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Leadership for Learning beyond Instructional-Lessons from Indian Private School Principals

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Abstract

A great deal of literature on school leadership focuses on instructional leadership and, leadership of school principals from within the public school system. There is no exploration, by contrast, of leadership from inside private school systems. This article outlines findings from a study that explored how teachers perceive principals understanding and action about leadership for learning that contributes towards high performing private school systems. Supporting the concept of distributed leadership, this study argues in favour of leadership for learning beyond academic achievements.

Key Words*:* Instructional Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Leadership for Learning, Private School Principals, Moral Leadership

Introduction

In the last two decades the area of leadership has, arguably, been studied more extensively than any other aspect of human behaviour (e.g.: Kets de Vries, 1993; Goffee and Jones, 2000; Higgs and Rowland, 2000). Leadership has been the most significant area of research in education. This applies, in particular, the function of Principalship in school education. Various analysts have linked school effectiveness with the leadership practices exhibited of school principals. According to Sharma, Sun & Kannan (2012), the rates of success, in terms of school effectiveness, are intimately connected to the roles of the principal. The principal is challenged to create a culture of quality which penetrates to the smallest elements, processes and systems of an institution. It is common experience, that under the same set of rules and regulations, with the same set of teaching staff and students from similar backgrounds, an educational institution can decline, maintain its status quo, or rise to prominence, with a change of principal. This is also borne out by a large number of research studies on management of change in education (Sharma, Sun & Kannan, 2012).

Research findings from various countries, and from across different school systems, have revealed the powerful impact of leadership in driving school development (e.g. Hopkins 2001 a; West Jackson, Harris and Hopkins, 2000).Hopkins (2001 a), in particular, emphasizes the importance of transformational and instructional leadership practices for school development. Furthermore, Brenninkmeyer and Spillane (2008: 436) state that past research shows a principal to be someone who spends a lot of time solving instructional problems in the school, which has a greater impact on the academic performance of students. This means that successful leaders not only set direction but also model values and practices

consistent with those of the school, so that "purposes which may have initially seemed to be separate, become fused" (Sergiovanni, 1995:119).

Effective leaders are proactive and seek help that is needed. They also promote an instructional program and school culture conducive to learning and professional growth. Nevertheless, effective instructional and administrative leadership is required to implement change processes (Hoy and Miskell, 2008).Such studies have placed an emphasis on the 'instructional leadership aspect' of principals.

In terms of instructional leadership, Hallinger and Murphy (1985), Zepada (2003) have emphasized students' high academic achievement. However, scholars such as Hallinger (2013), have interchangeably used the term 'leadership for learning' to denote instructional leadership. The concept is however challenged as follows:

> *Instructional leadership is a very important dimension because it targets the school's central activities, teaching and learning. However, this paradigm underestimates other aspects of school life, such as sport, socialisation, student welfare, and self- esteem* (Bush, 2003:16-17).

This view re-opens the debate for the reconceptualising of the leadership-for-learning-paradigm in different aspects. The transformational leadership models byLeithwood,1994;Leithwood & Jantzi,1999;Silins,1994, have pointed, in terms of student's academic achievement, to the literature which shapes an understanding of leadership directed towards academic achievement, without considering the roles of school leaders as merely government officers(e.g.: Hallinger,2013). In the context of the different aspects and student outcomes, other than academic achievements, Sharma (2012) argues that school leadership needs to focus on different roles , different aspects and on more 'holistic' outcomes.

School education in India is governed by three types of school: - purely government, government-aided and purely private schools. Schools run by central, state or local government are considered as government schools. The schools managed by private bodies, but drawing governmental financial support, are referred as government- aided schools. The purely private schools are fully responsible for their own support. School effectiveness research on the relative effectiveness of public and private schools had to rely on achievement tests carried out by researchers themselves in the small sample of schools (Bashir 1997; Govinda and Varghese 1993; Kingdon 2007; Tooley and Dixon 2003). In this context, it has been observed that, irrespective of levels (primary or secondary) and of locale (urban or rural), private school students have outperformed their government counterparts in terms of academic achievement (Govinda and Varghese 1993; Murlidharan and Kremer 2007; Kingdon 2007). Since 2009, private school enrolment in rural areas has been rising at an annual rate of about 10 per cent. If this trend continues, by 2018 India will have 50 per cent children in rural areas enrolled in private schools (Chaudhary 2013). The *Economic Times* (of July 24, 2012, xxx) reports that,

"It is a wake-up call for the government and its efforts to improve the quality of schooling through the Right to Education. The number of children enrolled in government primary schools has dropped by 21 lakh between 2009-10 and 2010-11 while there has been an increase of 11 lakh in enrolment in private schools. This decline in enrolment in government schools could, in part, be explained by the decline in percentage share of government schools - from 80.37% in 2009-10 to 78.15% in 2010-11 - even though roughly 16,000 new government schools have been set up in the year."

