

# Propelling a Learning Environment in Schools

## Significance of Principal and Teacher Leadership

RASHMI DIWAN\*

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### Abstract

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*The paper is centered on key leadership interventions in generating and sustaining environment conducive for learning in schools. The paper takes cognizance of creation of a positive culture to bridge the learning gaps, combat silent exclusion, addressing learning deficit in order to minimize school factors that hinder student learning. The paper also recommends changes a principal leader and teacher leader can bring in the overall school environment to facilitate student learning.*

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#### **FOCUS ON LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT: THE SHIFTING PARADIGM**

Indian school system, historically viewed as essentially 'examination centred' is now seen as a 'learning and development continuum'. There is a realisation today that measuring learning levels are only a part of the means and not an end in itself.

Cigman (2008) clarifies that it is not simply about getting children to perform better in examinations; it is about getting them to feel better—more motivated, confident, happier—and about the idea that feeling good in these ways leads to success at school, and in life generally. The knowledge society today demands excellence and creativity in place of

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\*Professor and Head, NCSL, NIEPA, New Delhi

rote learning and examination-based performance.

In the emerging paradigm, schools are expected to identify the social and emotional aspects of learning as a key focus for their work with the children. The United Kingdom in 2005 recognised that the factors holding back student learning are associated with difficulties in understanding and managing the feelings of children, working co-operatively in groups, motivating them and demonstrating resilience in the face of setbacks. In India, after the emergence of NCF 2005 and NEP 2020, the schools are expected to aim to make learning a joyful activity to meet the complex and diverse learning needs of students. This calls for school Principals and teachers who think and act differently, while proactively nurturing learning. In the emerging paradigm, one would agree that 'learning to learn' is gaining momentum.

### **UNDERSTANDING LEARNING AND CULTURE OF LEARNING IN SCHOOLS**

The Glossary of Educational Reform (last updated 29 August, 2013) explains

*'Learning environment refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures in which students learn... also encompasses the culture of a school or class—its presiding ethos and characteristics, including how individuals interact with and treat one another—as well as the ways in which*

*teachers may organise an educational setting to facilitate learning...'*

The schools where learning is constantly encouraged, every idea enriched, stimulating environment created is locked in a continuous cycle of *learning to learn*. Senge (1990), in his most popular writing on *The Fifth Discipline* explains learning organization as places "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results, they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together matters. The special feature of supporting teaching and learning, accommodating differential learning needs leave an everlasting impact on the learning and learning outcomes, and indirectly but strongly, on mental health and emotional well-being. Creation of an environment conducive to learning by the principal and teachers together creates stronger connections that result in holistic development of a child.

### **THE POLICY PRONOUNCEMENT**

There have been concerted policy recommendations on improving quality of school education. NPE 1986 (Para 5.15) emphasised on the importance of creation of a positive learning environment, coupled with attractive physical infrastructure and well qualified human resources. NEP 2020 (Para 5.8 to 5.14) strongly contends for a caring, vibrant, inclusive environment of schools

**Box 1: Key Ideas**

- ✓ A committed team ensures every student learns and every school excels.
- ✓ Generate a constructive learning climate.
- ✓ Sustain good teaching practices.
- ✓ Gradually transform from creation of learning milieu to a high-performance learning culture.
- ✓ Work as a team, distribute leadership, build highly motivated team and a learning culture.

conducive to learning for every child in this country. The Policy recognises the importance of positive teaching-learning culture that leads to improved learning outcomes. Para 5.13 indicates the *role expected of principals and teachers, explicit to include developing a caring and inclusive culture at their schools for effective learning and the benefit of all stakeholders.*

### **ISSUES AND CHALLENGES HAMPERING LEARNING**

Poor learning levels, low school completion rates even after completing several years of schooling have attracted considerable criticism all these years. Silent exclusion is the most critical factor pushing a child to discontinue education at any stage of schooling. This form of exclusion is hidden as no one would come to know that the student who keeps attending school regularly is hardly learning. If silent exclusion, learning gaps and learning deficits are to be addressed seriously, it becomes imperative to generate enabling conditions for every learner to be able to learn.

