

Samuhik सामूहिक पहल Pahal

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School leadership

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This issue of Samuhik Pahal has been guest-edited by [Vidhya Vidhai Foundation](#). It is a not-for-profit organization in the education space that works to ensure child-centric schools for every child in India. It addresses the lack of leadership and management to deliver quality education in state-run government schools and affordable private schools in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. Through its programs, it equips the school leadership with knowledge, skills and attitudes to deliver quality education.

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Leading schools, impacting learning

The foundational role of school leadership in creating schools that work

Team Vidhya Vidhai

Dear readers, we welcome you to the current issue of Samuhik Pahal, which focuses on the theme of school leadership. It is a collaborative effort between Vidhya Vidhai and Wipro Foundation. We take pride in our shared commitment to systemic education reforms in India to facilitate equity and access.

This issue of Samuhik Pahal explores how effective school leadership can potentially contribute to such efforts. This issue is not just a collection of articles. It tries to capture the experiences of our school leaders.

School leadership has been identified as one of the key reasons for educational success: “Of all the factors that contribute to what students learn at school, leadership is second in strength only to classroom instruction.”

Furthermore, effective leadership has the greatest impact in those circumstances (e.g., schools “in trouble”) in which it is most needed. This evidence supports the present widespread interest in improving leadership as a key to the successful implementation of large-scale reforms” (Leithwood et al., 2004; p. 70).

There are multiple ways to conceptualize leadership. These include, for instance, transformational leadership pertaining to big-picture vision and structural reorganization. Instructional leadership refers to establishing the importance of teaching and learning to improve outcomes (Day and Sammons, 2014; OECD, 2016).

However, in this issue, we delve into diverse leadership practices and their implications. We touch upon various key dimensions of school leadership. We also provide insights from the field, which could allow readers to broaden their understanding through a practitioner’s lens.

India’s education system is at a pivotal juncture, poised for transformation. The nurturing of effective school leadership is central to this process. School leadership shapes the education system of our nation in a foundational manner.

Our schools have the potential to inspire hope, foster innovation and nurture future leaders. The leaders in these schools can pave the way toward realizing our children’s aspirations and dreams.

In this issue, we explore the challenges faced by educational leaders, their innovative practices, and their impact on student’s lives. We try to shed light on the valuable work



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being done by school leaders, organizations and individuals. Our goal is to inspire a collective commitment to nurturing and empowering them further.

The authors in this issue delve into a comprehensive exploration of school leadership, focusing on several key dimensions. They examine the role of collaborations and collective action in enhancing school leadership practices.

They also highlight efforts to establish shared visions, create communities of practice, and facilitate peer learning. Effective leadership must ensure inclusive education and explore strategies to create thriving educational environments.

Many pieces in this issue of Samuhik Pahal also explore CSOs' contributions in developing school leadership. While doing so, the authors underscore the importance of systemic approaches, while remaining focused on the learner. The issue highlights the global prioritization of school leadership development. It also acknowledges the challenges that have accompanied this journey.

There are different models of leadership available across diverse contexts. These need to be examined. We have also tried to share with you a range of resources that offer critical insights into the multifaceted realm of leadership in education.

During our editorial process, we have actively engaged with educationists from a varied set of backgrounds. This engagement has been rewarding. It has provided us with a diverse body of insights.

This process has also introduced us to new perspectives that have significantly expanded our own understanding of educational leadership. These insights and perspectives may offer fresh departures for educators and practitioners.

As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, the role of school leaders is evolving. They are no longer just administrators. They are visionaries, mentors and agents of change. In the face of unprecedented challenges, including the recent COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders have demonstrated adaptability and fortitude.

Our collective action can nurture and support school leaders. It can equip them with the tools and resources they need to shape our country's future. As you read through the pages of this issue, we hope you will be inspired, informed and empowered to play an active role in fostering school leadership in India.

Work in this space can go a long way in ensuring that every child in our country receives an education that empowers them to learn and dream. We look forward to our continued journey of transformation through education.

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Path to school leadership

A journey of challenges and triumphs

Regila Marinus

In the bustling town of Chennai, where filter coffee and vada conversations curate the dreams of people, Mrs Victoria embarked on her journey as a school leader. She stood at the helm of John Matriculation School, a beacon of hope for the Tondiarpet community. Mrs Victoria was not just a principal, she was a visionary, a mentor and a nurturing force for her students.

