

Resilience in Promotion of Schools as Learning Organisations

Reflections on Karnataka Experience

RASHMI DIWAN*

Abstract

Present scenarios of school education in India portrays school as a rigid system of teaching-learning where teaching processes dominate over learning. Children voices do not have any place in the classroom. Teachers do not reflect themselves as life-long learner. Deliberating on this crucial aspect of Indian Education system this article makes a plea before all the stakeholders to transform the schools from teaching organisation to learning organisation. The paper strongly recommends that in today's world, each school must become a learning organisation. The paper strongly recommends that in today's world, each school must become a learning organisation. Looking at the possibility of transforming schools into learning organisations, the two practices namely, the H.D Kote and Kalikayatna in Karnataka reflects on the success with which schools have been providing rich learning experiences in all its activities right from curriculum transaction to teacher training. Highlighting the quintessential characteristic of schools as organisations that learn, the paper suggests some workable propositions by which schools inspite of functioning in bureaucratic framework can become learning organisations.

Introduction

School as a learning organisation is the center where students and teachers both have enormous opportunities to learn everyday. While teachers interact with each other and with children, they continually are learning different aspects of teaching skills, taming the problematic

children and managing difficult situations in the classrooms. Here children also right from the beginning are sensitised to new concepts and practice and drilling in counting, alphabets, social environment and moral education and beyond curricular and co-curricular boundaries. And at the same time not only do children learn from books and

*Associate Professor, National University of Educational Planning and Administration, Sri Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi.

teachers and other exercises improvised by the teachers as facilitators, they also get ample opportunity to learn from each other. In many of the instances, children studying in schools provide opportunity to teachers to learn from them.

Understanding Learning Organisations : Implications for Education Sector

The concept can be traced back with the works of Argyris and Schon (1981), Revans (1982), Pedler (1987) and Senge (1990) on learning organisations in business organisations. There is no uniform definition of learning organisation. In the Indian context, Malhotra in 1996 defined a learning organisation as an 'organisation with an ingrained philosophy for anticipating reacting and responding to change, complexity and uncertainty'. Most definitions are valid to some degree but possibly the closest to the essence is from Joop Swieringa and Andre' Wierdsma who explain learning organisations are not only capable of learning, but also of learning to learn. In other words, they are not only able to become competent but also to remain competent (Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1992). The basic premise on which institutions were recognised as learning organisations accrued from the statement by Peter Lassey (1998), "If organisations are to gain a competitive advantage in a changing world they need to have the ability to adapt constantly to new circumstances and challenges" and that the "Organisations can and have capacity to develop a culture where learning is encouraged". The research till then emphasised on the need to develop the capacity of whole organisation to

learn, rather than focusing on the learning of isolated individuals. It soon came to be realised that the concept could also be skillfully applied in education enterprise as well. The works of Everard and Morris, 1990; West-Burnham, 1992; Yinger and Hendricks-Lee, 1993; Southworth, 1994; Sammons et al, 1995; Leithwood and Sharratt, 1998; Clark, 1996; and Lumby, 1997 further expanded the idea of learning organisation to education and introduced the concept as a 'Learning School' or a developing school. It was repeatedly advocated that the concept of learning organisation is relevant to educational institutions because changing times demand new means to manage change on an unprecedented scale. It infact, promotes the idea of context-specific research into school and college effectiveness, need based teacher development, organisation of prompt learning among individuals for the benefit of educational institutions etc. The notion of schools as learning communities can be understood as a means of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

Learning organisation in the most simplistic terminology in the education sector can be one with the features as follows:

- a flexible organisation that learns and encourages learning
- promotes exchange of information
- creates well-informed personnel who are willing to learn further
- accept and adapt to new ideas
- changes through a shared vision
- contributes whole-heartedly in the entire transforming effort

This entails rejuvenation of traditional culture of schools that are based on positional hierarchy. In this milieu, conventional style of functioning will be replaced by a welcoming culture on learning and skills of individuals. This will apply specially on our grassroots practitioners who actually have to be empowered to take up challenges emerging from field realities to which our policy and decision makers are ignorant.

