong educational praxis that leads to positive educational change within Pakistani schools (Rizvi and Elliott 2007).

The latest Pakistan Education Statistics 2020–2021 report (GOP 2023) indicates fewer female teachers (36%) are getting trained to enter the teaching workforce as compared to previous years. This may be a serious indication of a reverse in trends across this decade as more career-oriented females are not interested in joining the teaching profession due to limited avenues for career growth. The 2020s leader paused her career after active service rendered over a decade due to a lack of material-economic development being foreseen in her professional career as a school leader. The 1990s leader referred to an urgency for targeted skill development of female school leaders so that they could strategically navigate social-political and cultural-discursive dimensions while developing their practice architecture. Through their vignettes both these leaders identified a need for targeting professional development, mentoring and coaching for aspiring and current female school leaders as this would assist them in staying the course and continuing their growth in these leadership roles.

Conclusion

The preparation and development of female school leaders within the Pakistani private urban school context is urgent as the number of female aspiring teachers are decreasing rapidly in this decade (GOP 2023). The current national educational policy (GOP 2017) supports both gender equity and parity as well as the promotion of private sector schooling as a structural enabler. This small-scale, collaborative autoethnographic study has explored the importance for policy-makers to further support private sector schools and school systems in ensuring that there are enabling power assemblages and caring and collegial management practices in place for the ongoing development of female school leaders within the Pakistani urban private school context.

As practitioners, private school leaders and system leaders are the front-face structural enablers whose efforts may lead towards developing the leadership praxis across 615,455 private school female teachers working in Pakistani private schools today (GOP 2023). As this study identified, their role in mentoring and coaching aspiring female school leaders within their school contexts cannot be understated. When appointing female school leaders, the provision of mentoring and coaching programmes that helps develop their leadership praxis and management skills is necessary as this will assist in continuing to disrupt patriarchal norms positioned against professional women in Pakistan. Likewise, the implications for those private urban school female teachers aspiring to be school leaders is to focus on developing their professional orientation around moral purpose in order to lead with a strong educational praxis.

Lastly, universities and education institutes that focus on educational leadership development must focus on developing leadership studies that provide this future female workforce with skills that will develop their educational praxis as they lead within the private school sector in Pakistan. More large-scale research studies need to be conducted in urban and rural contexts in response to this small-scale exploratory study that further ascertain enabling factors and conditions that encourage females to join the teaching workforce and aspire towards becoming school leaders exercising educational praxis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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