



Pathways to School Leadership: A study on school leadership practices in special schools of Kerala

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Received: 11 Feb., 2022

Revised: 28 Mar., 2022

Accepted: 12 Apr., 2022

ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reinstated the debate on the role of school leaders in ushering in school improvement. Research backs the statement strongly as 'school leaders are only second to teachers in ascertaining student achievement' (Halász & Pont, 2007; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020; Leithwood & Levin, 2010; Leithwood & Massey, 2010). Also, NEP (2020) focuses on developing inclusive education in the country. Hence, the role and responsibility of school leaders intensify as it needs to be explored in terms of inclusive educational prospects. The present qualitative study focuses on the case analysis of two schools in Trivandrum, Kerala catering to the children with special needs (CWSN) student clientele. Despite belonging to different boards of education, State and CBSE, respectively, it explores the dimensions of the progress made in special education and the challenges faced by the school principals and teachers in continuing their journey to school improvement. The paper contributes to the bleak literature on school leadership practices in the Indian context. It renders a contextualized understanding of the inclusive education development in Kerala; a state celebrated for its significant achievement in educational development, equity, and access (Kerala State Planning Board, 2019; KSPB, 2021; PIB, 2021).

Keywords: School leadership, contextual leadership, special needs education, Kerala schools, school improvement, Indian schools, and school support system

School leadership in contemporary times requires a contextual grounding of theory and practice as it reflects embedded realities of the milieu (Sinha, 2013). Contexts take time to build up and grow, and

How to cite this article: Bakshi, S. (2022). Pathways to School Leadership: A study on school leadership practices in special schools of Kerala. *Learning Community*, 13(01): 67-76.

Source of Support: None; **Conflict of Interest:** None



they also impact ‘school performativity and accountability’ (Tan, 2014). School leaders hence, have to stay abreast of dynamic challenges that invariably dwell with change in time and context. It is assumed that leadership is learned. Hence, it becomes an ever-evolving process extending over one’s entire career that contributes to new learnings at each stage (Brooks & Normore, 2018). Their role in shaping schools is indispensable as they identify and weed out the impediments to equity and equality in it. They balance out rights and duties while bringing them together under democratic ethos. However, when presented with binaries such as gender, class, caste, religion, geographical boundaries, and ability/disability school leadership becomes a slippery realm where the leaders have to tread carefully. In such a situation, competent school leaders find it easy to arrive at more precise decision-making that renders a conducive school environment. Therefore, for resounding school success, school leadership is vital (Boske *et al.*, 2017; Brooks & Normore, 2018; Green, 2018).

Addressing the issue of disability, Gupta (2016) accounts that the dropout of CWSN in India starts from class V onwards. The findings point out that CWSN is getting enrolled but not being retained. The education system retains 12.02% CWSN and 5.3% specific learning disability only in class XII enrolled in class I. These findings significantly examine existing school access and retention policies modifying teaching-learning strategies, evaluation provisions, and incentive schemes to retain the enrolled CWSN (Gupta, 2016).

Hence, moving towards an inclusive set-up requires clear philosophy apart from technical or a big organizational change. UNESCO views inclusion as “a dynamic approach to responding positively to pupil diversity and seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning.” Therefore, the principles of inclusion are interpreted and adapted to the context of individual countries (UNESCO, 2016). At the core of inclusive education lies the human right to education, pronounced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which states in article 26, “Everyone has the right to education... Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace” (UNGA, 1948).

However, the development is impeded when the schools require technical and affective skills from the leaders, especially in an inclusive school set-up. In their study, Schulze & Boscardin (2018) sketch a developmental trajectory for the school principals working as principals in special education schools. According to the study, the principals’ prior knowledge and background in special education are irrespective of their performance and contribution as leaders. However, it emerged that the seasoned and senior principals followed the ‘transformational-collaborative leadership’ style in higher-performing schools compared to the ‘transactional and instructional’ leadership patterns observed in lower-performing counterparts (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Hence, irrespective of their prior knowledge and indoctrination in special education, school leaders’ trajectory in leading special schools is developmental (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018).

