Schools and school systems are complex organizations whose work is crucial for social, economic and cultural reasons. Learning outcomes in school systems also contribute to the personal growth and well-being of learners. Yet goals of schooling are often unclear or under-specified, and outcomes are often difficult to measure. Their social and economic function is widely agreed to be critical but education is often starved of resources. In countries like India schools are parts of large administrative structures that are hierarchical and centralized. They function in extremely complex environments with tremendous cultural and socio-economic diversity. The combination of complexity and social importance has led to much concern about the effectiveness of schools and education systems.

The Indian education system is widely accepted to be of poor quality, both of outcomes and processes. The large public education system is a key piece in this story of deficiency. What would it take to improve the performance of schools? More effective teaching and learning is an obvious answer. Better curricula would be part of it too. It is in this context that many commentators argue for the importance of better management and leadership of schools. They contend that complex organizations need to be managed well. And good leadership is an integral part of good management.

It is easy to see that the above perspective naturally leads to arguments that call for a focus on improving leadership in school systems. It is a traditional assumption in public education departments that teachers attain "seniority" and proceed to become headmasters and B.E.Os. Their long years of service is all that is required to qualify them for leadership

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roles. This assumption is what votaries of effective school management question.

There is much to commend in this view. In many ways it seems uncontroversial. If schools are organizations with large numbers of stakeholders and participants, with goals and outcomes that are critical for society, then it is almost an axiom that they have to be led and managed. I do not intend to refute this perception. My purpose is to place the idea of school leadership in the context of the History of development of schools as organized structures and to suggest that alternative approaches exist that have relevant lessons to offer. These "lessons" become all the more important if we begin to question the terms of the debate – both aims of education and parameters for what counts as successful leadership.

The Leadership Industry

Many theories of leadership define it as a quality that individuals possess or acquire that enables them to influence other individuals and groups toward a common goal. This has led to tremendous efforts to identify the components of this quality and to specify how such capabilities can be acquired. A large part of this research has originated in studies of business organizations. The huge stakes involved have made "leadership studies" an important and sometimes lucrative element in organizational research.

The identification of leadership as a key element of organizational success has had the effect that people often assume that if an organization is successful, then the leader must be responsible for it. This has, as we know, had a positive impact on top management salaries in organizations. However, contrarian voices warn that organizational success (or failure) is more complex a phenomenon than can be explained by qualities of leaders alone. In spite of the huge amount of time and resources spent on identifying the qualities of a good leader and the processes that may nurture one, the results are a mixed bag. However, I do not intend to go into the critical review of this research here. I shall only touch upon some of the difficulties that traditional models of

leadership face in the challenging contexts of education.

Life In The Machine

The public school system in India is a vast machine. Its structure is predicated on the assumption that a central authority can prescribe, organize and control performance in even such a vast system. Part of the reason for this centralization can be traced to the colonial agendas that led to the establishment of organized school systems in India. When the education system expanded after independence, organizational innovation through the development of alternative structures was not seriously considered as an option. The existing system was scaled up with near-disastrous results. Even in the private sector, the structure of schools has changed little in a hundred years.

The centralization and rigidity of school systems in India, both public and private, have had a negative impact on their management. Most observers agree that the system is too big to be "steered" effectively. The gradual build-up of vested interests, both political and organizational, militate against change. The recent surge in funding for primary education in India has also had the unwelcome result of cementing the vested interests such that structural change is all the more difficult. Leadership of schools and education departments is, under these conditions, a rather emaciated process. The vast majority of employees in the system are often passive recipients of decisions and commands originating elsewhere. Even the top officials often complain of "powerlessness" to effect change.

Locating Leadership

Ideas of leadership as the embodiment of traits and qualities in an individual has been held most tenaciously in military organizations. Most successful military campaigns are invariably success stories of leadership and bring much adulation and glory for the general. The second world war generated a rich mythology of great and not so great generals. The industrial revolution and the creation of large hierarchically structured business organizations prompted the development of similar ideas in the civilian realm. This development is quite understandable in light of the peculiar challenges that military and similar structures pose. The need to deploy large numbers of personnel rapidly to execute well-defined battleground strategies or in assembly lines made centralization of command and control the preferred operational strategy. This vested a large part of

the burden of decision making on the top echelons. Personal clarity, intelligence and charisma inevitably play a large role in success here.

