

School Leadership

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Those who construct one's reality, at all stages, impact significantly on decisions that one makes in one's life. As a student I lived in awe of my principal. As a matter of fact, I lived in awe of my teachers...for a while. When I became a secondary school teacher, at the same school, though I awakened to the reality of the mere humanness of those very teachers, there was much for me to learn from them. Even before that, I had already made decisions about which of them I would or would not emulate.

Though many of us see school leadership as residing in the principal and in others with legitimate authority, the influence and power of the average teacher often go undetected. It is because of this great capacity for influence and power that teacher behaviours merit some discussion. In the first instance, teachers need to have a firm understanding of themselves or, at least, an idea of the general direction of their self-development, not just academically and professionally, but also personally. Teachers as leaders must take responsibility for growth, which does not always result from formalised, structured input.

As a young teacher, I was fortunate to have had the opportunity, like most in that setting, to have served on a myriad of committees. I learned from observing, making mistakes, and asking questions. As I grew into an experienced teacher I continued in this vein, with the understanding that no job was too insignificant. What mattered was doing it as if it were the most significant. What occurs in such settings, with very few exceptions, is that there is the ricochet effect. Others learn from you.

Thus, there is a prevailing view that facilitative leadership can create effective schools. Principals must have the wisdom to enable teachers on their team to develop their own organisational and leadership skills so that the principal is not the sole decision-maker. Both principal and teachers need to tailor their encounters with each other in such a way that it is unquestionable that each one is a member of the same team.

How would that impact on day-to-day life in a school?

Teachers would like principals (and vice-principals) to remember that their teaching time is virtually sacred. This would reduce to almost never, the practice of making announcements over the PA system and summoning teachers and students during teaching time. Communication between principal and teacher should be an exemplary exchange between two mutually respectful adults, whether it is on the corridor or in the office. At an intense moment, the onus is on the principal to be the exemplar. Principals and vice-principals who disrespect teachers in the presence of students invite hostility in its many manifestations.

I often wonder how many principals hold regular, structured staff meetings with agendas posted in advance, and which include reports from teachers. What is the accepted procedure used for teacher input in these meetings and are minutes taken? I remember once in a staff meeting, a relatively younger teacher blatantly reading a newspaper while

the principal was addressing the staff. The inappropriateness of this behaviour was discreetly drawn to the attention of the teacher who summarily declared that it was her right to read the newspaper at that time. Some of the “old school” would shake their heads and sigh saying “class is class.” In another setting, say with a CEO in a corporate setting, such behaviour would not be considered. I have come to believe that schools are places where formality, structure, and systems are being eroded, but are not being replaced by tangibles or intangibles that enhance our living.

The principal as leader must therefore use every avenue possible for creating and sustaining a climate of personal and professional growth for teachers. This does not translate into workshops and “professional days” only, but into a way of life. Though we acknowledge that principals themselves are susceptible to external pressures, it is their modus operandi that would determine whether their team is supportive or not, and whether members would be able to infuse in their students those attitudes that would generate desired behaviours and capabilities.

Without intending to understate the responsibilities of the teacher, it is axiomatic to say that principals and vice-principals do, to a large extent, bear the burden of establishing what may be termed “organizational culture” and “organizational climate.” If communication procedures are not clear and two-way, certain key understandings become fuzzy, resulting in misunderstandings and misconceptions, which become the bases of activities and relationships of a school or any other organisation. If legitimate leaders do not have the requisite skills to negotiate and to mediate in creative ways, our schools will become mires of dull monotony, lacking in proactivity, in persons who inspire, and in goals worth striving for.

Viewed in their individual capacities, both principals and teachers may develop their leadership skills by holding fast to personal and professional ethics. While no document can set forth the by-laws that constitute such ethics, increased expertise in professional areas could be a starting point towards the development of self-confidence and self-assurance, which would become important tools on the journey to empowerment. It is indeed inadvisable to attempt to facilitate another’s empowerment when one is not oneself empowered. Principals need to become sensitised to their teachers’ needs. They must hear their cries. They must interpret their cries.

The principalship is a responsibility that not many envy. If not careful, the holder of the legitimate power may easily lose control of that power and influence to a sub-system of political norms within the organisation. Such norms are implicit and sensitivity is required in order to operate within their ambit. They operate within the framework of coalitions and collusions, which are the worst nightmare of any principal.

Principals need to look long and hard at their goals, their priorities, and their resources, especially human, as they contemplate the challenge of creation and change in an environment that seems closed, but has the capacity to transform communities and societies—our very world.

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