One rainy morning in Tondiarpet, rains danced outside and created chaos and disrupted the school walls. Mrs Victoria swiftly coordinated with the local authorities and staff in the school to ensure the students' safety.

The next day rose with another new challenge. It was not limited to infrastructure problems alone. Mrs. Victoria juggled with addressing the student's needs (especially those of underprivileged children), curriculum reforms, monitoring and mentoring teachers and dealing with piles of documents that needed to be maintained for smooth operations.

Imagine what could happen if Mrs Victoria, did not do any one of these tasks effectively? What if Mrs Victoria is not aware of how to juggle between tasks and loses out on crucial actions of her role? Who would Mrs Victoria go to in order to upskill herself to better contribute to students' learning in the school?

Mrs. Victoria's story is emblematic of the challenges that school leaders face worldwide. Their journey is not just administrative. It is a tapestry woven with empathy, resilience and dedication. It is, thus, important to equip school leaders and provide them with an ecosystem to support and nurture.

In the sphere of education, extensive dialogues on curriculum reforms, classroom pedagogy, and student assessments have held sway. These conversations are undeniably crucial. However, they have frequently overshadowed a comparably vital yet less explored dimension of education: school leadership. It is perplexing why such a fundamental aspect of education has often been overlooked. But it is equally important to grasp the reasons behind this oversight.

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the significance of school leadership cannot be overstated. It serves as the guiding compass steering educational institutions toward excellence, shaping not only the present but also the future of countless students.

As we embark on a reflective journey, advocating for the development of school leadership, we experience the thrill of captivating our funders, diving deep into intricate system investigations, standing out amidst our peers, and the persistent endeavor to show that our mission isn't merely a wild goose chase.

The Vidhya Vidhai story

Vidhya Vidhai was born with the idea to educate, innovate and lead in the education space, our theory of change revolved around the idea of empowering school leaders to innovate and improve schools for child-centric education. In 2017, when Ram and I started the journey, we initiated our first steps of program design with two schools, one located on a busy street of Chennai and the other in the rural set up of Erode. Immersing ourselves inside the schools and



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School leader leading an SMC meeting

taking the role of school leaders helped in designing our program in empathy.

At Vidhya Vidhai, our journey began in May 2017 with two schools incubated by Edumentum. By May 2018, Tondiarpet Private Cluster School joined us, marking a significant stride with the support of the Wipro Seeding Fellowship Program. In 2019, we assembled a core team of six members with a proven track record in school improvement through school leadership.

Our program design was primed for scaling across schools when the unforeseen storm of the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Despite the challenges, our team stayed resilient. We used this pause to understand the ecosystem's needs better and capacitate ourselves for the challenges of school leadership.

During 2019-2020, we strategized for both affordable private schools and government schools, gaining confidence in our approach. Partnerships with credible organizations like Google, Atlassian, and Wells Fargo bolstered our efforts. In 2021, significant collaborations

were formed with the Tamil Nadu State Education Department, Puducherry, Directorate of School Education, and Shiv Nadar Foundation.

However, as our organization's strengths grew, so did challenges, particularly in fundraising, stakeholder management, and driving our mission within the ecosystem. These challenges demanded innovative solutions and strategic planning to ensure that our initiatives for school leadership continued to make a meaningful impact. We decode here some challenges that we encountered in the journey of our entrepreneurial school leadership path.

The quest for tangible outcomes

Imagine the task of building a bridge. Which investment do you think would face quicker acceptance if someone had to persuade an investor to either invest in building the bridge itself or in hiring skilled architects? In most cases, it would be the investment in the bridge as it offers clear, visible outcomes that can be easily measured. However, assessing the skills of an architect requires a deeper

understanding and cannot be measured solely by the naked eye.

In the context of seeking support for equipping school leadership, the challenge parallels that of building a bridge. When it comes to convincing stakeholders, whether funders, policymakers, or communities, the scenario mirrors that of the bridge funding dilemma. The tangible aspects of education, such as physical infrastructure or standardized test scores, might seem more straightforward and measurable. Measuring school leadership may involve a nuanced understanding of human interactions, teaching methodologies, and educational psychology. In contrast, the intangible qualities of effective school leadership – the ability to inspire, mentor, and create a positive school culture – are often more challenging to quantify.

