

What Is A Good School?

In order to understand school leadership it is appropriate to first consider what a school does and what could be the key elements that make it function well. From our collective experience of schools we all realize it is not easy to identify these elements. So far, there is no obvious set of aspects which can ensure the quality of a school. In recent times there have been attempts to identify and in some way describe them but these have not been able to go beyond basic infrastructure and the need for technically qualified persons as teachers. In some cases, they are stretched to include teaching-learning materials which are more than textbooks and notebooks and infrastructure that includes basic facilities for all children to ensure their convenient presence. The experience of the intensive studies on schools as well as anecdotes and conversations with people who are in close touch with schools suggests that while these factors may have some effect on the way the school functions they are certainly not the most significant requirements. Schools that are next door to each other and appear to be broadly similar in terms of infrastructure, environment, ambience, having equally well-certified and qualified teachers and other characteristics can show very different attitudes towards

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children. In turn, the way children relate to these schools is also very different and so are the outcomes.

Our definition of these outcomes depends on our opinion about the role of the school and the children coming out of it - the product of the school in a sense - should be like. For example, it could be an expectation that the children coming out of the school grow into adults who can calculate rapidly and without errors. This would imply that the school makes an attempt to ensure that children calculate quickly even if it is at the cost of building conceptual clarity.

The meaning of education in the current context has widened. The consensually articulated view that dominates discourse is that the school has to provide a complete education to children which encompasses more than just learning to read and write and solve known problems. Children need to be able to relate to other children, be sensitive to the pain of others and also respect others. They need to be able to acquire new ideas and create their own descriptions. We know that human beings do not acquire knowledge piecemeal. Many ideas are simultaneously put together to obtain a clearer picture of the whole. For example, the concept of force grows along with and gets clarified as being distinct from energy, power, work and momentum. Or, as the idea of a rational number grows, it helps build a better understanding of natural numbers, negative numbers and fractional numbers as well. As concepts develop, linkages with other subjects also grow stronger. These are some of the important aspects of learning that cannot be ignored.

For a comprehensive educational experience for the child it is clear that the school has to function as a team. There has to be sharing of ideas and information about children among the teachers and a common perspective of how to move forward. Not only must each teacher know what the other teachers are doing - the why and how - but there

must also be a common framework which can help each individual anticipate what is the expected response to specific situations. For such a team to function there is a need for a process where this cohesion can be developed, consolidated and nurtured. Angularities and differences of views can either be buried or shared and discussed. They should not be allowed to distort day-to-day functioning given the fact that each teacher has to engage with and have a dialogue with a group of children over a large part of the day. These engagements can be tiring and it is not always easy to make them interesting. Teachers have to not only conceptualize the possibilities of making classrooms interesting but also organize activities and patiently steer children through them. It becomes critical to have the sharing and smoothening of difference anchored in a process or in a person. In most cases, the school leader has to play this anchoring role.

The School Leader

It is important to clarify the role of the school leader. In the context of large schools where there are many teachers and many faculties, the role of the leader generally becomes that of an administrative head or a manager. It is considered advisable that the school head functions like the head of a bureaucratic structure so that the systems are understandable to everyone. In such a structure, there cannot be space for dialogue and discussions at all levels about everything as the school system has to work with precision. Even in smaller institutions there is a demand for 'consistency' and 'transparency' which reduces the flexibility and choice for the school leader.

Is the school leader an administrator or academic instructor? If we look at the school leader as playing the role of an administrative head and a manager, then we are essentially looking at leadership as a management issue. The question then is who would be the most effective manager? Does it require a greater share of managerial acumen or skill in public relations and dealing with people? Here we have to again ask if this is enough, or whether the team also needs somebody who is academically oriented and capable of leading the school. It is obvious that the leader cannot be someone who is just good at public relations and dealing with people; more is required. Such a person would not inspire confidence among teachers and would not be able to lead an institution that is able to respond to the ever-changing understanding of instructions. In a sense, at a

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fundamental level, the categories in which the school leader can be included are largely those of an administrative head or an instructional leader.

The instructional leader is expected to be able to advice and have a dialogue with teachers. In the current context, when teaching and learning are being redefined with more emphasis on learning, the role of the teacher becomes less predetermined and allows greater possibilities of choices. In this context, the term "learning leader" implies not only the head of the learning institution but also a person who is herself learning. The school then can be considered as a community of learners with the leader being the head of that community. But it is not very clear how this system would function given the expectation that a large structure should work cohesively and in a manner where each person knows his responsibility and ensures that it is fulfilled.

