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Should teachers become leaders?

By Shamsah R. Dhanani



IF we study the roles of teachers today, we will see them as people who demonstrate expertise in their instructions, are constantly on a professional learning curve, frequently reflect on what is best for children, engage in continuous research projects that examine their effectiveness and collaborate with peers, parents and communities. Given these actions, an image of leadership immediately comes in our mind. Various studies indicate that effective teacher leadership involves a move away from top-down hierarchical modes of functioning and a move toward shared decision-making, teamwork and community building (Alveredo, 1997; Coyle, 1997).

Keeping in view the above argument it is high time that teachers are seen as leaders in the classrooms and schools. However, researchers insist that teachers are too often left out of the loop of leadership in their schools, and all too often if given leadership roles, lack the skills that will make them successful as leaders (Sherrill, 1999; Zimpher and Howey, 1992). Many teachers today need encouragement from administrators and school managements to shift from their perception of isolation into recognition of themselves as active contributors in a larger context, outside classroom walls. The biggest challenge which teachers face today is the bureaucracy of schools and systems, as well as the attitudes of educational policy-makers that stifle the possibilities for teacher leaders to be effective as change agents. Besides this, teachers who take a step beyond teaching to lead are hampered with extra work load, rigid school schedules, unrelated instructional tasks, jealousies and/or lack of support from co-teachers and administrators. This argument has been supported by Paulu and Winters (1998) who state that barriers in teachers' lives as leaders leave them powerless.

Despite this, there are schools which advocate teacher empowerment, shared governance and collegial collaboration. They see teacher leadership qualities as necessary elements for re-designing schools for success. It is expected that if teachers are given a chance to appear as leaders, it can help foster a sense of ownership in them. Not only will the professional autonomy enhance the attractiveness of the profession but it will improve the quality of classroom teaching practice. Teachers who are given opportunity to work together hand in hand with the top

leadership in schools are more likely to remain in the profession because they are valued and supported in their work.

One of the most consistent findings from studies of effective school leaderships is that authority to lead needs not be located in the person of the leader but can be dispersed within the school between and among the people. Now the growing understanding is that leadership is embedded in various organisational contexts within school communities, not centrally vested in a person or in an office.

Research on effective schools show the results that teacher leadership gave way to teacher efficacy and organisational upliftment and thus lead to school improvement. In order to meet the heightened and multiple expectations from schools in today's electronic age, it is argued that schools need to be learning organisations and this can only be possible if teachers are given a break to think and act outside the box as leaders. Maden (2001) states that it is tempting to dwell solely on the head teacher as a kind of miracle-worker, but these heads know that actual school improvement come through the hearts and minds of teachers. There is a need for Pakistani school culture to be re-structured and re-designed so as to give its teachers room to explore and prove themselves for the betterment of the institutions they serve in.