Therefore, in the pursuit of support for equipping school leadership, the challenge lies in articulating the invaluable impact of investing in the skills and expertise of educators. Just as a well-designed bridge enhances connectivity and facilitates progress, adept school leadership lays the foundation for quality education that empowers students. The endeavor involves not just building structures but nurturing minds, a task that demands recognition, understanding, and investment in the architects of our educational landscape – the school leaders.

To reassure the funders, policy-makers and the larger community, and to help them see the results and growth of their support to school leadership, we at Vidhya Vidhai have developed the [School Leadership Taxonomy](#). It can be referred to dispel myths and foster a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of educational leadership.

The neglect

In the intricate world of education, school leaders serve as conductors of an orchestra.

Just as a skilled conductor shapes the music by guiding each instrument and section, effective school leadership orchestrates the harmony within a school. When this conductor is absent or ignored, the orchestra falls into disarray. Teachers, akin to musicians, lose their rhythm, leading to burnout and dwindling motivation. The notes of inconsistency in policies and practices echo through the educational experience of students, disrupting their learning melodies.

During a crucial funding presentation, a well-intended donor compared our program approach to a novice attempting to enjoy a meal. The question arose, “Why wave your hand around your head when you can eat directly?” This metaphor emphasized the misunderstanding that direct actions at the student level yield quicker results.

Much like the conductor’s precise movements shape the orchestra’s performance, effective leadership requires meticulous preparation and nurturing. School leaders carefully blend every educational element to create an environment where learning harmonizes seamlessly.

Recognizing the importance of school leadership, we adopt a proactive stance. Engaging in dialogues on education and leadership, we advocate for the pivotal role of school leadership in quality education. Through our stories and insights shared in our program reports at every stage, through our newsletters and stories of change, our research studies and dialogues with leaders, we contribute to a grand symphony, amplifying the significance of effective school leadership globally.

Defining unique value proposition amid collaboration

Collaboration with like-minded organizations and co-creation exercises have played an instrumental role in advancing our mission. Nevertheless, questions have arisen about our unique value proposition (UVP) amidst

this collective effort. I remember a time when our pitches to institutional donors and high net-worth individuals paused.

We reflected on the question – “What is your UVP?” This question remained in our minds and we introspected. We thought that if we really needed an UVP to solve an existing problem. Amid numerous educational initiatives, this concern is legitimate. We contemplated that our UVP is not standing out conspicuously, but merging seamlessly.

Like a master weaver who selects threads for their unique qualities, we chose the path of sustainable growth, empowerment, and enduring support for school leaders. Our contribution to the tapestry isn't a standalone thread.

Our approach is not about doing something different. It is about creating change that is profound and sustainable. Vidhya Vidhai's involvement in endeavors like Telangana Education Collective, Shikshagrah for District Collectives, and Tamil Nadu NGO Collective, mirrors the core belief that collaboration and collective action is the way to address complex challenges in education.

Our journey has also been enriched by robust partnerships with industry leaders such as Wipro, Shiv Nadar Foundation, Capgemini, Bosch, Zifo Technologies, and visionary individuals who have passionately embraced our mission.

Our impact extends across educational territories, reaching 37,000 school leaders in Tamil Nadu, 30,000 in Telangana, and 800 in Puducherry. While our reach expands, we remain firmly grounded, conducting meticulous pilots and delving deeper into our exploration of the education space.

Through initiatives like our District Education Empowerment Program (DEEP) and Leadership Enhancement Acceleration Program (LEAP) for government schools, and School Leadership Teacher Empowerment

Program (SLATE) for affordable private schools, we engage closely with schools in blocks and districts.

Our endeavors also stretch to central-level interventions. This is exemplified by our self-paced learning resources work on SQAA/ SQAAF frameworks for the CBSE Board. Additionally, we have actively participated in co-facilitating the National Mentoring Mission. At Vidhya Vidhai, our commitment is not merely a mission. It is a transformative journey, shaping the future of education one empowered school leader for one school at a time.

Regila Marinus, CEO & Director of Vidhya Vidhai Foundation, is a passionate social worker turned education champion. She holds a master's in education degree with a focus on School Organization Leadership Management. Regila's mission revolves around empowering every school leader to ensure every child with high-quality education, advocating for child-centered learning at state, district and school levels, and fostering collaborations with institutions and policymakers for shaping systemic changes.