The Indian government schools are deeply fastened by centralised control system. As a researcher, experience over the years has made us realise that although our schools function within bureaucratic rules and regulations, can enjoy the freedom to take decisions at their own levels about how and what changes need to be introduced. Ofcourse it requires commitment and initiative at the part of teachers and the School heads. Richard Elmore and colleagues discovered that even when teachers are willing to learn new methods, they often applied them in a superficial or inconsistent way, offering the appearance but not the substance of real change (Larry Lashway, 1997). Although this is an inspiring vision, schools may be far from achieving it. Teacher isolation, lack of time, and the complexity of teaching present significant barriers to sustained organisational learning.

This does not mean that all schools till now were not learning. All organisations train their staff, develop new concepts and methods of working to cope with changing situations but many of them move towards new situations slowly and painfully. "In reality all organisations do learn". But with a difference — and this difference is the

SUCCESS factor. Peter Lassey (1998) while stating the capacity of organisations to develop culture where learning is encouraged explains that "Learning Organisations have the capacity to reconstruct themselves rather than be dependent upon external pressures; learning organisations are able to exert a level of control on their environment rather than be slaves to it". The successful organisations have been seen as forward looking institutions showing progressive trends faster in terms of preparedness for managing change than many of the conventional institutions. In fact, institutions that have embraced change and development as the most important factor have assured better success as they have expanded their capacity to allow learning to take place, to reconstruct them rather than be dependent upon external pressures, and have been successful in exerting a level of control on their environment rather than be slaves to it. Simple changes to the way the organisation operates can make a huge difference to the culture and environment of the organisation.

Key Characteristics

The process of transformation of an organisation into a learning organisation calls for commitment to lifelong learning for all those within the school. Argyris (1977) explains: 'organisational learning system' which encourages and supports a learning organisation, should form the foundation of this transformation. The individuals' learning activities are facilitated or inhibited by an ecological system of factors that may be critical in determining whether or not its

'organisational learning system' is one which encourages and supports a learning organisation. Here there is an emphasis on collaborative learning and the creative and positive use of difference and conflict. Unfortunately, many of our schools prefer to be on the safer side by not introducing something new in the system for which they may even might have to be answerable to the higher authorities.

This organisation is highly characterised with commitment of the entire school team to change the structure, system and practices to sustain learning. It is the structural changes which encourages and support cultural change, and therefore a more fundamental change process may be needed. "To become a learning organisation involves both attitudinal and process changes" comments Middlewood, Coleman and Lumby.

Another salient characteristic usually found in such organisations requires a holistic understanding of the school as an organisation. Aspinwall and Pedlar (1997) illustrates totality of learning in an organisation that visualise learning about things, learning to do things, learning to become ourselves, to achieve full potential and learning to *achieve things together*—completely embedded in learning culture.

The Commitment

The determination to become a learning organisation, important as it is, cannot transform a traditional organisation unless a school head along with his

group members takes initiative to chalk out a programme for themselves about how to cope with the changing expectations of the local people and community to which it caters. Barring very few, majority of our school heads follow their own trail but within the norms specified by the respective State governments. The journey is long and tiring but with confident specific steps if followed seriously can make it possible to transform schools into institutions that can learn and provide opportunities for the personal development of its people by recognising that people learn in different ways depending upon their abilities and capabilities, providing them instructions depending upon their maturity levels on how to go about in certain directions for their self and institutional improvement, finally encouraging all its people to learn, innovate, and contribute for the progress of its institution to which they belong. The importance of developing a clear vision of a school head to create an effective management system wherein ample learning opportunities are provided to teachers cannot be denied. Helping teachers understand the new content, developing new teaching skills, enhancing practical pedagogical skills, understanding the psychology of learning, giving them the opportunities for attending training programmes with other subject specialists, developing essential team skills in them, involving them in the macro and micro school-based decision making can be considered as safe beginning strides for a School Head. Unquestionably, one can apprehend that a learning organisation

allows freedom and autonomy to our School Heads and other practitioners to be able to decide for themselves that works in the system. This will in itself make an enormous leap towards the organisation becoming a learning organisation. How a school can be promoted as learning organisation is a

major breakthrough in State of Karnataka. The two major initiatives, *H.D Kote* has been in practice for more than one decade and *Kalikayatna*, a recent initiative have shown high level of commitment and zeal as learning organisations, well reflected in the forthcoming paragraphs.

