School Leaders for Teachers: A Case on the Emerging Trends in Teacher Leadership in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

School education stands at a crossroads with growing uncertainties and ambiguity in the wake of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). The government's mandate for the schools to go digital in their functioning is back into focus. From managing time-table to ensuring learner outcomes, teachers' responsibility has increased considerably. Besides, the onus of school improvement has escalated the responsibilities of the principals considerably'. In such a scenario, there emerges a need to form a leadership continuum in schools that expands across the hierarchy and decentralizes power, especially to the teachers. Teacher leadership is a recent phenomenon in India, unlike its western counterparts, where the focus on the teachers' role in leadership positions has already gained impetus. Clearly defined as a *'set of practices that enhance the teaching profession, it is a holistic concept that offers a means to improve schools overall'* (Killion *et al.* 2016). Besides guaranteeing school reforms, it also ensures durable professional identities (Fullan, 2006). 'However, even where principals and schools support teacher leadership in classrooms and schools, this does not guarantee teachers to take full advantage of those opportunities to lead'(Berry *et al.* 2010a). In such a scenario, it becomes crucial for the principals to usher new and fresh teacher leadership prospects in schools 'to embrace, encourage, and support innovation and creativity from their teachers'. The present paper contributes to the bleak literature on teacher leadership in India with a case study of a C.B.S.E. school in Trivandrum, Kerala. In India, rare studies attempt to conceptualise teacher leadership in a contextual understanding. Since education comes under the Concurrent List, both the Centre and States have a significant share in shaping education systems in the respective states. Hence, despite having a standard school system, culture and diversity shape the systems differently to cater to the diverse student needs and vast student strength. In such a scenario, teacher leadership can assure a potential solution to the issues related to the management and administration. The case study enlightens on the trajectory of teacher leadership observed by the school leader to achieve the maximum potential from a clientele of approximately 5000 students with the help of strong and confident teachers. It also assists the school in promoting positive culture, healthy competition, and overall improvement and concludes with the study's implications.

Keywords*: Teacher leadership, school leadership, school improvement, continuous professional development of the teachers, Kerala schools and C.B.S.E. schools

The New Education Policy (2020) has brought back the focus on improving education quality in India (G.O.I., 2020). Besides, associating it with the students' low educational attainment, it points at the status of teacher education in the country (G.O.I., 2020). At the same time, it has redirected attention to the regulatory aspect of teacher education during the pandemic of COVID-19 (Li & Lalani, 2020). With the school education going digital issues related to access and quality education resurfaced that were overlooked so far. Currently, the focus lies primarily in building a strong teaching force that aims at the transformational process in schools.

In the entire educational pyramid, teachers are situated at the lowest hierarchy, having minimum autonomy and serving as the scapegoats for the management's systemic failures. Despite having high credibility on the professional front, they need to be updated regularly to face the challenges abreast. In this regard, continuous professional development of the teachers (C.P.D.T.) is considered crucial. Ideally understood as a continuum extended between the pre-service teacher education (P.S.T.E.) and the in-service education of the teachers (INSET), C.P.D.T. is not only holistic in terms of development but also provides the teachers with reinforcement to strengthen their subject as well as strategise the teaching-learning concerning the dynamic environmental needs. It, therefore, is a crucial factor in ensuring the school's overall improvement. Indeed, the importance of teachers in the education system has always sought immense focus and consideration. Timeously, commissions and policies have mentioned teachers' indispensable role in achieving positive school culture, increased learner achievement, and effective school functioning (Kothari, 1966). However, despite all the considerations, the real potential of the teachers continues to go unidentified. Hence, there is an emergence of revamping the orientation toward teacher education and bringing forth the much-needed professional aspect associated with it (GoI, 2020).

Prof. D.S. Kothari pointed out a notable weakness in teachers' existing professional education system. At the time of the education commission's report 1964-66, it identified gaps between the policy and its implementation. Despite many recommendations, teachers' quality of training in colleges continues to dwindle (Kothari, 1966). Even when policy planning has been robust, there has been tremendous faltering at the implementation level as the ground realities differ from the policies' ideas. It holds even today as the government has finally level taken up the drastic measure of coming up with the National Education Policy nearly after three decades through reformative policy action.

