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Abstract:

A school principal is the central source of leadership influence and plays an instrumental role in shaping the school climate, which serves as a catalyst for students' achievement. As a prime mover of leadership, the principal initiates action, supports, and sustains improvement initiatives through effective and consistent practices that enhance school capacity (instructional, professional and organisational). However, despite its significance being emphasised in educational policies (National Education Policy, 1986 and 2020 and National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, 2009), there is a lack of indigenous research on principals' integrated leadership, school climate and students' achievement taken together. That is to say, much remains unmapped at the ground level as to what specific initiatives/ actions and leadership practices of principals make one school better than the other. To address this gap, the present study utilised the integrated lens to study principals' leadership initiatives that drive a school's collective, collaborative action towards student achievement and school development. The researcher employed a mixed methods design to gather data from 21 high-performing secondary schools in Delhi, incorporating teacher surveys and interviews with principals to gain a holistic perspective related to the key variables of the study.

Major findings: The study findings revealed that:

1. In most schools, teachers perceived the principals' integrated leadership practice as slightly above the 'highly effective' threshold, and school climate as slightly above the 'highly favourable' threshold.
2. There was a high, positive, and significant correlation between principals' leadership practice and school climate ($r = 0.81, p < 0.01$).

3. There was a low, positive, and significant correlation between principals' leadership practice and students' achievement ($r = 0.38, p < 0.05$).
4. Principals' leadership initiatives were categorised into 23 themes which coalesced with eight dimensions of integrated leadership practice under study – shared vision of learning and school development; high, cohesive and culturally relevant expectations and teaching-learning for all students; data-informed decision-making; assessment of student learning; buffer teaching-learning environment; structure the organisation; safe and orderly school operation; distributive and empowering leadership. The initiatives also corroborated teachers' perceptions of principal leadership practice and school climate.
5. The suggestive model of successful school leadership illustrates the synergistic influence of principals' integrated leadership (from 'proximal' to 'distal') on school climate and student success. It underscores the interrelatedness and complementarity of initiatives, wherein teachers as a conduit link principal leadership with improved outcomes in different areas of school functioning.

Conclusion: In a nutshell, principals in high-achieving schools effectively exercised integrated leadership practice and collaborated with the school community to evolve need-based and strategic initiatives for shaping a conducive school climate and promoting student success. Also, based upon the findings, the study offers several implications (for principals, teachers, parents, and policymakers) that address the recommendations of NEP 2020.