Attracting children to schools and retaining them in an environment

which they might consider unfriendly is another challenge. The greater onus lies on school principal and teacher leader to work out on strategies for dispelling the fear and unfriendly school climate that is equally vital for holistic and balanced growth of the child, bringing the trust and confidence that schools stand as the biggest support to them for their emotional wellbeing. Therefore, in the first place, schools and classrooms need to focus on 'learning and learner'. In the second place, the schools need to become 'safe and conducive' institutions. These expectations bring to the fore, the need for making the whole system revolve around learning, total wellbeing and safety. This is not an easy proposition as it poses a huge challenge at system and institutional levels, particularly in varying school contexts.

### **Building Constructive Learning in Schools: What can a principal do?**

There has to be a realisation that schooling in itself is not learning. When improving the school is the focus, learning becomes a priority.

Seen from this perspective, the School Principal follows a motto *All for learning*, a commitment, that leads to *Learning for all* (World Development Report, 2018, p. 16). At the heart of learning of every child in such schools, lies the untiring efforts of the principal in creating a supportive climate by building teams of committed teachers, collective creativity, reflective dialogues and the like. The domains where attention can be focused to reinforce learning in the school need special mention.

### ***Become an academic leader***

Academic leadership has strong linkages with student learning. Leithwood, Day and Sammons (2006) contended that academic leadership improves teaching and learning indirectly but influences staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions. The Principal as an academic leader guides through the teaching and learning, creates a positive work culture, gives freedom to experiment, innovates new ways of teaching and learning inside the school, but also connects teachers with professional learning community outside the school.

### ***Create learning communities for social learning***

The social engagement of school leader with professional learning communities outside the school provides an array of opportunities for teachers and SMC/SDMC members to share experiences,

reflect on challenges, thus together refine ideas and enrich mutual learning. Social learning reinforced by the principal among students creates a chain of small learning communities in the school to shape a constructive positive climate for motivation; fosters an environment of trust, cooperation and empathy; models positive attitudes, respectful behaviour, helpful conversation and constructivist learning, absence of any kind of complexes like ridicule, sarcasm, or superiority; view others positively and treat them well. The peer group learns social virtues of cooperation, discipline, sharing, loyalty, morals, courage, resourcefulness and self-reliance. The learning communities also provide personalised learning environment to every student in the school. The students participate in the learning processes that promote higher order thinking, nurture differential learning needs and motivation to learn. Small learning communities provide a climate of personalised learning, allow students to link new learning with existing knowledge, build new knowledge following a constructivist approach, deriving learning from different members of learning community while creating own learning pathways. The more is the strive for absorbing learning, better is the confidence with renewed spirit, *I can do it*. Once the lost confidence is regained, the student restores all the thrill of learning from peer groups, teachers and teaching

community outside the school as well as professional learning communities. Such occasions create an overall stress-free environment charged with energy, interest, curiosity, excitement, humour and fun.

### ***Increase the comfort levels of students***

Feeling of safety and security add to the total wellbeing of all. The home environment may not be congenial for many students and they bring all sorts of baggage from home. The mental blocks created seriously hamper their learning curve and keeps impeding their learning cycle. It is important to recognise that mental health is a major hampering factor that should be seriously addressed. On the contrary, when a student comes to know that listening, sharing and caring environment is encouraged in school they are bound to break all mental states. Any time students break the shackles of mental hurdles and step outside their comfort zone to achieves higher, consider it a time of celebration.

### ***Meeting psychological needs***

A stimulating environment has the most powerful effect on the learner and on the process of learning. Such conditions are created where students and teachers become active learning partners in the process of learning. In such an environment where freedom of improvising and applying new innovative methods are encouraged, the confidence levels

of teachers and students enhance. Learner's involvement in organising learning for themselves provides an impetus to satisfy learning needs of students and teachers, which is a major contributory factor for "feeling good" about learning. Also when a creative school Principal ignites the spark of creativity in the classrooms and teaching methodology, the mental space to absorb knowledge that comes through collective learning is bound to bring sparkle in the eyes of teachers and students, tangible excitement in all teaching and learning exercises, an active attempt to learn, a drive to find out, construct or reconstruct something new.