However the increase in enrolment in private schools is argued to exist as a direct consequence of the inability of government schools to provide quality education to students. This is evidenced by the following statement from a parent, as cited by Chaudhary 2013:

"It is not a question of how much the fees is? We want a good education for our children. The main thing is discipline, which is absent in government schools. Teachers themselves are missing in government schools... Our children's future is unsafe in a government school. Not only is it far away, I feel no one is serious about education there."

As stated earlier that school effectiveness is linked to school leadership and India is a vast nation blessed with good number of reputed schools in private sector with exemplary high reputation counterparts (Govinda and Varghese 1993; Murlidharan and Kremer 2007;Kingdon 2007 and Chaudhary 2013). Therefore, it may be justified to conduct a study on the leadership of principals, in order to strengthen the views of such analysts as Barth (1990): *"Show me a good school and I'll show you a good principal."* What is more, a significant amount of literature regarding school leadership, including concomitant leadership models, originate in 'western' contexts, such as the USA, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand (Hallinger 2013).Reflecting the perspectives of public school principals as merely government officers, it is now necessary to study school leadership from the perspectives of principals of effective private schools in India.

The study aims to explore leadership for learning in private schools in India, by attempting to answer the following three questions, with the aim of developing a model of leadership for learning.

1) What is the understanding of private-school teachers, regarding the concept and the importance of 'leadership for learning'?
2) What is the role of the principal as a 'leader', towards attaining leadership of learning as envisaged by the teachers?
3) What are the benefits of leadership for learning, as envisaged by private school teachers?

Literature Review

Instructional Leadership has been a topic of study and discussion across the globe for almost four decades (Hallinger 2010). Hallinger (2013), Leithwood (1994), Zepada (2003) have linked Instructional Leadership to improvement in class room instruction. Though the term instructional leadership

remains an elusive concept, most researchers agree on the point that any principal of a school must be a strongly' instructional' leader. Barth (1990: 64) stated, "*Show me a good school and I'll show you a good principal".* In light of this statement, it appears necessary to embed more firmly an instructional leadership perspective in the wider context of principalship. Moreover, such assertion about instructional leadership led to a significant rethinking as regards the role of school principal. This, ultimately, resulted in a body of research which sought to establish a viable model that could be applied broadly to the principal-ship (Barth, 1990; Cuban, 1984).Hallinger and Murphy (1985), in their model on instructional leadership, describe principals' roles in the three dimensions of Defining *the School's Mission*, *Managing the Instructional Program*, *and Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate.* In addition to this, Andrews and Soder (1987, pp. 9-20) described the effective instructional leader as a principal performing at high levels in four areas:

- Resource provider,
- Instructional resource
- Communicator, and
- Visible presence in the school.

In addition to this, Leithwood & Jantzi(1999: 514-15), define six dimensions critical in the practice of leadership. These include:

- Identifying and articulating a vision
- Fostering the acceptance of group goals
- Providing individualized support
- Providing intellectual stimulation
- Providing an appropriate model; and
- Inculcating high performance expectations.

Zepeda (2003) describes instructional leadership as critical to the development and maintenance of an effective school. In his view, instructional leaders must influence others to pair appropriate instructional practices with their best knowledge of the subject matter. This kind of re-conceptualization of the area of school principalship has entailed much closer linkages of instructional leadership concepts with the wider themes of *Transformational Leadership* (Leithwood,1994;Leithwood & Jantzi,1999;Silins,1994), *Distributed Leadership*, (Gron,2002, Harris,2008; Spillane,2006)and *Shared Leadership* (Barth ,1990;Hallinger,2010;Marks and Printy,2003;Pounder ,Ogawa & Adams,1995). However, empirical results across a large number of studies, showfairly consistent patterns of impact. Today, the term 'leadership for learning' has come to subsume various features of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and shared leadership (Hallinger, 2010; MacBeath & Cheng, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003; Mulford & Silins, 2009).However, Bush (2003) and Sharma (2012) favour the idea of leadership for learning beyond academic achievement, which then becomes the basis for further debate on school leadership. While the literature on leadership for learning comes from various countries, there has, until now not been a coherent study examining leadership for learning in the context of Indian school principals that too in private schools. This article, therefore, fills the gap in the literature, and it also

serve as a basis for further research in – and on - India.