An Innovative Learning Approach: The H.D. Kote Experience

The remote tribal Heggadadevankote block of Mysore district in the State of Karnataka initiated certain innovative learning exercises on Micro planning on 257 government schools out of 279 schools in the block in 1995. This collective purely teachers' movement began its journey with the help of UNICEF involving District Institute of Education and Training and teachers of Rishi Valley in making initial efforts to transform the entire schooling practices which brought into action a number of changes in all domains of school activities. Curriculum was designed on the basis of competencies identified under MLL; learning materials were developed; teaching methodology and evaluation procedures were redesigned, learning kits which replaces textbooks, workbooks and teachers guide were devised (these include learning ladders which encourage individual pace of learning, learning cards easily identifiable to the children by the logos used, instructional cards for teachers, games and reinforcement cards) appropriate classroom management techniques were adopted, a sense of ownership was built among children by helping them to prepare learning materials through art and craft and suitable indoor and outdoor activities were chalked out for joyful learning among them. A drastic change was seen in the learning and recapitulation exercises of the subjects like language, mathematics and Environmental Sciences. Classroom management and transactions have been entirely different from the traditional practices. Similarly progress chart specially designed for children to mark their progress themselves, the weather chart where children can freely record information about weather conditions daily are significant additional features in this learning experience. Interactions among teachers at cluster level to exchange notes, ideas, songs, activities, puzzles etc., form an integral part of learning exercises.

The Learning Initiative: The Kalikayatna Experiment

Kalikayatna (KY), is a reflection of recent shift in paradigms in education as a response to the National Curriculum Framework-2005, formulated by NCERT, which largely envisages a total shift in the classroom environs. Children are seen

as constructors of knowledge and teachers as facilitators of learning. Developing critical thinking among children is held to be an important value. Learner autonomy is stressed. It is initiated by an NGO called *Prajayatna* in collaboration with Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Karnataka. Kalikayatna Kalikayatna is under implementation in Bilikere Cluster of Hunsur Block in Mysore District of Karnataka. The class room management forms a major part in organising learning environment in the schools. Children from classes 1-3 form one group and children in classes 4-5 form another group. There is no concept of introduction of a textbook for curriculum transaction. They are allowed to refer to books, textbooks meant for those classes and any other material available to them, develop reading habits in them and they learn more effectively at their individual pace. The syllabus prescribed by the state for classes 1-5 is redefined here in terms of concepts/themes. The subjects are seen as a holistic programme, conceptualised in the form of learning points. With every learning, the learner keeps reconceptualising his/her own understanding of these subjects in relation to other subjects. There are series of interactive discussions in smaller and larger groups in different phases through several reiteration by composing different ability groups. All the activities center on several discussions. The teacher also pays personalised attention to each child depending on the situation. The observations made by the teacher are recorded in the observation book. The teacher maintains separate observation schedules for each child. A portfolio of each child is maintained by children themselves, based on which evaluation exercises are done by the teacher. There is also a provision of well designed professional training of teachers once a month at cluster headquarters, which keeps them constantly reminding and discussing about gaps, lacunae and progress of each child. The training sessions also gives them a platform to chalk out plan of action at every step.

Transformation of Schools into Learning Organisations

Creating enabling conditions is becoming a necessary condition for bringing changes within the schools. Barth (1991), suggests that strengthening interpersonal relations and collegial conversations focus more upon what is occurring in the school and, in particular, upon what needs to be done to improve the quality of education for students. Barth recognises that such conversations may, at times

result into conflict but it is equally important that educators move beyond the conventional boundaries they had set for themselves. The transformation of traditional institutions to learning organisations does not suggest a diminished role for school administrators. It does suggest that what it means to be a leader needs to be fundamentally altered. This shift require a supportive climate from decision making authorities where the school practitioners are encouraged to do experimentation, learn from mistakes,

take risks, while working across departments while following multidisciplinary approach. Understanding the school is vital, which comprises of the following information about the school:

- Levels of student achievement in internal and external examinations;
- Academic and infrastructure facilities in the school;
- Student discipline and health status;
- The special needs of disadvantaged, marginal, and hard to reach segments of student population such as girls and children with physical and mental disabilities;
- Health of children;
- Family background and socio-economic and poverty status, etc. etc.

This baseline exercise is expected to help them to determine the priority areas for their respective schools. Based on such an assessment, each school can have its own school development plan.