Rationale

International human rights treaties emphasize the prohibition and active elimination of discrimination. A logical consequence of these rights is that all children have the right to receive an education that does not discriminate on any grounds such as caste, ethnicity, religion, economic status, refugee status, language, gender, or disability. A rights-based approach to education is, therefore, based on three principles:

- Access to free and compulsory education;
- Equality, inclusion, and non-discrimination;
- The right to quality education, content, and processes.

Presently, the status of inclusive education is under transformation and transition in our school education. The government's impetus in NEP (2020) lies in developing this aspect of school education (GoI, 2020); problems surface due to a lack of awareness and readiness from the families' side. As a result, dealing with an inclusive school set-up creates much stress for the school leaders. The study contributes to the bleak literature on school leadership in inclusive school scenarios by presenting case studies of two schools from Kerala, belonging to CBSE and State board, respectively, to cull out significant concerns and impediments faced by the school leaders to usher school improvement in their schools. The study locates the disparity between the binaries existing in the social mindset through the formal education system. It attempts to understand the emergent attitudes towards inclusive education and difficulties faced in implementation.

Research questions

1. What are the challenges faced by school leaders while facilitating inclusion?
2. How does a school leader usher in school improvement in inclusive schools?

Theoretical Framework

The study focuses on generating a perception of the status of inclusive education in Kerala schools by grounding on the *Transformational leadership theory* as it brings forth school leaders' better version of themselves by broadening and elevating the stakeholders' interests, generating awareness and being receptive towards the dynamics of change rather than negating them upfront (Bass, 1990).

Methodology

The paper is a qualitative study of two different school set-ups in Trivandrum, Kerala, affiliated with CBSE and the State board. Besides drawing a matrix of different school situations, the paper juxtaposes two case studies of prominent schools located in Trivandrum to gauge emerging trends in inclusive education. Therefore, the present work is a contextual study trying to seek alternative practices to promote inclusive education within the school campus.

Based on the recorded interviews of the school leaders and the senior teachers of the schools, the analysis draws upon the underlying issues that form at the juncture of administrative, infrastructural, and academic realms.

The school profiles

School A: Kalyan Public School, Trivandrum

Situated in Trivandrum, the school is a budding school under the aegis of the *PRS group of Hospitals* and therefore models the curriculum upon the psycho-medical paradigm of educating the CWSN. With 400 students, the school has a CBSE affiliation registered under the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI). The principal juggles her role as a school leader and as the C.E.O. of the school. It has a reasonably strong staff of counselors, psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech and behavior therapists who work diligently for CWSN. Besides them, it also has a staff nurse. The school has a mainstream and learning assistant section, but children with learning disabilities and autism in the educable range are accommodated within the mainstream classroom to promote inclusion. The school has an extended branch that admits intellectually disabled students under three sections; *‘the Preparatory section, the Learning readiness, and the Custodial section.’* The central ideology of this school is *‘to provide education to all types of children.* In case of severities, the students are immediately taken to the PRS hospital, where they receive first aid.

Acceptance of CWSN- a taboo

The school leader observed that having a special child within the family changes the parenting dynamics. The families undergo acceptance issues considering their child’s condition. Inadvertently they feel let down and often displace anxiety. In such cases, the school acts as counseling support to the parents as well, excerpts:

‘Regular schools simply advise them, ‘you please take your child from our school’. He’s not learning, he cannot read, he cannot write, he cannot do mathematical calculations. He cannot do upper primary classes, he cannot do board examination.’ So, the parents are stuck in that range, and then they come here and ask us for a solution. So we help them with a help of a scribe or an interpreter or we design for them a special curriculum teaching them with the help of study skills.’