Research Methodology

The aforementioned absence of an accessible formal literature on educational leadership in Indian private schools frames the research tasks and methods for this study. More specifically, it suggests that the pertinent research methods should be aimed at exploration rather than explanation.

The focus of this present study is on 'leadership for learning' by principals as envisaged by the teachers, and hundred high-performing, private schools were randomly selected for the survey from the list of 300 top performing schools in India. All the schools selected for this study not only proved their effectiveness in teaching and learning through public examinations but also in co-curricular activities in a local, state-, national, and even international, context , a moderate and affordable school fee structure and student's representation from all sectors of economic strata. All the sample schools have principals who have held their current position for ten years or more. Two teachers from each school who have worked with the principal for over a decade were selected as the key respondents for this study and were interviewed for it. The interviews were conducted using Skype calls, which lasted from forty-five to sixty minutes each. The interview questions were framed, in order to explore the answers given based on three themes:

- The concept and importance of leadership for learning
- The role of school leaders, and
- The benefits of a leadership for learning approach

The interview questions were developed, and tested on ten different teachers from the list of 300 top performing schools but not from the selected hundred respondent schools, in order to ensure clarity of the responses provided on leadership. We believe that this interview technique helped to encourage thinking, and furthermore, that it allowed the respondents inopportunity to express their opinions in greater detail, thereby revealing more background information the researcher may not have been aware of initially.

Data Analysis

The analysis focused on the interview schedule which related to issues of' leadership for learning' by principals. The researchers manually transcribed all 150 hours of audio data into 800 single pages of the interview transcripts Data analysis employed the "constant comparative method" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 21-22) in which the data were examined across cases of teachers, with two phases of grounded coding. In the first phase, we investigated the textual context from each transcript, marked and extracted key points from the text, and then assigned a 'code' for each of them. Next, we identified 12 codes across the interview transcripts. Then we organized the codes into the three themes which comprise the key elements of the individual conversations:

- Leadership for learning as concept and importance
- The roles of the principal in leadership for learning, and
- The benefits of leadership for learning

Limitations of the study

The study is limited to the findings from private school teachers. Since this is the first ever study in India, in the context of private school principals, no theoretical framework from previous researches was applied or tested here.

Findings

The Concept of *Leadership for Learning*, and its Importance

It's noteworthy that all of the teachers displayed similar ideas of leadership. The comments they provided reflect the opinion that leadership for learning was, essentially, seen as team work. It was conceived of as a key feature of distributed leadership, rather than a method that was merely 'administered' by a single principal. Some of the typical responses provided in the context of this study include:

> *"Right from setting school goals, its communication and action we teachers too owe responsibilities as coordinators and team leaders."*

These responses would indicate that leadership for learning practised in these 'successful' schools, embraces 'distributed-leadership' practice. This, in turn, appears to be in accordance with the work of key writers in this field(see, for example: Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2006;Gonn, 2003).

All respondents stated that leadership promoted effective learning practices in the classroom, and that furthermore, outside of the classroom, it led to the learning of values, ethics and responsibilities, promoted further learning to sustain culture and developed a 'national character'. Some of the relevant comments are reproduced below:

> *Principal encourages us to think beyond academic achievements. Besides academic achievements our principal leads accountability parade towards values inculcated in students, sense of responsibilities sustainable leadership, developing firm national character, emotional intelligence and entrepreneurship that can't be transferred through curriculum transaction and pedagogy.*

These responses and comments clearly indicate that principals from these private schools in India do have a different understanding of leadership than many western scholars (e.g.: Leithwood, 1994; Zepeda, 2003).The above comment reveals the importance of leadership for learning beyond the class room – and going beyond the prescribed curriculum. Our findings indicate that principals frequently engage in significant' leadership-acts' beyond classroom. We here argue that prescribed curriculum only *develops* subjective competencies in students, leadership beyond the classroom accounts for a more holistic development of students, which specifically is emphasised by Bush 2003. Here, 'leadership for learning' means leadership for holistic development of students, compared to instructional leadership (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Leithwood, 1994; Zepeda, 2003).

