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# School Leadership in the Changing Context of School Education

## Abstract

*The role of school leadership is critical in determining the effectiveness of schools and thereby of learning. This paper examines the changing discourse around school leadership, with focus on academic leadership and distributed leadership in the context of the school as a professional learning community. It then goes on to examine ideas around accountability, and then proposes a framework for capacity building to ensure leadership is operationalized at not only the school but also at the systemic level.*

## Introduction

A question that often arise in the context of school education is – why are some schools more effective than others? The question becomes even more pertinent in the context of changing perceptions of schooling, as delineated in the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCERT, 2005). Although a decade and a half has passed since the NCF 2005, we are still struggling to translate the framework into reality. Hence the criticality of the question – what are the factors that drive student learning?

If one looks at the literature, in-depth qualitative studies in exceptional school settings, large scale quantitative studies of overall leader effects across schools and large scale quantitative studies on specific leadership practices provide evidence that among school-related factors, school leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student learning. (Corcoran, Schwartz, Weinstein, 2012; Dumay, Boonen, Van Damme, 2013; Gates, Hamilton, Martorell, et al., 2014; Hallinger, Bickman, Davis, 1996).

The second question that arises is – what kind of school leadership?

With changing discourse on education, the role of school leaders is also undergoing change – from managers and implementers, they are being viewed as drivers of school improvement. A cas e in point is the Bordia Committee, which states that "A pre-requisite for improvement of school management is to restore the pre-eminence of headmasters/principals". It follows that the capacity of school leaders must be oriented to fulfilling these enhanced expectations (MHRD, 2010).

While there is a paucity of clear recommendations on capacitating school leaders in most other policy documents, the 12th Five Year Plan for Teacher Education highlights the need for capacity building of school leaders, but it does that only in the areas of planning and management, and allocates a specific budget for it. (MHRD, 2012) Recent SSA and RMSA Joint Review Missions, particularly the 22nd SSA JRM, note the significance of good school leadership in ensuring quality, curbing student and teacher absenteeism and maintaining rapport with community. They also cite empirical evidence of a correlation between school leader performance and school quality (MHRD, 2015).

Thus, an understanding of the kind of

leadership schools need becomes imperative.

## Leadership in Schools

If a definition of leadership is sought, what emerges is that essentially it is a role or capability to give direction to something to be done. It involves setting the pace and directing others' energies in a manner that best helps achieve set objectives. A leader is one who chooses what is to be done, and coordinates efforts to achieve these objectives. But how does this work in education? After all, education is a process of engaging minds – can one approach work in all situations? Another question is, who or what influences educational processes? And isn't this also different in different situations? The question then arises, can academic leadership involve a role disassociated from any particular individual, which could be taken up by different members at different times?

In this sense, leadership could be 'distributed', wherein many members may share leadership depending on the task or occasion. This would imply collaboration and relationships within institutional structures, with the responsibility for school effectiveness shared among a much broader group of members than merely the school leader. This responsibility would go beyond a commitment to making the school effective, and would require building teachers' commitment and capacity to pursue the collective goals of the school (Camburn, Rowan, Taylor, 2003; Devos, Tuytens, Hulpia, 2014).

While academic leadership is usually associated with formal organisational position in schools, however, there are also informal leaders whose influence stems from their subject knowledge or skills with groups of learners, or individuals who can influence their peers, and sway views and attitudes. Thus, a teacher planning for her students' learning or a peer mentor is as much of a school leader as the school head. Also, a group of students who are part of a student committee must lead processes in that area (Copland, 2003; Hatcher, 2005).

If we try and understand what this academic leadership is, illustratively, it involves managing change, building consensus and promoting collaboration, advancing the development of students and teachers, setting and maintaining academic standards, disseminating information about and supporting implementation of programmes, and evaluating progress towards learning goals, amongst other responsibilities (Hargreaves, Fink, 2003; Nettles, Herrington, 2007; OECD, 2013).

In the current context, there is also a need for academic leaders to strike a balance between several extremes: direction versus giving leeway to autonomous professionals, monitoring versus support, and using structures and procedures versus creating a shared culture oriented towards student achievement. This would necessitate that education professionals work towards change in their own, and each other's educational practice for the better.

A perspective regarding academic leadership is also that it is a social influencing process – with who exerts influence, the nature of that influence, the purpose for the exercise of influence and its outcomes varying in situations. Thus, a teacher who is developing a plan for improving achievement should ideally be able to exert more influence on school and classroom processes than the school head, who is generally perceived to be in that role. Thus, academic leadership is not necessarily attached to a role and can be viewed as a process rather than a position of authority. In that sense, leadership roles may be through formal appointments, or may be assumed. The basic premise is that leadership is not an individual enterprise, but a shared enterprise, and individuals at every level should be able to lead (Opdenakker, Van Damme, 2007; Robinson, Viviane, 2007).

Thus, the school must be seen as a professional learning community, based on

the assumption that teacher professional knowledge is situated in their day-to-day experiences, and that it is best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experiences, with a commitment to improve their practice and therefore student learning. It follows that the system must be oriented to nurturing these professional learning communities.