### ***Be a reflective thinker***

A reflective leader is endowed with the capability to look inwards and shape the way of functioning that reflect on what strategies will help in creating happiness and satisfaction for self, teachers and students. It's time to realise how important it is to examine, introspect, reflect on one's style of leadership and take decisions on matters of concern for a school which might have been lost unknowingly. The reflective leader can make connections between conflicting or disaggregated school processes, question one's own functioning, prioritise requirements and take the conscious controls to make the school a place where teachers and students feel comfortable while it carves out pathways for it's progression. Classroom visits, coaching and

mentoring of teachers foster collegial conversations about teaching and learning. A reflective leader helps the teacher and learners to see the world with a different lens; in the process, creates a reflective teacher and a reflective learner.

### ***Nurturing Differential Learning Needs: What can teachers do?***

Principal leadership influences teacher leadership to create appropriate learning spaces for every child in the school by planning and implementing activities around happy, caring, productive classrooms charged with excitement and stimulating learning experiences. Teacher leadership is what matters the most when it comes to nurturing learning needs of all children. Some of the measures discussed in this section carve pathways to facilitate learning of all.

### ***Ensure vibrancy to reinforce learning in the classroom***

Learners respond well to beautiful, attractive environments and activities that reinforce learning and creativity. It is important therefore to design classrooms that provide sufficient space to play and learn simultaneously (Vygotsky, 1978; Sawyer, 2006; World Bank Group, 2016 and 2019). Researchers also have evidences to state that cognitive development is closely linked to physical space utilisation as well as social interactions. The teachers use part of classroom wall space to celebrate student success. The physical environment emits positive energy that gives a feel of welcoming culture, boosts the interest and curiosity around, helping the students and teachers to reconstruct and embrace learning. No matter

#### **Box 2: Key Ideas**

- ✓ Create an ecosystem to enrich learning for all through formation of Professional Learning Community within the jurisdictions of a specified geographical area or formation of informal teaching teams, helping them learn and apply new teaching strategies, creative problem solving, overcoming subject-specific difficulties, handling problematic students, etc.
- ✓ Generate enabling conditions for teachers and students to learn and sustain the efforts for maintaining the culture of learning.
- ✓ Promote schools to become a learning organization and further build it as an innovative and creative institution to provide new experiences to teachers and learners and to give new meaning to a school.
- ✓ Cultivate beliefs that change is possible; every team member has the ability to create a culture of learning and potential to contribute to improved student learning.
- ✓ Small learning teams contribute to personalised learning teams. These teams have the capacity to bring a comprehensive reform in the structure and climate of schools.

how attractive a physical space is, learning can never happen if learners are not stimulated to learn. The teachers use a variety of instructional strategies and activities to make learning an insightful experience that nurtures a feeling that the school actually 'cares'. The students are taught problem-solving, conflict resolution and/or social skills. The emphasis is more on improvement rather than perfection. Some of the positive effects of stimulated learning leading to a vibrant classroom may be summarised as:

- Setting attainable goals and providing feedback at regular intervals.
- Introducing internal reinforcers by organising learning around students' interests and potentials.
- Capturing the interest of learners by making tasks challenging.
- Taking the learning trajectory from beliefs and attitudes to causes of successes and failures.
- Instilling confidence among learners that they can "do it" by enhancing the expectations of students about their capacities to succeed.
- Setting goals to attain mastery by establishing linkages between existing skills and new tasks, supporting every action and effort, ensuring success and the reinforcing self-confidence at every stage.
- Providing a variety of choices for students like writing a paper,

making a presentation on the topic chosen. Teachers may feel that they may have less personal influence on learning, but certainly can suggest ways to support learning.

### ***Nurture uniqueness in every learner***

Students learn differently and in a variety of ways. Therefore, differential learning abilities call for a variety of styles of instruction. The beginning can be made by gauging the prior knowledge of every student which one will find through the three categories of learning potential:

- Learners may look at the whole picture by taking all segments of knowledge together as one whole.
- Learners may interpret with different meanings in a particular context in which it has occurred. The teacher can integrate both types of learning to help them learn to adjust to the learning challenges.
- Learners may become impulsive and respond either quickly or more thoughtfully.

The category in which students fall will be understood by their responsiveness in the class or the choice of assignments. The techniques may include creating visual images to relate new information with already learnt information and organising information into an easily remembered structure. A teacher can include multiple tasks in learning to benefit students in matching their

preferences with levels of learning and to adjust to the task challenges that do not match their preferences. Students may respond to different activities in different ways depending on their preferences for learning. Assessing the range of understanding and remediation for those falling below 25 percentile rank can certainly help the teacher to understand the higher order learning needs of every child. The teacher's task is not easy, but it's important not to single out even one student.