Some simple changes to the way a school operates can make a huge difference to the culture and environment of the organisation (Lassey, 1998). The H.D experience shows that a school has enough capacity to develop as a learning organisation as it should be able to provide enough space for freedom to children to explore their world themselves to follow their own pace of learning in order to steer a sense of individuality among them. Group work and co-operative learning seems to be a workable proposition in Kalikayatna practices. The children need to be encouraged an active rather than a

passive role in learning. Robert Melamede (1997) suggests dialogue rather than debates-listening, suspending judgement, common understanding in this situation. Faculty and other staff can act as facilitators in learning organisation. Healthy two-way debate, positive conflict and disagreement are part of the culture of a learning organisation.

As recommended by Joyce and Calhoun (1996) that schedules and assignments should allow time for **collective enquiry**, otherwise, significant reform is nearly impossible in a typical school situation. In this setting, learning needs to be generated in small groups to provide motivation, support, learning etc. Honey (1991), supports "a mini learning organisation in the parts you can influence. Small incremental changes, if sustained, have a habit of gaining momentum to the point where they become transformational". Therefore, the learning experiences that a school is expected to provide is activity based and joyful. Morgan (1986) — 'Organisational learning' requires openness and self criticism that is challenging to conventional management.

As well echoed in Kalikayatna practice, **training and professional development activities** for school faculty will have to include a component that helps teachers to understand and redefine their roles for creating an environment which is conducive for development of child's personality, encourage such activities which locks them in the cycle of learning and improvement throughout without disturbing the broader framework of

rules and regulations. Sharon Kruse and Karen Louis (1993) contends that preparatory exercises can help in the formation of “Responsible Parties”, which act as champions for extended inquiry and points out that email and regular faculty meetings becomes an important aspect in this arrangement.

Practitioner research is another element that supports the process of learning as it is more sustained and systematic in bringing “conceptual and instrumental change” (Lumby, 1999). Morgan (1986) asserts that fruitful research needs to be linked to the idea of the school as learning organisations, where learning occurs at many levels and leads to organisational learning and change. The actors who participate in the process give them the chance of reflecting on their own practices and consider themselves as part of the organisation. The participation they find it quite ‘challenging’, ‘refreshing’ and ‘enlightening’ since learning can be driven by data. Practitioners’ research in fact gives an opportunity to teachers and institutional heads to lock into the system of reflection and feedback that helps them to adapt educational ideas to one’s own context and professional needs. Schools where the culture of collaborative research is promoted, becomes a learning centre for both, the teachers as well as its students.

No improvement can take place until teachers are emotionally involved with their jobs. **Teacher selection** holds very important place in the process of lighting that spark. School environment needs to be made more child “friendly” and welcoming to their parents, so that there

are no drop-outs, push-outs and *pull-outs*. This is high time when recruitment procedures are changed, even though this requires an extensive exercise. Based on different empirical findings supported by our own perceptions/ observations, the teachers in each school can be divided into three categories:

First category comprise of teachers who have attained total liberation from the jobs expected of them.

Second category comprise of teachers who are committed, sincere despite whatever may come.

Third category comprises of teachers in between these two categories. Sometimes they are with Group 1 and sometimes with Group 2.

Now the success of an educational leader in building a learning organisation depends upon bringing Group 3 with Group 1. Group 3 is the most important human resource who through proper care and nurturing can become the most important instrument for restructuring the school to which they belong. Important is to identify this category of teachers and for locking the school system in the continued cycle of learning, bringing basic commitment for school improvement planning .

If **passion for teaching is to be rekindled**, the selection procedures will have to recast if institutes of teaching have to be transformed into institutes of learning. Selection procedure of teachers based on I.Q. (Intelligence Quotient) degrees, divisions and other formalities need to be revisited. May be teachers with high E.Q. can be one of the possible answers but how to select teachers who

are emotionally involved with the profession is the question to be addressed seriously.

Concluding Statement

What are the ways by which an institution can lock itself into the cycle of learning? In order to bring positive results, there is a need for every school personnel to reflect on the most to the most vital issues honestly:

- Are we ourselves pace setters? Which category do we actually belong to – Ist, IInd or IIIrd?
- When policy in school is framed, do

we actually consult teachers? Are we doing it in the real sense or our consultation is confined to a small group? Is our behaviour demotivating the IInd Category?

- Appreciation, recognition is a natural urge. Do we actually mean what we say and convey right messages with right tone? We talk of Generosity. Are we really doing it?
- Schools until this time have been a teaching institutions. Can we make it a teaching-cum-learning institution — Learning Centre for Heads as well as for Teachers?

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