Like other schools catering to the cream players of the student group, the school received moderate to severe cases of special needs.

Medical Support

It offers sound medical support in occupational, behavioral speech, and other forms of therapy. Instead, the school leader ensures that therapy remains a priority area, wherein parent support is strongly pitted. Besides having regular teachers and special educators, the school also has three occupational therapists.

Focussing on the Continuous Professional Development of Teachers (CPDT.)

The principal focussed on the training aspect of the teachers and ensured they held medical certification in therapy besides a special education teacher training degree. The teachers engage with teaching-learning and the evaluation process for the CWSN. Besides initiating teacher training courses for nursery teachers and at the introductory level, refresher courses, conferences and seminars are encouraged regularly. Due to a lack of awareness amongst teachers to deal with CWSN, it becomes pertinent to update knowledge from time to time. The school leader empathizes with the teachers, and therefore as per the school's policy, all the teachers are required to take a mandatory vacation of ten days wherein they do not have any contact or update from the school apart from summer vacations. It also helps the CWSN gain familiarity with other teachers and therapists in the form of group therapy, wherein 80 students are considered a group. They are not allowed to gain dependence on any human figure.

Evaluation

Screening of curriculum happens in the form of fill in the blanks, one-word answers as confidence need to be developed by designing and refining the curriculum. The school's occupational therapist trains CWSNs in activities of daily living (ADL), such as table etiquette. According to the school leader,

'It is essential for children with autism or intellectual disability to be independent. We envision a life for them wherein they are complacent and not dependent upon their parents.'

For this purpose, the school encourages activity-based learning where their writing skills are worked upon. The goal of education is considerably different for them, and they are encouraged to develop soft skills, such as music therapy for CP students, speaking skills, and grooming activities. Even when there are severe sections for mild-moderate to severe cases, the school focuses on inclusion in every aspect.

Until secondary, the school follows CBSE and in senior secondary, it follows the curriculum of the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) curriculum, where they get assistance through a scribe or an interpreter. Pre-schemes help them with the help of the special educators and resource teachers. Subjects taught include English, Painting, Data Entry operations, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Psychology. The special educators follow a diagnostic approach to identify the aptitude areas of CWSN. Post schooling; the teachers recommend vocational fields/courses related to their aptitude and interest.

The psychologist provides for psycho-educational support and trains CWSN with skills like pencil-holding, scribbling, and concept formation. Recently, the school leader did start a new phenomenon wherein the CWSN have been inducted within a mainstream class to gauge the level of comfort and confidence these children developed. It has also been observed that while they imitate their peers in the class, there has been a remarkable improvement in their social skills and communication abilities. This happens in the presence of a regular teacher and an assistant for each class and is overall supervised by the special educator.

In order to help CWSN, study skills such as brainstorming method or flow chart method and Mnemonics are used along with phonemic readings for spellings and visual concepts in mathematics. In addition, oral assistance is given to dyslexic children in case of severity. After finishing the board exams, the educators also advise parents to go for some practical or vocational courses, which they can do and learn.

School B:GHSS, Trivandrum

Government Higher Secondary School is located in Thiruvananthapuram's *Jagathy* are a and caters to students suffering from auditory impairment. A special education school, it offers only the *Humanities* stream to nineteen students. After a rich service of thirty-three years, the principal taught Sociology as a teacher initially but worked consistently to transform herself into a special educator. An interpreter in the annual meet for the *All-Kerala Deaf Association*, she is an active member in numerous clubs for people with auditory impairment.

The leader functioned within the continuum of special educator-facilitator as she inculcated mental readiness and acceptance of CWSN to the families coming from the margins and dealt with the similar magnitude of issues as in the previous case. However, the support she earned as little as her efforts in making the students dependable were thwarted by administrative glitches, infrastructural lacunae, and a hostile work environment. Nevertheless, the focus retained on enabling the CWSN and making them employable at all levels to become independent, even when there was a limited scope.