An important point that needs to be mentioned here is that the leadership is also expected to be able to raise support amongst parents and in the wider society. The output of a school is therefore an important concern. For many parents and for society in general the worth of the institutions is in the diplomas earned by students and the grades that they obtain. The school has to produce multitudes of children who do well. So while the teachers and school may have certain views of what is good education, they could be overridden by what parents and society expect and believe. There are

expectations and demands from the environment the schools function in. The school has to match the parent's expectation to retain their interest and continue getting children. It is natural that the functioning of the school is influenced by its environment and the structures that are imposed on it by History. For a leader to move forward it becomes important that she recognizes that there is an external environment and there is an internal environment within which the school processes can be conceptualized.

The Idea Of A Leader

In general, we can analyze the role of a leader in any structure and break these up into the following forms. These are all broad descriptions of leadership and need to be contextualized to schools and then to a particular school:

1. We could imagine that a leader is more likely to produce socially useful outcomes by setting goals that meet the needs of both the leader and followers. This has the benefit of distinguishing leadership from merely "getting people to do what you want them to do".
2. "Transformational leadership" - Socially useful goals not only have to meet the needs of followers, they also should elevate followers to a higher moral level. In schools this is essential as the teachers have the additional responsibility of setting an example for the students.
3. Viewing leadership in terms of adaptive work. Adaptive work consists of addressing conflicts in the values of different people, or diminishing the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs or behavior. In a context of a school this is crucial because of the porous boundaries within society.

This is the responsibility of and expectation from leadership. The expectation is that a leader would facilitate dialogue, identify insights and ensure that these are shared. A leader needs to motivate and excite teachers to explore ways to improve performances and atmosphere and ensure that teachers and the students have a pleasant and effective involvement. Leadership also needs to look ahead, anticipate changes in situation, look at what new and interesting that is happening in the field and what elements of that are relevant and purposeful. It also needs to be able to deal with difficult situations and tide over inferences and obstructions. The list

of requirements can be longer but these indicate what is essential.

Leadership Systems

Like in other organizations and structures, schools also can explore different systems of leadership. In most instances, however, whether in schools or in other structures that are exploring collective leadership, eventually there is a need for someone to emerge who is willing to assume greater responsibility. This person would then take on far more responsibility, greater interest and be the focal person to deal with any situation that may arise. She also becomes responsible for facilitating discussions, for ensuring that people do not transgress each others space and listen to ideas and opinions with an open mind. Many who acquire such a responsibility do try to ensure involvement of others in leadership. That, however, does not mean that their responsibility is reduced.

In many structures, the role of the coordinator is with one person for a fixed duration. After her term, somebody

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else from the team would assume that responsibility. The leadership in such a system is, therefore, unfocused and distributed among a larger group. The impact of such a leadership process on a structure can be mixed and there can be arguments and views against or in support of this system. These views emerge from different notions of leadership and the factors that motivate people to work with greater seriousness and engagement.

The debate is not just interesting but also relevant in the context of the school which requires a definition of team/individual who would ensure dialogue among peers. A

dialogue which needs to be different every day as it responds to the children, their daily experiences and the challenges in the society around. Clearly there are no specific answers as they relate to the context including not only the children, but also the parents and the colleagues. Being a part of the social and a historical context implies that in spite of a fairly defined structure and a large component that is governed by unalterable norms. They have to be in line with the perspective and consistent with the purposes of the school. They also must be strategically acceptable and doable.

The convergence of viewpoints of the teachers is critical for any response to be strategically acceptable. Informal networks can often emerge in large groups. These networks having no consistent patterns and do not necessarily have teachers with the same beliefs and styles. Most discussions in education show a lack of precision and therefore people can be on the same side even though they have comparatively divergent positions. The most important step in order to build an acceptable strategy is to develop a dialogue where discussions can be open. A process in which normatively preferred teaching objectives and strategies can be questioned rationally and alternatives assessed dispassionately. A culture needs to be created where teachers are able to collectively work out and analyze situations and challenges. It is clear that only when there is cohesion among faculty members about convergence on goals and strategies would the student growth be substantial. This cohesion is important because although the classrooms have pre-determined timetables where defined procedures can be followed, no pre-decided structures can guide a teacher in her day-to-day practices as she would encounter a diversity of students and would need a diversity of responses each time. There is no way to predict where the classroom discussions or activity may lead. If there is an acceptable cohesion at the level of goals and strategy then alternate choices could be made by different faculty members. Apparent discord, unhappiness, dissatisfaction and tension in a system that is otherwise functioning is not necessarily a symptom of an improperly run institution. It could also reflect the independence of thought and space that allows it. We have to look for other signs and probe deeper before judging a system. A superficial consensus with everyone voicing the same view may reflect a well run but non-creative, non-reflective system.