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Role of school leadership for developing and sustaining inclusive education

Seema Nath, PhD

A strong and supportive school leadership is imperative for successful implementation of inclusive education, along with other factors such as inclusive policies, flexible and accommodating curricula, trained teachers, and equitable distribution of resources. In fact, school leadership is often a pivotal enabler, not just for bringing in inclusive policies and practices into a school's system, but for sustaining it year on year as well.

A study of school leaders in Estonia (Pedaste et. al., 2021) showed that implementation of inclusive education was made possible by the vision, support and practices adopted by school leaders (in both mainstream and special schools). However, at the same time, school leaders often expressed negative attitudes towards the adequacy of support for themselves and the teachers. Along with these, close partnership between school leaders and teachers, clear communication, and empowering second-level leadership appeared to be major enablers to developing and sustaining inclusive education (Poon-McBrayer and Wong, 2013). This essay will examine the role of school leadership for developing and sustaining inclusive education and review the literature around school leadership and inclusive education in India. It will finally present a few examples of what it has looked like in practice, address some challenges, and share some reflections on the way forward.

Role of school leadership for inclusive education

School leadership is crucial and instrumental in bringing in systematic shifts in the

attitudes towards inclusion and inclusive education, and needs them to be closely engaged with all stakeholders in the school. Reviewing the literature around the role of school leadership in India, a few crucial things stand out. Foremost among these is school leaders' sensitivity and understanding of inclusion and inclusive education, and how they uphold the same for teachers, students and parents. Second, commitment to inclusion and inclusive education is also important. Finally, experiences of school leaders around inclusive education and building capacity among different members of the school to uphold the same is also crucial.

Developing sensitivity and understanding of inclusion and inclusive education: In an [interview](#), Dr Sudha Acharya, Principal, stated that making the mission and vision clear for the entire staff in the school (teachers and support staff) is important. This helps in building an understanding that students have different needs (physical, social and emotional) and may require support. Mr John Bagul, Principal, also [reiterates](#) similar focus on meeting the needs of every child and sensitizing teachers and parents that inclusive education is not unrealistic. He affirms that it does not increase the workload. Rather, according to him, it requires systematic planning and a change in attitude.

Lack of a unified understanding of inclusive education continues to be one of the foremost reasons for exclusion of students with diverse educational needs and disabilities from the education system. Developing sensitivity and understanding

of inclusion and inclusive education amongst school leadership is extremely important. However, developing a common understanding of inclusive education and a commitment to inclusion (academic, social, physical and emotional) and inclusive education is also extremely important along with school leadership's vision of how to implement it. Thus, this requires school leadership to gain a nuanced understanding of inclusion as a practice and what it entails. This understanding can pave the way for planning and implementation of inclusive education.

Affirming commitment to inclusion and inclusive education: The commitment to inclusion and inclusive education means taking an [intersectional view](#) of inclusion and inclusive education. Such a view sees systems of inequity as being based on the various identities of caste, class, gender disability, etc. It would also entail building the school leaders' own capacity for inclusive education.

Thus, investment in building capacity of school leadership for developing and sustaining inclusive education is extremely important. Demonstration of positive values such as equity, valuing and trusting all teachers and staff, leading with vision, motivation and autonomy by school leadership are some important markers of inclusive and quality education in schools (Schuelka, Sherab & Nidup, 2018).

A clearly articulated admissions policy that includes all, without discrimination, can be a good starting point for implementing inclusive education. There is also a need to incorporate policies around child safety, anti-bullying, etc., and making provisions for accessible infrastructure. Many parents and students share about their difficulties with getting admission in schools, or even having to change schools, due to learning difficulties, behavioral challenges and disabilities. School leadership can often play a decisive role in ensuring that such exclusion does not take place.

Building capacity among different members of schools

Experiences of school leaders with implementing and upholding policies that facilitate inclusion of diverse learners in the school system goes a long way in sustaining inclusive education. Government policies often rely on school leaders to deliver the last mile, in terms of implementing equitable and quality education for all. School leaders are often approached by teachers when they have difficulties with teaching and learning in their classrooms. Thus, it becomes imperative that school leaders invest in building capacity of all teachers and staff members in their schools for inclusive education.

It is also important for school leaders to recognize and encourage good teaching and learning practices that teachers are already practicing. They must encourage teachers to practice instructional techniques and strategies that can support students with diverse learning needs and disabilities in the classroom. Continuous support for teachers to implement inclusive teaching and learning by school leadership goes a long way in sustaining inclusive practices in schools.