Further, there is the '*National Initiative of School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement*' (N.I.S.H.T.H.A.), assuring the capacity-building of school heads and teachers at the elementary level. The training is to be conducted directly by Key Resource Persons (K.R.P.s) and State Resource Persons (S.R.P.) identified by the State and U.T.s, and trained by National Resource Persons (N.R.P.s). NRPs are identified by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (N.C.E.R.T.), National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (N.I.E.P.A.), *Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan* (K.V.S.), *Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti* (N.V.S.), Central Board of Secondary Education (C.B.S.E.), Non-Government Organisations and UNICEF (GoI, 2020). Training encourages teachers' willingness to initiate positive changes in their schools. With N.I.S.H.T.H.A. aiming 'to nurture the training of confidence and teachers' desire to move outside their comfort zone and embrace the idea of exerting influence on school reform' (N.C.E.R.T., 2019), teacher leadership has become the need of the hour. Teachers avoid standing by the tried and tested teaching methods and focus on innovative techniques in teaching. Hence, the teachers' concerns are addressed through a dedicated approach by building holistic, inclusive classrooms.

Despite an insurgence against the outdated teaching methods, the training dedicated to the C.P.D.T. reinforces the spirit of teacher leadership as it manifests aspirations in them to aim for promising career options. It 'restores and strengthens the deteriorating self-concept and engages them to step up during the crisis' (N.C.E.R.T., 2019). The hour's need is to inspire and restore depleting levels of confidence in them to infuse positivity and hope for a better and brighter future ahead. With COVID-19, teachers have to teach with reflective practices. They must reassess, evaluate, and respond to the new 'normal' within the classrooms. Thus, there is a growing demand to bring a robust mechanism for a school-based management system in place. The following section deliberates upon teacher leadership and its significance today regarding better and effective school management.

Understanding Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership is not merely limited to the teachers being in charge of scheduling the classes, working on assignments, and selecting textbooks for examination. It offers a very myopic view of the concept. It holistically involves the teacher's potential and helps him/her provide a direction towards self-learning. Therefore, working on the

'self' model for C.P.D.T., teacher leadership is crucial to learner achievement. It is a collective effort that empowers a teacher to contribute effectively to a school, while setting standards to be aspired and achieved by others. The space of teacher leadership is thus not restricted to formal settings but emerges from informal spaces of communication between the teachers, school leader, headmaster, students, and other stakeholders (Brien, 2007; Cosenza, 2015). It utilises their potential in the classroom and allows them to influence beyond the classroom walls. Despite the importance associated with teachers' recruitment and retention, the proportion of their leadership opportunities and their influence in the decision-making to that of their retention in the profession is evident through research studies (Berry *et al.* 2010b).

There is a constant need for the teachers to feel secure and wanted by the profession if expectations are upon them. Therefore, the principal's role becomes essential to provide adequate reinforcement to the teachers to perform better. Gabriel (2005) backs it further by stating that 'valuing teachers and supporting their leadership roles can significantly impact educational change' (Gabriel, 2005). By strengthening processes in a school that promote and support teacher leadership, a school leader increases the chances of teacher participation, invariably leading to empathy, 'ownership and commitment to the school's established goals.' Empowering them through the decision-making commits them to the school's vision and mission and aligns them with the general school culture. While it heightens the 'self-efficacy' of the teachers, it also boosts their morale. Teacher leadership enhances the opportunities for collaboration and better teacher networking. Through collaborations, they harness the professional spirit and feel intrinsically motivated to take 'ownership'. Since they are usually at the end of receiving instructions and mandates from the authorities and management, teachers barely get to identify the streak of 'leadership' in them (Lowery-Moore *et al.* 2016). Further, they are crucial intermediaries regarding student success and achievement as they are directly involved in the teaching-learning processes, pedagogical nuances, curriculum development, and execution, yet they do not identify themselves as 'leaders'. It, therefore, becomes vital to carve leaders out from them for

their professional growth and development and contribute to school improvement (Leithwood *et al.* 2020; Strand, 1997).