Managing resource crunch

The school faced systemic limitations due to which the principal found it hard to make the school environment sustainable. Infrastructural issues were reported, such as resource crunch, issues in grant disbursement from a centralized system, and the lack of trained professionals to handle student-related issues. However, with collaborative efforts, the school eventually overcame the impediment. Through networking and seeking support from other schools, she encouraged her students to come forward and participate in inter-school events.

'When I joined the school back then, there wasn't any computer or related accessory for the school, slowly I have developed all the facilities, today we have 6 computers with all the requirements. The intelligence bureau located in Vazhuthacaud donated water purifiers, and for the 11th class, we have added about 12 study tables with chairs and eco-friendly mats, at my expense. The government has given us an LCD projector as the IT sector is expanding for taking the class. There are teachers who are able to operate the system here and a few more teachers will be added soon, I hope there will be additions as well. I have managed to pool 12 digitally programmed hearing aids which are worth 2 lacs, through different charitable trusts. A lot needs to be done.'

The principal exhibited a strong sense of empathy with the students. The focus retained on maintaining amity between the students and herself. The need to be employable at all stages bothered her, excerpts:

‘The students should be more job-oriented, even though the vocational higher secondary school has a limited scope in it. There are only two technical courses for the students: printing and tailoring. This is not enough for these students. In order to acquire more jobs, they need to be trained in those ways required by the government. I have registered for the Adequate Skill Acquisition Programme (ASAP), but there is a shortage of trained hands at the government level, as these initiatives require a lot of funds and additional costs which will be a burden for them and only a handful of students are there. For them, this isn’t feasible.’

With a lack of support system, the principal found it hard to work on the language development for the students. Hence, during post-school hours, she approached public schools in the vicinity for the initiative.

Impediments to teaching-learning

There is a shift in the students’ learning patterns with auditory impairment. Since the disability impacts conceptual understanding and reception, students struggle to grasp information and process it due to language impediments. The principal then re-directed the focus towards vocational training, thereby harnessing their potential and making them confident in their works skills, excerpts:

‘We have state syllabus but the methodology is different. Questions are generally easy, but there will be difficulty for them due to the language impairment. Even if we spend our 100% time and our efficiency, they will remember the 25% concept, rest they will forget everything if I ask them the consecutive day. What I find here is they are interested in other activities apart from the curriculum matters, I sense it could be because of the hearing impairment, they don’t put their heart and soul into learning the language but in the vocational learning. Due to that the current trend of higher secondary is going backward, and the vocational schooling is going forward.’

Identifying the ‘ideal’ language course

The principal validated that sticking to the vernacular languages was the only way to educate CWSNs, especially those with auditory impairment. Besides acting as a medium of instruction, language serves the purpose of developing a dense sense of self-concept and communication of ideas and ideologies. It is, therefore, a crucial aspect of pedagogical training and value addition. However, the principal did foresee an essential gap in it. She perceived the approach to be practical and myopic at the same time, wherein there was a need felt to introduce students to the basic English skills as sticking to vernacular would restrict them in more than one way:

‘We strictly follow one language here that, is Malayalam, all teachings are done in the vernacular language. Here all the subjects are taught in Malayalam because the partial hearing students and the others are hearing Malayalam conversations and the related things in the same language. . . The government will not probably understand the part which is the students who

are leaving the schools will have a tough journey as the computers are following English and these kids will find it hard to use.'

Albeit, the state-owned school had much to cherish regarding the development in the vocational regular for a gruesome reality-check on the plight of infrastructural support and trained teaching staff with regular interventions to cater to the needs of the CWSN students. The following section briefly discusses the socio-psychological underpinnings.