### ***Preparing Students for lifelong learning***

Promoting lifelong learning is a way to make students socially aware by engaging them in activities that refine their thoughts, helping them to become successful adults. The students can be given the opportunity to choose and experiment with their skills. Problem-based learning and research projects where students hypothesise, explore and discover will enhance critical thinking and problem solving skills on their own.

### ***Addressing different levels of learning***

The increasing demands for showing better performance of every child in a class every year have placed the teachers at crossroads. It is mind boggling for them to decide which way to move, especially when they are in hurry to complete the syllabus while at the same time are on everyday treadmill to make students learn by

all means even if the understanding levels are low. Bloom's taxonomy (1984) provides a direction to teachers to think about their teaching and subsequent learning of their students. The taxonomy provides six levels of learning as arranged in a sequential order starting from remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and eventually creating. It helps in developing a newer insight, allowing students to follow a ladder for learning at their own pace that is more sustainable and enduring.

The taxonomy teaches a teacher to think critically about the students capabilities and accordingly plan for teaching different topics, prepare lesson plans, diagnose the problem areas in all the subjects, identify differential learning needs, analyse teaching strategies followed by regular assessment with multiple techniques. The mantra is to find ways of engaging the students all year round and repeating again and again until the concepts are retained in the minds of students while at the same time map learning around projects, experimentation and exploration. The taxonomy helps the teacher in establishing a connect between students and classroom instruction, and both become co-learners in this journey of learning. Regular assessments help to ensure that all the teachers and students are deeply engaged. Assessment-based feedback sheets work well, quizzes help and group tasks make understanding of concepts easier. A



### **The Six Levels of Bloom's Taxonomy**

**L1: Remember** (Example activities Memorize a poem, recall state capitals, remember math formulas)

**L2: Understand** (Example activities Organise the animal kingdom based on a given framework, illustrate the difference between a rectangle and square, summarise the plot of a simple story)

**L3: Apply** (Example activities Use a formula to solve a problem, select a design to meet a purpose, reconstruct the passage of a new law through a given government/system)

**L4: Analyse** (Example activities Identify the 'parts of' democracy, explain how the steps of the scientific process work together, identify why a machine isn't working)

**L5: Evaluate** (Example activities Make a judgment regarding an ethical dilemma, interpret the significance of a given law of physics, illustrate the relative value of a technological innovation in a specific setting—a tool that helps recover topsoil farming, for example)

**L6: Create** (Example activities Design a new solution to an 'old' problem that honours/acknowledges the previous failures, delete the least useful arguments in a persuasive essay, write a poem based on a given theme and tone)

Source: <https://www.teachthought.com/learning/what-is-blooms-taxonomy-a-definition-for-teachers/>

blend of teaching a particular concept followed by a simple assessment after every class enriches learning at every level of learning. Students are measured against their own progress than in competition with others, backed with immediate feedback and reinforcement for further learning until one attains mastery in learning.

#### **Correct problematic behaviour of students**

The teacher divides the target behaviours into small, easy to achieve steps, arranged in logical sequence that would build a complete behaviour. There are common set of rules every student is expected to follow. The teacher creates opportunities for students to learn, maintain regulation, discipline and mechanisms for students to

monitor their own learning and pace of learning and cycles of review, reflection and feedback. Sometimes positive reinforcers help, but many a times fail if not properly executed. The cause of certain behaviour needs to be understood and then an effective way to handle the problems needs to be designed. One way is to involve students in framing draft rules for themselves, supported with statements for justifications. The draft can be placed for discussion with the school learning community that becomes accepted norms for the entire school to follow. It is equally important to have a strategy appropriate to the nature of misconduct or indiscipline. In some instances, parent training in application of behavioural techniques work, while in others, techniques like social praise, or role-play or by

creation of hypothetical situations where students participate in setting the rules for appropriate behaviour.

### ***Improve cognitive abilities***

Anderson (1983) stressed on the importance of mental associations inferred by the learners in the instruction. The role of a teacher becomes crucial in maximising learning where learners' attention is directed to critical features of information by increasing the memory storage using strategies including analogies, examples, clear definitions, focused attention of students by highlighting in bold the main ideas, essence and abstractions. Content can be presented in concept maps or flow diagrams. The prime idea is to make information more meaningful and relevant for learners by helping them to develop mental associations. In the entire learning pathways, instructional practices can be presented in hypertext and hyper media.

