INTRODUCTION

Headteachers grapple with multifarious challenges, dilemmas, issues and problems in their headship roles. In Pakistan, they have no formal preparation before becoming headteachers. Therefore, they join their new positions, associated with new demands and different nature of tasks, without any appropriate training. However, how these new headteachers without any headship training, confront with diverse problems and meeting with expectations from diverse stakeholders, is a question that very few researchers have discussed in literature.

It appears that very often such heads have recourse to their teaching experiences, beliefs and critical incidents. These teaching experiences, beliefs, and critical incidents tend to guide them in making decisions, facing challenges, resolving conflicts and dilemmas, and dealing with overall problems in the school.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it explores the co-relationship between prior professional experiences and decision making of a newly promoted head teacher and unpacks its influence on the status-quo in the educational leadership in the context of Pakistan. Therefore, the findings from this study may be utilized to improve the system generally by bringing in changes at policy level. The scope of the study does not undermine its significance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to gain insight into the process of how headteacher’s decisions are informed by her prior professional experiences, in coping up with the challenges in initial years in a well-established Government Secondary School in Pakistan and to explore the other factors which, tend to influence a beginning headteacher’s decisions in dealing with the challenges.
Statement of the Problem

The importance of the headteacher in the school is the focal point in many educational research studies. For example, Hallinger and Leithwood (1994) cited in Shafa (2003) say, “In fact it has almost become an article of faith that the capacity of schools to improve teaching and learning is strongly mediated by the quality of leadership exercised by the principal” (p.17). But in many developing countries including Pakistan, very little effort has been made to understand this role. Consequently, in Pakistan the quality of leadership in Government schools, remained almost unimproved for almost four decades. What seems evident is that decision-making styles are transferred from one head to another due to many reasons, such as insufficient and inappropriate preparation for the post.

One of the criteria for becoming a headteacher in Government schools in Pakistan is seniority, which is mainly based on teaching experiences. One would agree that this criterion has some role to play in the transmission of headship role in schools. As Feiman-Nemser (1983) argues that, “students internalize models of teaching which are activated when they become teachers” (p.153). Probably teachers internalize models of management as subordinates in the school and reactivate them on their turn, when they become headteachers. So, there is a need to explore how prior professional experiences influence decision-making. Hence, this study is an attempt to unpack the influence of prior professional experiences on decision-making of headteachers in dealing with challenges in the initial years.

Research Question

How are a headteacher’s decision-making processes informed by her prior professional experiences in dealing with challenges in the initial years of a headship, in a Government Secondary School in Pakistan?
Initial years: Refer to one to two years’ experience as a headteacher.

The assumption of the study was that headteachers’ prior professional experiences do influence her decision-making in dealing with the challenges in the initial years of headship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the literature review of the areas this study is exploring.

Decision-Making and Headteachers in Schools

After realizing the fact that effectiveness of the school to a greater extent depends on the administrative ability of its headteacher (Klein, 2002), headteachers “are faced with more decision-making responsibilities than ever before” (Terry, 1995, Radical Change: Methodology of Empowerment, third last paragraph). Therefore, Walden (1985) cited in Klein (2002) says that in many developed/developing countries, before recruitment headteachers are assessed from different dimensions of their personality including their decision-making skills to check their competence. There competencies include but not limited to; good interpersonal skills and ability to show professional responsibility (Prickett and Richardson, 1992, cited in Benaim and Humphreys, 1997). However, competence in problem-solving and decision-making is being recognized as the most important characteristic of the successful headteachers (Terry, 1995) because, headteachers “participate in initiation of various key decisions, in allocation of resources for their implementation, in execution of plans, and evaluation of the outcome” (Klien, 2002, p. 119). Thus, the way headteachers make decisions can bear long lasting consequences for the school, so the underlying philosophy of decision-making process has also been given attention in literature. For example, Klien (2002) says “many of the decisions in the field of education rest on value-based or probability-based judgments” (p. 119). The value-based judgments, to a larger degree, are embedded in personal experiences as Griffin (2003) cites Bolin
(n.d.) that “experiences create deeply ingrained attitudes and beliefs that constitute a ‘latent philosophy of education’” (p.207). So, in many cases, headteacher’s decisions are consistent with their beliefs/values about their philosophy of administration (Bolin, n.d.). Rowland (1992) cited in Klien, (2002, p.119) argues that “specific features of decision-making process may also be examined by comparing the manner in which experts and novices make decisions.” The difference between experts and beginners has also been studied in the fields of teaching and of educational administration. Studies on effective school heads identify three major influencing factors on the decision-making of headteachers among which, the most important one is “professional background, including their professional training courses” (Khaki, 2005, p.56). This study is an attempt to explore the co-relationship of headteacher’s decision-making and prior professional experiences in dealing with challenges in initial years in headship in a Government school.