## Accountability of School Leadership

A review of literature across the globe shows that accountability is primarily 'external', that is, it is focused on external demands. These external demands are driven by various types of external factors, which drive the focus of accountability of school leaders. The focus may be of different categories such as – school management, increasing admissions, meeting externally-set school standards, facilitating student learning, or school improvement. These factors are mainly driven by national policies, thrust areas in education, regulatory structures and approach to educational governance. Though different combinations of these categories of accountability may be dominant at one point and may change over time, one category that is quite established and often utilised (as evidenced by its usage in countries such as USA, UK, Australia, Canada, most other OECD countries, China etc.) is that of student learning outcomes, generally measured through standardised large scale tests (OECD, 2013; Stephenson, 2011).

This approach, with its narrow focus on immediate display of student learning outcomes relies on examinations and large scale testing as sources of evidence. However, if the system reorients itself to the wider perspective on school leadership discussed in the previous section, the approach would be to hold schools accountable on the basis of annual plans. The focus in this case would not only be student learning outcomes, but also contextual enablers and appropriate resourcing (both human and material) to

achieve these outcomes, as the sources of evidence would include these while assessing progress towards achieving annual goals. Such an assessment would lead to detailed feedback to the school, as well as advocacy for school improvement at the relevant quarters. This approach would also lead to 'collective efficacy' among all members of the school and staff, since they would be jointly involved in attaining the annual goals.

This collective efficacy would result in better learning outcomes, since it is characterized by higher levels of teacher collaboration for school improvement, and greater focus on teacher professional development, planning school improvement, and evaluating the curriculum. The basic assumption is that the school team as a whole can execute the action necessary to have positive effects on students and foster teachers' collective efficacy, which is a critical determinant of student learning (Stephenson, 2011; Wanzare, Da Costa, 2001).

## Framework for Capacity Building

The next question which must be addressed is – what is required to prepare school leaders with a strong sense of efficacy and the ability to take responsibility when required?

A strong association exists between an individual's professional learning experiences and their tendency to take on leadership roles as well as to engage in particular leadership practices – thus, the amount of professional development received is associated with higher levels of academic leadership.

However, this professional development to assume academic leadership must not be limited to school heads alone. The notion of teacher leadership is woven throughout discussions of teacher professionalism, thus necessitating an examination of pre-service teacher education, and of the content and processes of in-service teacher education. Capacity building of education functionaries is equally important, as they are the interface between the school and the system, and part

of the ecosystem which will influence, if not determine, the approach to school leadership (York-Barr, Duke, 2004).

The obvious question now is, what would be the curricular areas for building capacity in leadership? The first and most obvious is perspectives on education policy – understanding of legislative enablement like the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 and so on, besides national and state education policy, and their implementation on ground. This would help all members of the school understand the genesis of guidelines that define school processes.

An understanding of the structure of education – academic and administrative structures within the nation and the state, especially for school and teacher support – is also critical to be able to understand how the school is situated in the larger system, what kind of support it is entitled to, and how to advocate and attempt solutions involving the larger system

Framework on planning – Visioning, planning, reviewing, autonomy and accountability frameworks – are important not only for school heads, but also for teachers in order to be able to co-evolve a vision, values, goals and strategies for the school with all stakeholders, which in turn will guide planning processes and provide autonomous teachers with a framework for accountability and for shared monitoring and review.

An understanding of school processes and engagement with illustrations of 'good practices' is necessary to understand the nuances of school processes which will help develop an environment conducive to learning.

In addition, an understanding of educational change – dealing with imposed interventions/policy changes besides improving processes – help to build an understanding of how to change in response to both external changes as well as changes driven internally while 'owning the change'.

Engagement with educational perspectives – philosophical, psychological, sociological, historical – is necessary to understand the context in which schools evolved, their larger purpose and to understand learners and learning.

It is axiomatic that any one working in or with schools and children must have a deep understanding of curriculum – its development and review; current frameworks and curricula; relationship between curriculum, syllabus and textbooks. Curriculum transaction is central to schools – hence, leaders must have an understanding of what drives curriculum development and its areas for review – they must be able to contextualize it etc. themselves or to support teachers in contextualizing curriculum, extending learning opportunities for children, sourcing additional material. An understanding of pedagogy and assessment is a part of this larger framework.

In addition, education functionaries must have a deep understanding of teacher professional development so as to be able to plan teacher orientation/induction and school based support as well as to help schools assess teacher needs access support for them, and evolve a school-based performance management system.

While formal workshops that are spaces for conceptual engagement on specific issues, sustainable alternative and ongoing approaches, are also needed such as around interactions professional learning communities, which could be used for sharing experiences and peer learning in any of the areas. Regular meetings such as participation in the monthly cluster-level meeting, could also be used for discussions or presentations on a particular topic. There could be anchored by an identified facilitator along with follow-up/implementation-focussed discussions resulting in actions on the ground.

On-site support to help teachers to resolve issues on a daily basis in addition to implementation of policy and programmes, as well as understand the implications for the school and the classroom is also critical to ensure continual improvement. Exposure visits to other schools and sharing of best practices, learning from success stories, etc. are also desirable. Helping teachers conduct action research can be a viable means to develop teacher leaders.

## Conclusion

A fundamental rethinking of the content, structure, delivery and assessment of leadership learning is required to develop a framework for leadership, which will lead to academic leadership at different levels in the system and school. Political will and some incentives and reward system are other requirements for this field. Rather than 'measuring performance' a shift towards guiding and encouraging growth will provide a supportive environment, while at the same time a shared responsibility will ensure student learning.

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