The Roles of the Principal as 'Leader'

A number of researchers have investigated these roles of principals as instructional leaders. While Zepeda (2003) describes the essence of instructional leadership as the making of a 'commitment to learning', providing connectivity and cohesion,

developing team of teacher leaders and understanding change, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) advocate the use of class room observations in the study of this subject. In contrast to this, all the teachers from private schools in India have put emphasis on the four areas of

- Exercising leadership for the students' overall development
- Incorporating both teachers and students in the leadership process, and
- Effective and authentic supervision, and
- Continuous professional development of both staff and students

Some of the relevant comments were as reproduced below:

Our vision begins with overall development of students and is never ending. Periodically we plan, do, check and act to accomplish the vision. Each one of us is responsible and committed for the cause of vision. Overall we consider that it is our vision not merely principal's vision.

Certainly for development of students their involvement is a must. We invite and encourage them with their ideas and seek feedback on our actions. Our principals favour such actions.

Teachers do their best when their views are valued. We are involved in every process right from planning to outcome through process. We need effective feedback from principal at every stage. Therefore supervision is very important. We plan the process of supervision with our principal and are observed. We receive proper feedback, through appropriate behaviours that encourages us to work collaboratively

with principal and develop professionally and continuously.

The Benefits of leadership for learning

As stated earlier the term 'instructional leadership' has become widely-linked linked to concepts of *Transformational Leadership* (Leithwood,1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Silins, 1994), *Distributed Leadership* (Gonn,2003; Spillane, 2006), and *Shared Leadership* (Barth ,1990;Hallinger and Heck,2010; Marks and Printy,2003; Pounder, Ogawa & Adams, 1995). Understandings of the roles of a 'principal' have also frequently become connected to areas of' moral' leadership (see above, and: Owens, 1998). This both implies, and exemplifies, the fulfilment of the 'higher needs' of teachers, students and the respective principal. Most of the teachers in this study strongly advocated certain 'benefits' of their leadership, which included student satisfaction, student recognition, self- esteem and self- actualization; it also embraced teachers' and principals' high levels of morale, recognition, self –esteem, actualization. Some germane comments include the following:

Not only in academics our students bring laurels for school in sports, Olympiads and other competitions held locally, nationally and globally. Its outcome of distributed leadership where teachers encourage and help students to face competitions.

Though various schools are in the town, district magistrate invited our school students and teachers only towards eye camp, blood donation camp, each one teach one scheme. It's the recognition of our school in society.

Foreign delegations when visit to our city are always brought to our school by district authorities. And every time they add words of appreciation.

These comments show the high recognition of schools and teachers and students with high self- esteem. All of the principals proudly admitted that they, their teachers and students are always ready to work for their nation, society and would even commit to bring laurels for them. This finding deviates from many of the studies in the 'western' world, which often emphasize 'academic' achievement, brought about by means of effective 'leadership'. We here argue that leading mere academic performance of students is just narrowing down the essence of leadership. Leadership is just not to fill empty vessel , nor to follow the trail of academic achievement but to leave your own trail of vast new experiences for others the follow . We further argue leading school just for academic achievements is limited experience of school improvement ,while holistic development, morale development, self- esteem and self – actualization are the real indicators of school's effectiveness.

Discussion &Conclusion

There can be little doubt that our study has helped provide a new outlook onto the emerging field of 'leadership for learning'. Throughout the study, we have observed that principals from Indian private schools have advocated learning beyond classroom, beyond curriculum and beyond the context compared to the literature from western scholars(e.g.: Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Leithwood, 1994; Zepada, 2003).

Although some findings on 'distributed', and on 'shared' leadership are broadly in agreement with the work of such scholars as Harris (2008), Spillane (2006) or Gonn (2003), the Indian teachers have exemplified their principals' leadership basis as distributed and shared through their comments like *"Teachers do their best when their views are valued. We are involved in every process right from planning to outcome through process.* While 'western' researchers (e.g.: Leithwood 1994, Hallinger and Murphy 1985) have identified wider school 'goals', defined or determined by a single principal and followed by teachers, the Indian principals' approach of involving teachers and students in 'framing' school goals can lead to a new understanding of leadership for learning. The leaders' willingness to involve teachers and students in framing school goals has been found to have been strongly connected to their sense of recognition, self -esteem and self- actualization . School principals have achieved 'moral' leadership - which is often described as the top level of leadership. The Indian private school principals examined for this study have conceptualized leadership for learning in a different manner: they refer much more to the development of 'moral' values and 'national character' as the very 'embodiment' of developing sustainable leadership in schools.