What Facilitates New Headteachers in Decision-Making Process?

Shafa (2003) argues that headteachers’ approach to deal with challenges depends mainly on their value system, and personal and professional visions. Personal values facilitate their decisions in both technical and managerial nature of challenges. Their personal values are deep-rooted in their experiences. Similarly, Daresh (2004) uses ‘lenses’ for already existing mental models of the headteachers. He emphasizes “each [decision] is made though certain lenses that individuals bring to the job and the sources of those lenses vary” (p.14).

What are the Factors that Influence Decision-making?

Personal Values decision maker makes decisions that are consistent to his/her values. Lack of Confidence also influences decision-making. This is true in cases where an individual with authority is of relatively low status (Enayati, 2002). Status and Power is also a potential
influencing factor on decision-making process (Enayati, 2002). **Social Factors**, according to Jackson, 1996; cited in Enayati (2002) social factor does influence the decision-making process. Social factor refers to chances of agreements and disagreement of others who are likely to be influenced by the decision.

**Relationship between Decision-Making, Prior Professional Experiences and Challenges**

According to (Descriptive approaches to decision-making, (n.d.), there is a relationship between prior professional experiences to address challenges, because “factors such as existing knowledge and previous experience of similar situations combine in the individual to create a unique body of knowledge and professional process informed by, but not restricted to the information learned in formal education or training.” So this accumulated knowledge from prior professional experiences in brain memory become activated when the headteacher comes across similar or opposite situation and hence make decision, which is consistent to the pre-existing mental pattern (brain physiology). It gives clear relationship between past and present. In the context of school it can be referred to headteacher’s prior experience and decision-making in dealing with the challenges in her/his present role. Likewise, Ubben, Hughes and Norris (2001) cited in Khaki (2005), say that principals bring in their values, beliefs and philosophies to schools and in light of them “heads chose what to follow and what to ignore” (p.275). Khaki (2005) further found that the government headteacher, in his study of three headteachers, drew on his professional experiences when he had to make decisions.

**THE METHODOLOGY**

This inquiry was about exploring the relationship between decision-making and prior professional experiences of a headteacher in dealing with challenges in initial years as a headteacher in a Government Secondary School in Pakistan. It demanded qualitative research
paradigm because qualitative research offers valuable ways to explore the qualitative world of human beings (Creswell, 1998). A case-study tradition was chosen for this exploration because case study offers explanations for the way things happen (Creswell, 1998).

**Research Context and Research Sample**

This study was conducted in Pearl\(^1\) Government Higher Secondary School (PGHSS)\(^2\) in the Metropolitan city of Pakistan. This school was established in 1958 and is well-reputed in the locality. This in-depth case-study was conducted with a newly promoted headteacher. She was selected on purposive criteria and was proved beneficial for the study. For anonymity, she will be called Nadia in this research paper.

**Data Collection Processes**

Looking at the complexity of the research question, multiple tools of data collection for example; interview, observation, document analysis, and informal conversation were utilized to view various dimensions of the inquiry niche (Yin, 1989). On the whole, five hour interviews of varying durations- from 20 minutes to one hour, were conducted. All interviews were audio-tapped in Urdu as per her convenience, which was later on, after transcription, translated into English.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis started from the very first meeting with headteacher and continued till the last interview. Color codes were used for dividing the emerging themes into categories.

**Findings**

The main findings are presented into the following themes.

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\(^1\) Pseudo name

\(^2\) Higher Secondary Schools means grade 6\(^{th}\) to grade 12\(^{th}\) (grade 11\(^{th}\) and 12\(^{th}\) are called Higher Secondary Classes in the context of Pakistan).
Teaching and Learning

Data reflects that Nadia considers the area of teaching and learning of her interest, her top priority and the ultimate goal of the school. She does acknowledge her experience as a teacher. She believes that her previous experience in teaching is facilitating her role as a head in decision-making, in areas related to classroom such as checking students’ registers, setting timetable and understanding teachers’ and students’ problems and their needs. For example she said “If I would not have that experience in teaching, I would not be in a position to check results …. But today I am aware of rules in the school, so I am in a position to deal with those” (Interview, 06/05/2005).