Challenges And Strategies

It is important to recognize that the school leader has to conform to many guidelines. All schools have to follow curricular guidelines that are developed at the national and state level. The guidelines may leave spaces for local decision-making but the main functioning has to be within the boundary of the state curricular expectations and the parameters specified by the district institutions. The principal of a school managed by a large body, for example the government school system, has limited flexibility. Apart from curricular choices that are prescribed at a large level, strategies and operational choices are also predetermined by the system that she is a part of. Sometimes even the structures that exist within the school are pre-decided, leaving her with very little opportunity to create structures appropriate to her instincts and the local needs. For example, a school may not have good Science teachers and can do little in Science but simultaneously have an excellent History faculty. But this is of little account as the leader cannot give more time to History. She cannot also choose to do more of language and Mathematics even if she thinks that is what is more important for her context. She cannot make a timetable that is very different from what is suggested at the district or state level and has to follow broadly similar patterns of classroom processes and assessment. The role of the school leader, therefore, needs to be analyzed carefully and the spaces for choice extracted and emphasized.

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of desire to take initiatives stems from the unwillingness to take responsibility. It is safer to follow the routine than to explain your choices and defend them. This is particularly true when the surroundings are not very conducive and it is not easy to get support for transformational processes. The school is not decoupled from society or the larger structure and neither are its academics or administration. Talking about school leadership, therefore, becomes circumscribed by this realization.

Another challenge is that space for the leader is often restricted by local environment and local interests. She does not have the choice to appoint her deputy as the name is pre-decided by the large hierarchical systems. Another scenario could be that the parental aspirations of an up-market chain school can be very different from those of a low-end school and the role and the strategy to be followed by the leader is correspondingly different.

Schools that are a part of a larger chain are limited by its philosophy and its functioning strategy. While some of the traditions in these institutions are often without a well-articulated rationale, these are also so deeply ingrained that it is difficult to change or upstage them. It is important to recognize that there has to be a strategy for overcoming this but it cannot be done by simply taking a decision and executing it. For example, as a new school leader you feel that the current morning assembly consists of non-secular programs or portrays a lack of human freedom and rationality but your colleagues in the school have been doing this for years. They see a value in these prayers, which may be a part of the wider culture as well. Your goal may be

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to increase the active participation of children, or planning and conceptualizing the morning assembly with a focus on alternate issues and to develop it as a component of the educational activity. But this can happen only through a gradual involvement supported by sharing and airing of views and possibilities. In order that the team understands the purpose of morning assembly and moves towards an effective program there can be many strategies and a variety of small steps. One extreme way to react for is to argue that since the morning assembly is inappropriate it should be stopped totally. Children will go to directly to the classrooms and start their studies. Another way is to have some congregation where children come together and start with some physical exercise and games. A third view point can be that the time spent on the morning assembly is important and adds to the personality of the child and cannot be done away with. Therefore, the form and content can be changed to some extent but the assembly has to be essentially retained. All these strategies would require negotiations with the already functioning senior school team. These decisions can only be put into operation with their concurrence and participation.

If you were to look at these three above-mentioned strategies dispassionately you will find advantages and disadvantages in each. As a newly appointed leader, what you choose would be determined by your personality and the circumstance. We know the term “leadership” has to include not just the appointed head but also others who in some sense provide role clarity and purposefulness to the school. Should this decision be taken based entirely on what the leader or the leadership team considers as appropriate, or do other factors have to be kept in mind? While this gives the leader an opportunity to open a dialogue on wider issues, it also may imply a lack of authority in the leader. The process of dialogue may be vitiated by a few who are too set in their ways or otherwise unhappy. If there is no possibility of a dialogue and some influential people are adamant, then the role of the leader and the way she builds and protects a dialogue become significant. The choices have to be open for dialogue. As a leader, whether you make the interim decision not to have an assembly or you make it an assembly without prayer or collective singing depends upon the context. From the discussion, it should be clear that even if a leader thinks assemblies are not needed and a waste time or that the school needs to spend more time on school subjects, it is important for her to listen to others.