*Hypertext:* Concepts linked to one another are well organised but in unique or creative ways.

*Hyper media:* Mimics the ideas and thoughts; but associations are established when these are consistent as well.

The capacity to learn seizes when too many demands are made right before examination time. Instead of being able to concentrate on probable test questions, the students tend to divide attention among multiple

perceptions around and therefore, the learning capacity gets lost in anxiety and stress on what and how they would fair. Site maps can be used to help mark the position and path for the learner to give a direction to learning.

### ***Improve metacognition in learning***

When learners are given charge of the directing course of their learning, they master their own thought processes and self-guided understanding levels. In metacognition model, the teacher directs his/her own learning by demonstration on how thinking and practice works by solving a problem or problems in the class in the presence of students. In this model, the students are involved in setting goals, making decisions and evaluating the entire process in a continuous manner. The students construct their own learning, work on a continuum from prior/simple knowledge on the understanding of existing knowledge, link with new knowledge and draw on the context of the learning situation. In the process, the learner becomes aware of all learning and guides the process of storage, filter through divergent views and retrieves the learnt concept, familiarised with the process of thinking that leads to learning. These are built into the regular activities of the class. One can say with all conviction, learning becomes more enduring when it originates from interactions of personal characteristics, behaviour and environmental factors.

### **Multiple evaluation techniques closer to learning levels of students**

As the learning progresses in students, the more connect with classroom instruction gets established. The teacher can devise multiple techniques of evaluation which essentially need to be creative as well assessing a variety of learning among students. The workload of teachers might increase but by end of the day, they will feel more content when they get much higher rewards than the time invested in deciding the techniques. Trigger think-pair-share model is one where frequent questioning happens after sharing a presentation where other students pose questions seeking further clarifications. Another method is what Angelo and Cross (1993) calls “minute papers” in which opportunities are provided to learners to get feedback on their level/degree of understanding.

### **Sustaining the culture of learning**

Fullan (2002) vehemently pointed out that *most changes are structural and superficial* until culture is transformed to make change more enduring and everlasting. Today when the entire social and educational matrix is changing, the conventional belief system does not simply work. In the present context, quoting Kotter (1996) who describes culture as “the norms of behaviours and shared values among a group of people” (p. 148), one can foresee a need to create a new belief system by aligning perceptions, behaviour, attitudes with the transformed belief system. When learners are made to believe that they can learn, they also start working harder. A deeper impact for sustainability of a change becomes more stronger when all the stakeholders are locked in a continuous cycle of re-culturing. The major onus for initiating and sustaining the process depends on principal and teacher leadership.

#### **Box 3: Key Ideas**

- ✓ Students to be engaged with instructions, giving enormous opportunities for involvement in various activities of choice, interests, reinforcing their thinking, bringing clarity that eventually leads to learning.
- ✓ Instruction to be coupled with motivation, caring environment, safety, creativity, constructive thinking and empathy.
- ✓ Students do better when one believes they can; they also do better when they can and therefore work harder and harder, and efforts too get linked with student learning. Their confidence enhances when their efforts to learn do not go unnoticed or futile.
- ✓ Beliefs can be made stronger by creating a strong belief that beliefs may not be “seen” but structures that create beliefs can be seen. tested, measured, understood and lessons derived.

The process starts with setting of a new vision, supporting the new belief, followed by a strong commitment to a new belief. The principal and teachers together work on a new approach and partnerships for distributed accountability and new strategies to push learning as an experience that remains lifelong with the students. It's all about training the minds that becomes a habit. Over the years, if followed seriously becomes the culture of an institution, deeply embedded and ingrained as a necessary condition for ever lasting impact.

## CONCLUSION

NEP 2020 articulates the need for creating a climate conducive to learning with a hope that a roadmap for principals and teachers will help create an ecosystem that supports learners and learning. The promotion of learning in schools would largely depend on sustenance of a climate conducive to learning. It is not enough to provide signposts to the leadership pathways, but a realisation that proactive action taken by the principals and teachers helps transform schools into Schools of Excellence.

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