The roles of teacher leadership are complex and diverse. Their expertise extends beyond being subject as they deal with varied responsibilities as subject-based departmental heads/ representatives, curriculum and examination setters and developers, mentors to help novice teachers in the induction process in the schools, and action researchers who focus on resolving the recurrent class and student-related issues (Ash & Persall, 2000). Hence, it becomes crucial to understand it as a concept that takes on three fundamental roles, namely:

❑ The leadership of teachers as 'facilitators, coach-mentors, trainers, and curriculum specialists, for creating new approaches, and leading study groups';

❑ Exercising leadership in 'operational tasks by keeping the school organised and moving towards its goals, through acting roles such as Head of Department, and action researcher';

❑ Exercising leadership through 'decision-making and partnership' by intervening through committee memberships, initiating business partnerships through 'higher education institutions, and parent-teacher associations' (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001).

Therefore, teacher leadership is essential to attain higher degrees of professionalism. It empowers the teachers and reinforces them to condition classroom practices and performance. Through such supportive teacher leadership systems, their retention probability increases as they continue to work and better the existing schools for which they work. It also enables them to build a robust network across the schools, consequently working towards school development and improvement. Thus, enabling them to cultivate a 'self-monitoring and self-improving system' of evaluation. Further, their collective spirit of working and carving out solutions to complex problems with their specialised knowledge also broadens the efforts put in by the school leaders for school improvement and effectiveness (Lumpkin *et al.* 2016).

The covid-19 pandemic has increased the principals' roles and responsibilities with leadership demands in the twenty-first century. One of the significant

roles is to encourage the teachers to become leaders. Anderson (2004) discusses 'leadership reciprocity' wherein there is a need 'to inspire teachers to become leaders' (Leithwood *et al.* 2004). It is therefore worthy of considering developing leadership tendencies in teachers as a part of the school leadership process. However, despite the theoretical deliberation, the policy execution and implementation to support teacher leadership are limited as the dynamic environment has ushered a shift in the perspective of the leadership process. The following section elaborates on the research method, followed by a discussion on the school's profile.

Research Method

The paper is a qualitative study that attempts to understand the ongoing leadership trends in Kerala, known for exceptional school education practices (Ramachandran, 2018).

The case study of a C.B.S.E. school explores the leading trends in the school and how the school leader initiates and encourages the teachers to step into leadership positions and take charge and ownership of the school.

Sample

Trivandrum was selected based on the statistical data of C.B.S.E. class 12 board results in 2017. It emerged as the highest performing region along with the following facts:

❐ The region with the highest pass percentage, i.e., 95.62%, followed by Chennai at 92.60% and Delhi at 88.37%. (C.B.S.E., 2017);

❐ The pass percentage of girls stood at 97.59%, while it stood at 93.72% for the boys. (CBSE, Press note: Region-wise statistics, 2017);

❐ The region has shown 100% results in government schools and 95.10% for independent schools, the highest amongst the regions. (CBSE, Press note: Region-wise statistics, 2017);

❐ The region scored a maximum pass % for the C.W.S.N. of 97.56%, where 23 students scored above 90%, and four scored above 95%. (CBSE, Press note: Region-wise statistics, 2017);

❐ It continues to remain the region with zero cases of unfair means during C.B.S.E. boards. (CBSE, Press note: Region-wise statistics, 2017).

Further, the U-DISE data served in selecting the high and low-performing schools of the Trivandrum region using the school-wise data capture format.

During the fieldwork, an independent case emerged in the selected senior secondary school with a co-educational set-up where the principal diligently practised the teacher leadership model. Hence, the present study dwells deeper into its understanding. The interviews with the principal and the teachers were recorded using a professional voice recorder and transcribed.