The idea of leadership in a school is strongly influenced by the manner of functioning of the 'key' person. That, as we have said, is also influenced if not determined by the circumstances she is in. The context of the school is important but so is kind of teacher in the school. When you set up a school you can choose teachers and prepare them and organize them. It is also possible to build a dialogue with them and set up processes for the same. But how do you deal with your role when you are in an institution that is fairly set in its ways? For example, in a particular school, the teachers by and large do not read books themselves and do not encourage children to read, either. The leadership team also believes that reading materials other than academic books are of no use as they do not help in bettering examination results. Then what does the school leader do? Given the way the climate is, it is highly likely that there is no capability in the school to encourage children to read, no systems and perhaps no infrastructure. The questions that again confront the leader are, "How do I proceed? Do I insist on a library immediately, do I forget libraries for some time, or do I try a process of negotiation? Is it purposeful and encouraging to cite the example of a productive person to those who are less productive, or does it make them unhappy, depressed and sulky?"

Many more examples can be considered. In each case, choices would be thrown up. Once considered, the battery of choices and requirements has to be negotiated. The school needs to move towards developing an understanding where there is consensus on the change process. There have to be reasonable arguments constructed for recognizing this as the correct strategy. This has to be in the context of the possibilities and a strategy to be chosen by everyone may not be the best strategy in all circumstances.

But there are some situations that suggest the need for radical steps. For example, the incoming school leadership finds that children are not respected and valued enough. Occasionally children are harassed intentionally, reprimanded and sometimes even hit. What would we want to do then? Would we still look for a strategy that wastes a long time in negotiations or should you begin with the declaration that this is totally unacceptable and cannot be allowed? Or there is a situation where some of the teachers in your team are forcing the children to take tuitions from them. What should the choice be? Of course, whatever the choice there has to be a dialogue for buy-in and gradual understanding, but

can time be wasted in simply suggesting that this cannot be allowed?

We can construct more examples but it is clear that answers are not simple. In situations like these, different people would and do make different choices and see them through. It is also clear that the context is not the only important consideration but also the way the leader interprets the context. The interpretation is a function of our beliefs and capabilities as well.

Conclusion

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clear that unlike many other organizations, the constraints on the school leader are more. They arise from the nature of the 'product' or 'output' and definition of its quality. They are also constrained by the focus on homogenization and the attempt to make a product that everyone would like. This is bound to lead to a clash of opinions and critical observations about the processes followed by individual teachers and the school as well. A leader is expected to act as a shield for the teachers in her school who exercise choice and initiative. She has to protect them from the determinism, strangulation and bureaucratization of the outside forces. In addition she has also to protect them from internal forces where differences in view points can lead to acrimonious sabotage. An important responsibility is to consolidate dialogue and open spaces for listening and acceptance. The leader needs to be able to present her ideas and be patient in listening. She therefore has to fulfill external expectations, communicate

with the outside and the inside and also set up internal communication processes. This obviously is less possible in large systems where the role of the leader becomes largely that of a bureaucratic manager who has to ensure everyone follows procedures and instructions.

Consider all the clichés about leadership. A leader must lead from the front and set examples for others to emulate; the leader must not be an impediment to the growth of others, she must use the knowledge of people, etc. These are just a few examples. But even in these there is some confusion and contradiction. There are suggestions that the leader has to be the most capable and one who is sensitive to all to be recognized as the most appropriate for the role, or that she should have the initiative and drive to take risks, take the blame and give credit to team members and simultaneously be fair and transparent. Others would argue that in order for the leader to encourage everyone and provide space she must be able to genuinely give respect for their capability. She must recognize that in many areas others can do better than her.

It is clear that all these requirements can be argued for and defended. It becomes, therefore, difficult to spell out what leadership needs and what leadership should do. Both the role of the leadership team as well as its development and

selection become specific and contextual.

All of us in our life have been part of the teams that have done significant tasks. In situations where people have to function together, however routine the task may be, a mechanism for ensuring dialogue and aspirations for maximum quality contribution is required. Even in these processes an informal leadership is assumed and accepted by the rest. These leadership roles may also be flexible and may shift from one to the other during the task. There is no fixed identification or selection of the person who will perform this role.

Many of the common notions and statements about leadership are not always usable. They are to be interpreted in context. In particular the oft-repeated common personality orientation to the team leadership that “leaders are born”, is dangerous. It fosters both arbitrary decision making and/or irresponsibility. On the other hand, the recent belief that leaders can be made by organizing one time training sessions is as much of a myth. It appears that leaders emerge in contexts that have sufficient conducive pieces in them. They are a response to a context.

We ought to focus on leadership as an activity – the activity of a citizen from any walk of life to mobilize people towards doing something. In our case, run a school. But what the socially useful activity is and what a good school is, remain contentious.

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