Conceptions and factors associated with effective school leadership

ANAGHAA WAGH DISCUSSES THE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PHENOMENON FROM THE SCHOOL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVE.

Research on the dynamic question 'What is effective school leadership?' goes as far back as the 1980s. Bell, Bolam & Cubillo suggested in 2003 that there is no right or wrong answer to this question, nor is there an agreed definition of school leadership.

Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins in 2008, and other education researchers have repeatedly concluded that school leaders do have an impact on students, teachers, and schools. The school leaders' perspective, however, is missing from education literature.

Our faith in the value of leadership is durable—it survives, again and again, our disappointment with actual leaders.

Rothman, 2016, p. 2

Case study on iTeach Schools

In early 2018, I investigated two critical questions related to school leadership by studying iTeach Schools – free, high-impact secondary schools for the most under-resourced children in Pune, functioning through a public-private partnership.

▪ What are the conceptions of effective school leadership?

▪ What are the personality, knowledge and experience and leadership style factors associated with effective school leadership?

Four iTeach Schools in Pune were chosen as case studies for conducting this research. The leaders who participated in the study were unconventional – they didn't necessarily have a degree in teaching or school leadership. Traditionally, school leaders are expected to have several years of teaching experience, but, on average, iTeach school leaders had only two-to-three years of experience. Moreover, students in these schools come from underprivileged families – some of them first generation secondary

school goers. Given this background, it made the school leadership job unique and more challenging.

This article documents what Radha, Suchita, Soumya, and Robin, four leaders of iTeach Schools had to say about effective school leadership. These participants were given a questionnaire consisting of 23 open-ended questions divided into two sections. The first section had questions about the participants' background and the second delved into their conceptions of school leadership. Their views were compared with what current literature states about the topic.

From the school leader's perspective

Below are reflections on the meaning of effective leadership, in the words of these school leaders

'An effective school leader enables teachers to achieve even beyond their goals by sustaining operational excellence, so that teachers can focus entirely on the core work of teaching; creates learning experiences for teachers and students and provides feedback about them; and continuously learns from other schools and applies that learning to their own context.' – Radha

'Effective school leadership is leadership that impacts all the stakeholders in a school and helps them progress. School leadership becomes an effective practice when a leader is able to build depth and improve outcomes in these aspects – teacher professional development; school vision; academic and holistic goals for students; school operations; and investment of school partners.' Suchita

'An effective school leader builds such a culture for their staff that they love coming to school; owns the pedagogy of the school; manages operations smoothly; and models leadership through personal belief and behaviour. These lead to a single greater purpose of ensuring that students meet the

school's vision for them.' – Soumya

'An effective school leadership is one of high sense of belief in the vision for the school and student, the relentless drive to achieve it and the power to invest a host of stakeholders to get to the vision holistically.' – Robin

Factors associated with effective school leadership

School leaders elucidated the factors – personality, leadership style, knowledge, and experience – associated with effective school leadership.

Personality

All four school leaders agreed that their inherent personal qualities influence their leadership abilities. The qualities mentioned by them are: building relationships, persistence, belief in the team and self, perseverance, ambition, vision, sense of urgency, continuous learning, the morale of 'whatever it takes', drive, firm decision-making, continuous learning, and courage. This view contrasts with those in the literature on leadership, where the personal qualities approach to understanding leadership has been abandoned.

Leadership style

This case study revealed four distinct leadership styles – consensus building (shared goals and actions), organic (leveraging on existing strengths and resources), high expectations and high support, and excellence with empathy. Both Soumya and Robin highlight the importance of maintaining high standards for students, irrespective of their background. Radha values collective setting of goals and exemplifies it by addressing the challenges in consensus building process and observing that the best working projects in her school are the ones involving a team. These styles are also personal to the individuals and rooted in their motivation to be school leaders.

It is worth noting that none of these school leaders talks about 'distributive or distributed leadership', which is, as mentioned by Harris in her 2003 article, the current favourite and more effective form of school leadership styles.

Knowledge and experience

Apart from Radha, these school leaders do not believe that a formal degree or training is necessary for being an effective leader. Even Suchita, who has a formal degree in education, believes that most of her knowledge comes from the experience of being a school leader. Robin and Soumya too, do not regard formal degrees as being requisite. Interestingly, Soumya mentions that a degree similar to that of an MBA can be a helpful catalyst in school leadership.

Two conclusions can be drawn from these leadership insights. First, the skills for school leadership can be acquired almost exclusively by practising on the job or what we know as 'learning by doing'. Second, the knowledge and skills required for school leadership are transferable. This is quite radical when juxtaposed with the European or American way of formally training school leaders, which is valued from a policy perspective. India lacks dedicated and exclusive institutes for school leadership training, and a formal mandated system for training school leaders. One of the reasons why these school leaders do not think formal training is necessary, could be a lack of faith in the current pre-service or in-service training as highlighted by one of them.

Leadership: inherent or learned?

Though they believe that inherent personal qualities are associated with leadership, they unequivocally insist that leadership qualities can and should be learned. They mentioned the following qualities as essential for effective school leadership:

'Action planning, resource optimisation,

communication, investment in stakeholders, attention to detail, and continuous self-learning.' attention to detail, and continuous self-learning.'

According to Suchita and Soumya, a school leader requires many skills but there can't be an ideal 'set' of qualities for every leader. This concurs with the works of Stogdill in 1948, and Clark et al. in 1980, who have also contended that leadership traits are determined by the leader's context. Robin and Soumya emphasise that self-awareness and willingness to work on one's 'weaker areas' are key for effective leadership.

The study concluded that there are certain similarities in school leaders' definitions of effective leadership, for instance, they all highlight the importance of having a vision, goals, and stakeholder investment. The findings on the factors associated with leadership reveal that personal qualities of leadership are valued by all the participants. They believe that such qualities help them to overcome barriers.

It is perhaps worthwhile revisiting the personal traits approach to leadership, not to enlist exclusive traits of special leaders but to investigate how these qualities relate to effective leadership. Finally, it is noteworthy that these leaders believe the skills or qualities required for school leadership can and should be learned. **T**

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