By contrast, 'academic' achievement to them is only one single aspect of observing student performance. The researcher here argue in favour of students which exhibit 'good values', 'good attitude' and 'good national character', embracing a much more

'holistic' approach of developing students rather than the one that over-focuses on content-based academic achievement. In our study, a student with 'good values' and 'firm character' was frequently seen as an 'asset' for the nation, not just a mere liability.

Furthermore, the current study has linked 'school effectiveness' with 'recognition', as exemplified by the following comment:

> *"Though various schools are in the town, district magistrate invited our school students and teachers only towards eye camp, blood donation camp, each one teach one scheme. It's the recognition of our school in society."*

Such comment also displays the sense of self- actualization . Since the key focus of studies of school leadership is on the overall development of students, this study has found that such achievement is the outcome of a' committed team spirit', brought about through distributed leadership, involving students, and focusing on moral values and sound character. The key involvement of the principal is that of a supervisor, who provides effective feedback; this feedback then becomes basis for motivation to teachers to accomplish the common school

goals. This study therefore can help to reconceptualise the leadership of learning as a form of leadership that involves learning beyond the curriculum, developing moral values, and cultivating good attitude and a 'firm' national character.

The study may also serve to re-frame the role(s) of the principal, showcasing his /her commitment to the overall development of students, displaying distributed leadership, supervising the process and ensuring the professional development of both himself and his teachers. This article further advocates the investigation of leadership outcomes in a broader sense, seen as an overall development of students which can contribute to meeting the' higher' needs of recognition, self-esteem and self – actualization of students, teachers and the principal.

The findings of the study on leadership for learning of principals in private schools in India should be seen, and further discussed, as an attempt to develop a preliminary model for leadership for learning based on the responses of the principals to the interview.
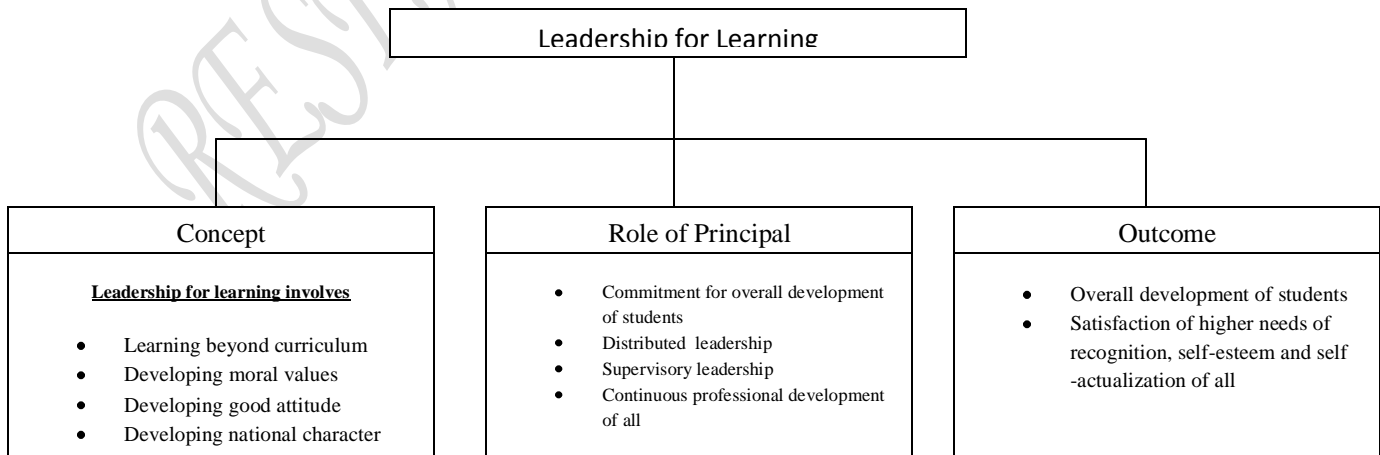

Figure 1: Model for Leadership of learning

Figure 1 shows a model derived from the responses of the principals interviewed in the context of this article. The role(s) of the individual principal and the outcomes of the leadership process can act as major dimensions of the further development of leadership for learning processes. While these concepts involve the continuous improvement of learning, both inside and out of the classroom, the kind of leadership that leads to the development of moral values, good attitude and national character amongst students, reflects the role of the principals, and subsumes their commitment to the overall development of the school. This can involve teachers and students in processes of shared leadership. It can also produce better supervisory leadership, using a variety of models, and resulting in the continuous professional development of all. This study has found that good leadership also meets many 'higher' needs of students, teachers and the principals themselves, along with improving the academic achievement of students, thus explaining the recognition, self- esteem and self-actualization dimensions.

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