Research Questions

1. How do schools identify teacher leadership practices in schools?

2. What role do school leaders play in promoting teacher leadership in their schools?

3. How does teacher leadership ensure better school performance and functioning?

Research Objectives

1. To delineate practices that promote teacher leadership in schools.

2. To determine the role of the school leaders in promoting teacher leadership in their schools.

3. To examine the significance of teacher leadership in ensuring school performance and functioning.

The School Profile

The school was established in 1998 under the aegis of Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI). The Congregation had aimed to create students who stood as winners at all odds without relying on external support. The principal considered children and teachers as the pillars of the school. Even when he gave time and space to them, he looked forward to creating healthy individuals who were self-critical yet independent in all life situations. As a result, to make sound life choices, the school focused on the students' personality development besides academic achievement. It boasted a student clientele of roughly 5000 students. The school had been practising teacher leadership since the principal had joined. Being a '*participatory leader*,' he maintained providing space to teachers to turn them into leaders, thereby diminishing the hierarchy.

By providing them support in all situations, he emerged triumphant in maintaining the harmony of the institution. It was apparent as the teachers received directions before the commencement of the interview.

Since the school had a student clientele of 5000 students, he decentralised the responsibility. The school had what he referred to as a '*grade leader*' and '*teacher leader*.' The minimum number of sections per class was seven, and the maximum stood at thirteen. Depending upon the class strength and feasibility, one or two sections were allotted to a teacher, who acted as a '*grade leader*.' The grade leader reported to the '*teacher leader*' who managed their issues. Towards the month-end, a final report was submitted to the principal discussing all the issues faced and resolved. However, the principal was always approachable if there was any primary concern.
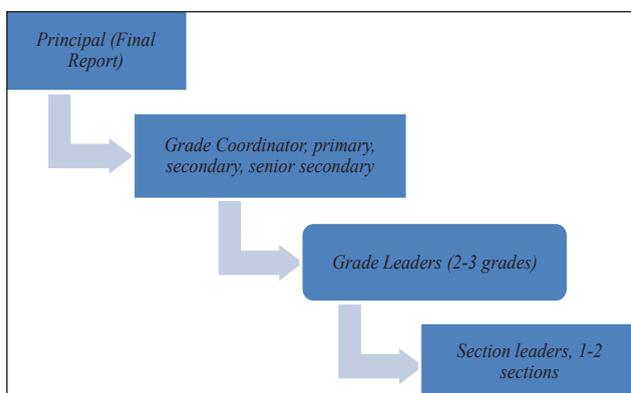
Fig. 1: Decentralised model of teacher leadership practised in the school

According to him, the primary wing had eight leaders for approximately 60 sections, leading to better team-building and association amongst the teachers. As a result, the principal faced minimum issues, as the teacher leaders resolved most of them. It also made them empathetic towards the school leader as they experienced issues daily. Furthermore, it made them more accountable for being inefficient or incompetent if they failed to address any issue. The teachers approached the principal personally to deal with issues on rare occasions. Hence, there was a transparent and proper flow of communication between the principal and the teachers. He observed the classes, took rounds, and personally managed teacher regularity as he took charge of the teachers' attendance.

A practical and well-planned model for the school guaranteed better results and higher academic achievement and helped the teachers develop an inclusionary approach to teaching. As leaders, the teachers felt more responsible and accountable for all the teaching-learning. They were also involved in developing academic and co-curricular plans, besides giving them the responsibility of their execution. Albeit at a smaller scale, this model updated them about the latest development in organisational and administrative skills required to manage schools effectively. The teachers felt more confident in addressing a crisis and remained more vigilant in resolving student-related issues. The model also strengthened the teacher camaraderie and weeded out factors such as insecurities, professional jealousy, and bias that would have otherwise impacted their performance. Teacher leadership in the school ensured timely execution of the academic plan, bettering the overall school performance and functioning.

DISCUSSION

Policymakers have significant concerns about issues related to the teachers today. They accrue to teacher recruitment, performance and retention in the teaching profession. They also focus on the emerging trends in school education that can enhance and better the conditions of teacher professionalism. The study enlightens the realms mentioned above for the practitioners and policymakers to develop leadership skills and capacities in school teachers besides principals.