DISCUSSION

The study reviews the status of implementation of strategies adopted by schools to address the issue of inclusion in classrooms to facilitate effective teaching-learning. It looks forward to tracing the steady development of CWSN as they move ahead in secondary and senior secondary classes. The special schools confront challenges and gradually carve out strategies to overcome these challenges by introducing many inclusive practices in the schools. These strategies result from severe thought and deliberations with various stakeholders, including teachers, co-ordinators, and parents (general, E.W.S., CWSN), as there is now a growing 'acceptance factor' amongst them.

The study provided a chance to observe related variables such as T-L, curricular transaction, student interaction, and infrastructure in defining a situation in multifarious ways at a given point. It has been taken up to address co-variation patterns within one school context rather than deeming it a comparative study between CBSE vs. State board set-up. The schools are well-established and brought up in two different contexts and managements, under different political ideologies and government support. Where one has a relatively open approach towards private schooling, the other finds it hard to surf the political wave against privatization. It should be observed that the relevance of studying these units emerged to illuminate the larger concept of inclusive practices in schools along with the perspectives of the teachers, special educators, and the principal.

The qualitative study marked a typical ambiguity of hybridity of research design. It required both-formal and informal analysis. The observation carried out included all aspects of the curricular and co-curricular transaction. From teaching to the assessment of body language in addressing each other, both the schools offered a highly flexible environment. The study, hence, was approached ideally, without holding prior judgments. One of the equivocal factors that emerged highlighted the difficulty in determining the functionality of subunits (infrastructure, CPDT, training, and support for the CWSN, special educators, school leadership) within one unit (the school overall) and gaining understanding through their interaction. It focussed on the adjacent factors determining the overall philosophy of inclusive education and its impact on the stakeholders. The interactive nature of the case study added to the *interpretivism* in qualitative research.

The study does not limit the two institutions' populations but the adjacent mechanisms and units that define that institution's inclusive practices and ideology of inclusion, such as T-L, curriculum transaction, and student-teacher interaction. Another dimension is *confirmatory* versus *exploratory*. A case study is

bound to define and prove an existing hypothesis or venture into unexplored dark territory. Therefore, another significant aspect needs a close look to determine whether the present study is exploratory in nature or confirmatory. The study inclines towards a *confirmatory* nature as it focuses on the existing practices under different lenses. Also, it is not to prove or demonstrate but to gain a deep insight into the bigger picture at large.

The role of school leaders in promoting inclusive education is indispensable. Under the verified guidance of the two female principals in Trivandrum, Kerala, the cases emerge as prominent examples wherein the school leaders' involvement reinvented the educational goals and inspired the families to usher in acceptance at home and a conducive environment in the school. Despite administrative and infrastructural impediments, school leaders carved out efficient ways to handle the shortages through effective collaboration and raising awareness. School leadership in an inclusive education set-up, therefore, requires further interventions for strengthening and development.

CONCLUSION

With NEP (2020) focusing on inclusive education in India, the impetus has shifted to its development and expansion (GoI, 2020). With an increased dropout in the higher classes, especially in the special needs category, there is a need to retain CWSNs in the system and promote them in higher education.

Despite having a constitutional, rights-based policy framework for CWSN, gaps remain in operationalizing the envisioned standards and goals and the inclusive education domain (Grissom *et al.* 2021). The challenge lies ahead in implementing the policy that benefits the stakeholders dealing with the set-up and retaining CWSN. With the appropriate mechanisms in place, the impetus has shifted to remove barriers and strengthen the education system's capacity to ensure all learners' full and effective participation, accessibility, and achievement. *Samagra Shiksha*, NISHTHA, and NEP 2020 are the emerging forces that entail a transformation in policy and practice. Where the promising framework of *Samagra Shiksha* is a response to promote age-appropriate inclusion on the continuum of school education; *NISHTHA* is a response to promote robust teacher development and sensitization across all levels of school education, primarily to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms (MHRD, 2018; MoE, 2021; NCERT, 2019). With a robust mechanism in place, India is on the trajectory to bridge the gap in inclusive education between idea and reality.

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