Leading and Managing Staff

Leading and managing staff seem to be more challenging for Nadia in terms of decision-making in dealing with challenges. As data reveal that Nadia joined the post with some expectations regarding her ‘power parcel’ (Benaim & Humphreys, 1997) and ‘order and obey’ authority of headteacher. However, she said, “I cannot control teachers; they are spoiled by our previous headteacher.” (Interview, 25/04/05). It seems that Nadia strongly believes that headteachers are controlling authorities. This may be coming from her own accumulated experiences when she used to observe headteachers of her own times, when she was not involved in any kind of decision-making and was never allowed going to the office unless she was called for.

Efficient and Effective Deployment of Staff

Data reveals that Nadia has developed a mental pattern of efficient and effective deployment of staff which is mainly based on ‘order and obey’ and ‘strong content knowledge’. So while making decisions, she refers to the same criteria.
Strategic Direction and Development of the School

Data suggest that more than a decision maker, Nadia sees her role as an implementer of decisions in strategic direction and development of the school. She believes that in bureaucratic context of Government schools, she cannot take major decisions for the school. This view is suggested by Oplatka (2004) that in most developing countries, principals’ power is severely limited. However, for implementation of various Government policies, she certainly makes decisions. Most of her decisions in this particular area do not seem to be directly influenced by her professional experience, rather she consults experienced headteachers of other schools or the senior clerk of her own school.

Resources and Accountability

In arranging resources for effective implementation of curriculum, most of Nadia’s decisions are based on prior professional experiences. However, in accountability, there seems a mixed approach to decision-making; some decisions are influenced by her own prior professional experiences, while others are dependent on some external (who are not directly involved) factors.

The Influence of Headteacher’s Mental Model on Her Decision-Making

There are two different approaches coming out from her interview and observations about influences of her mental models on her decision-making process. There are some areas, mostly in resolving staffing issues, where she is purposely following the decisions which were made previously by her headteachers and justifies herself for that. For example, she said, “yes, of course I follow them because I believe we should follow good things” (Interview, 25/04/05). Another equally important approach which is contradictory to the first one is that she feels compelled to follow whatever were the practices of previous the heads.

CONCLUSIONS
Synthesis of the Findings

In her new position as a head, Nadia is facing challenges in matters which are internal to the school, external to the school, and those related to staff and staffing issues. These are the areas which Dunning’s (1996) study has also identified as challenging areas for novice headteachers (cited in Benaim and Humphreys, 1997).

Latent Philosophy of Education: the Driving Force for Nadia

This study showed that Nadia is very much influenced by her prior professional experiences in making decisions in dealing with challenges in Teaching and Learning. Nadia’s philosophy of education has provided her with a lens of her personal values, which is being displayed in her decisions. For example, the rationale behind her decision of not allowing teachers to teach science was, “not every one can teach science” (Interview, 25/04/05). This depicts her personal values in her decision-making, which is rooted in her past professional experiences.

‘Lack of Confidence’ and ‘Status and Power’: Influencing Factors

Nadia’s decisions in the area of efficient and effective deployment of the staff were found very much influenced by her mental pattern and her constant recourse to past experience. The nature of challenges could not come out very clear in this area. Either, she did not think of deploying staff in their most effective ways, or due to her burden of managerial task, she was not yet able to recognize the strengths of individual teachers. It was found that she looked for ‘quick fix’ recipes for dealing with day-to-day challenges. It was found that besides her prior professional experiences ‘lack of confidence’ and ‘status and power’ were also influencing her decision-making. These two factors are being identified by Enayati (2002) as two of the influencing factors on individual’s decision-making. Because some of the teachers in the school
are senior and more educated than her, so lack of confidence is influencing her decisions in effective and efficient deployment of the staff. And due to Bureaucracy in Government, Nadia remains under pressure of higher authorities, and hence, ‘status and power’ is also influencing her decisions.

**Reflections and Questions for Further Exploration**

This study explored Nadia’s tendency in decision-making to choose the option from her prior experiences was adoptive rather than adaptive. How much of this dependency is on past experiences, is likely to facilitate the endeavors of bringing about a change in schools’ leadership and management in a Government school, is a question that I put forward for further exploration.

Further to this, this investigation identified influencing factors other than professional experiences, including pressure from higher authorities and lack of confidence. What are the implications for school improvement and students’ achievements in the light of this kind of pressure on school headteachers, is a question that needs to be explored in the context like that of Pakistan.

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