I argue in this article that we need to reformulate ideas of leadership in ways that do not locate it merely as a set of traits that individuals possess or as a set of processes that

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they initiate. While such a trait based or process based idea of leadership is attractively simple, it has been difficult to find clear evidence that organizational success is inevitably the result of the qualities that the leader exercises. In addition, in sectors that are highly dynamic, where objectives are contested and diverse methods are admissible, such as education, I would like to suggest that alternative conceptions of organizational structuring and leadership may be equally if not more relevant. I will use the rest of this article to expand these thoughts.

Some readers might object that History is full of examples of individuals whose personal qualities unified large populations and focused energies. The sociologist Max Weber called this the exercise of charismatic authority. Gandhi, Mandela and Churchill are immediate examples that come to mind. Hitler, too. I do not deny the impact that charisma has on people. However, the contexts in which such qualities are exercised are usually more circumscribed and less organized. The case of long-lived organizations where people often spend lifetimes, I maintain, is significantly different.

I would like to argue that modern organizations, particularly in the knowledge and education sector, face entirely different challenges. They confront dynamic external environments, unspecified threats, and distributed expertise.

Creative problem solving down to the lowest rung of the organizational ladder is a great advantage. Command and control is extremely inefficient in this environment.

I talked about the notion of leadership as influence. Influencing stakeholders for creative performance and learning defines the nature of schools and schools systems. In that sense, every teacher has to exercise leadership, not just headmasters, directors or I.A.S officers. Such an atomized notion of leadership that locates it at every level of the organization requires an entirely alternative distribution of authority and decision making in schools and school systems. Since our schools rarely empower teachers and other stakeholders in this manner, we are stuck with a military model of organization that is woefully inappropriate for the task it is set up to achieve.

A Culture Of Leadership

Let us visit "Edutopia". This is, for the moment, an imagined society with schools and similar organizations that are significantly different from what I described above in the Indian context. In Edutopia leadership is not the monopoly of particular individuals. People in Edutopia have an alternative formulation of leadership. Leadership here is located in the culture of the schools itself. Such a culture facilitates and encourages initiative, creative thinking and the assuming of responsibility at all levels of the schools and school system. The members of the system are encouraged to envision and "re-vision" its goals and devise creative approaches to achieving them. The environment in which such organizations function is diverse, complex and uneven. The work of the schools in Edutopia is to facilitate learning that is appropriate to the learners' needs and interests. Every teacher is a leader in this sense. Of course, there are people in the "higher levels" of organizations, but their work and influence does not depend on depriving their "subordinates" of autonomy.

I worked, for over two decades, in a small alternative school outside Bangalore called Centre For Learning that attempts to realize such a structure. The school is teacher-run, non-hierarchical and democratic in its culture. Authority for decision making and possibility of initiative are dispersed. The relationships are collegial and cooperative. The educators in CFL believe that if the aims of education are conceived of in a much wider manner than is customary, conventional leadership fails to achieve goals.

Admittedly, such a structure is almost laughably improbable in the mainstream Indian context. Restructuring schools in ways that disperse authority and distribute autonomy would be considered too risky. There is also, perhaps legitimately, a concern that members of our school systems need to be prepared adequately to make the transition to such a structure. However, such alternative models of organizational leadership are important beacons that give us a glimpse of new possibilities. Even if such experiments "fail" they provide valuable lessons.

Radical social theorists who consider present organizational forms of schools as the reflection of existing power relationships in society may, skeptically, object that schools function more as the defenders of the status quo than as harbingers of change. They function to reproduce and defend existing structures of power and privilege as manifested in society. Why would such systems invite the disturbance that more democratic forms imply? Perhaps the answer is that education that promotes social justice, by nurturing critical capacities and facilitating learning that is responsive to individual needs has to be more egalitarian at the organizational level itself. It is through embedding leadership in the organizational practices and the autonomous initiatives of their members that we increase the probability of increased well-being and justice. If such structures are improbable, the larger goals of social justice and "well-being for all", become improbable too. As educators, we must resist the temptation to surrender to the status quo and must sustain the exploration of paths to change.

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