Another significant aspect is teachers 'teacher burnout' and 'attrition rates'. Where teacher burnout refers to the saturation of teachers in the teaching profession, attrition rate refers to the dwindling effect of teacher enrolment and retention in the teaching profession, thereby leading to lower reinforcement and professional sustainability levels. Considering the recent Open Government Data (O.G.D.) on teacher profiles in school education, it emerges that the critical concentration of teacher enrolment lies in primary education. However, as we progress towards the senior secondary levels of education, it drastically decreases (O.G.D., 2019).

Although India needs to record data on teacher attrition, international research segregates the

Teachers appointed at different levels in 2017-2018
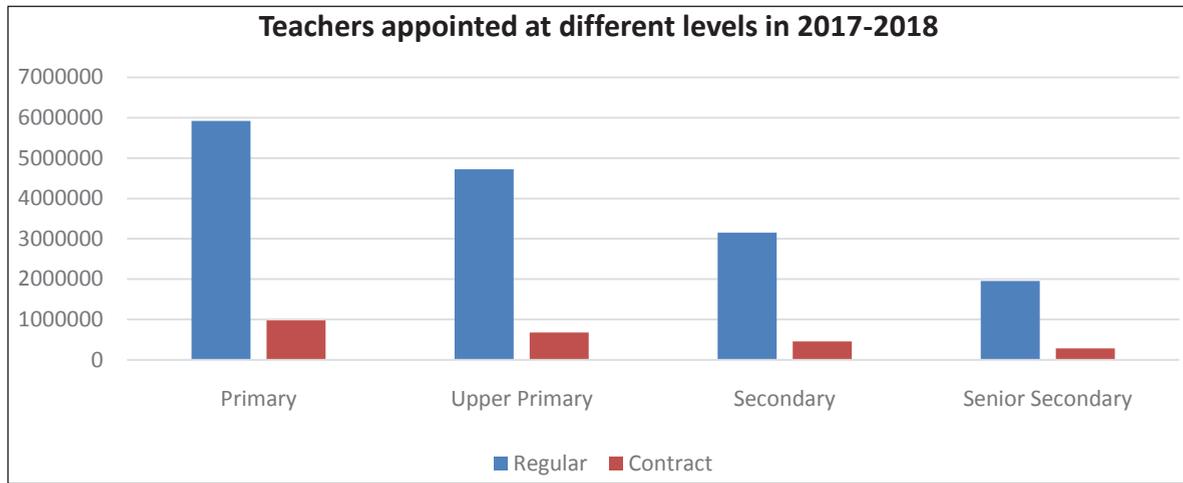
Source: OGD PMU (2019)

Fig. 2

causes of attrition categorically, namely 'personal and school correlates' respectively. Nguyen and Springer (2019) elucidate that 'personal correlates' attribute to factors on personal aspects dealing with gender, age, race/ethnicity and teachers' educational qualifications, shaping their professional decisions; 'school correlates' determine the factors and situations in which teachers perform. Further, 'external correlates' refer to the factors coming from national and state-level policies (Nguyen & Springer, 2019). Further, the findings also show that female teachers in contrast to their male counterparts, teachers without graduate degrees, depraved school administration, and low levels of professional development are the chief reasons behind their attrition.

Despite the parameters mentioned earlier regarding the enrolments at different levels, it becomes pertinent to consider the teachers as the frontline workforce in school development and improvement (GoI, 2020). Robust research efforts are needed to develop exhaustive teacher leadership models in India to ensure more transparent school functioning. Persistence research exploring leadership trends in school education in India at the levels of teachers and principals would benefit academia and update the school improvement efforts.

CONCLUSION

Teacher leadership initiates teachers' participation in an expressive and engaging debate with the school system. The concept establishes a

leadership continuum that places teachers and principals at polar ends. Besides, it effectively contributes to increased student performance and academic achievement, producing impactful teacher collaboration and building effective learning communities.

Kerala has been a pioneering state in endorsing the model of teacher leadership. It is because the principals and the teachers believe in the education system's integrity and aim for society's social upliftment by educating children. Therefore, it is a much-needed concept in schools across India that ensures equal distribution of roles and responsibilities to generate maximum potential within limited resources.

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