[Dr Sudha Acharya](#) (2022) lists upskilling of teachers on key areas of inclusive education. These include workshops on sign language and equipping them to prepare individual education plans. Teachers also need continuous support for inclusive education. All these are important factors for sustaining inclusive education.

Providing on-going in-service professional development, lesson planning support for the entire class, and investing in teachers' well-being and mental health (so that they can support diverse learners) by school leadership, can also potentially sustain inclusive education. Creating spaces for teachers to come together, collaborate and share about the challenges and enablers to include students with diverse needs in the classroom helps them implement inclusive practices as well.

Such spaces are often created and sustained by the school leadership. Such safe spaces are a pre-requisite for inclusive education. These, thus, need to be extended to all stakeholders within the schools' education space. In fact, school leaders should also have spaces where they can network with and learn from their peers who lead schools in different contexts.

Examples of school leadership for inclusive education

The next part of this article will go beyond the research literature and examine some of the practices that school leadership or those working with school leadership have implemented to support inclusive education in different parts of the country. The following case studies are derived from the report called “[Differently Together, Inclusion in Education](#)” developed by Ummeed Child Development Center. It consists of cases from various schools across India on how inclusive education is practiced.

Samait Shala, an NGO based in Ahmedabad, began their work towards creating inclusive learning environments for students with learning difficulties and disabilities by working with the school heads. They incorporated their inclusive practices with the school leaders and subsequently with departmental leaders and teachers, so that there is inclusion among various members of the staff and sustainability of the practices.

A school leader from Abhyudaya Municipal School, Mumbai, reinforced the need to include all learners and sensitize all students to recognize that each individual is unique, who comes to school with a purpose, and has skills that they can develop.

Many schools that Ummeed Child Development Center, Mumbai, works with have created ‘Inclusion Committees’ comprising of the school leadership, teachers, students and parents/caregiver’s representatives. These committees are responsible for continuing ongoing



PNKN High School in Keliasole village in Jharkhand's Dhanbad district

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discussions, implementation and monitoring of inclusive practices in the school. Thereby they reiterate the school's commitment to inclusive education.

Challenges

While school leadership is recognized as being of utmost importance for implementing and sustaining inclusive education, it has been extremely hard for school leaders to insist on inclusion. Many have reported an uphill battle and face constraints in terms of not enough support from their teachers, apprehensions of parents without disabilities, and lack of financial resources that they feel are important to make inclusive education a reality (Bannerjee, Mahendale and Nanjundaiah, 2011).

School leaders often neglect education for marginalized groups, especially children with diverse learning needs and disabilities, as they succumb to academic and test score pressures (Sharma and Das, 2015). A review of the academic outcome-oriented education system illuminates that academic inclusion is often way more challenging than social inclusion. Very few school leaders see academic, social, physical and emotional inclusion going hand in hand.

Way ahead

Collaboration has emerged as a key when it comes to implementing and sustaining inclusive education. If inclusive education is

to be accepted as a core value by the school, then it must embrace not just the students but also teachers and all other staff, parents and caregivers associated with the school.

School leaders can facilitate collaborations and create clear lines of communication between various school stakeholders to promote inclusive practices. Collaborating and engaging with the parents and community members can go a long way in sustaining inclusive education. School leaders can lead through example, by not just acknowledging and embracing diversity in the school, but rather by celebrating it.

A clearly articulated vision and mission statement by the school leadership that emphasizes the importance of inclusive education needs to be shared with all stakeholders including students, teachers, parents, caregivers and community members. Another important contribution of school leadership is in creating and implementing policies that support the practice of inclusive education. This also includes upholding the provisions within the Right to Education Act, ensuring that no child is left behind, and all children have access to equitable and quality education.

Advocating for, creating opportunities for, and investing in, ongoing professional development for all teachers is another space that school leaders should prioritize. It is also important that school leadership continually monitors and evaluates the implementation of inclusive education in their school and recognizes and addresses barriers to inclusive education in a timely manner.

Thus, the school leader will be able to build an inclusive culture in the school, which can in turn facilitate sustaining of inclusive education. Assuming leadership for inclusive education is a remarkable responsibility and an opportunity. It needs leaders who are reflective, adaptive, contextually grounded, open to feedback and believe in collaboration and teamwork.

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Seema Nath is invested in creating safe teaching and learning environments through strengthening teacher education programs, supporting diverse learners in the school system, adopting whole-school approaches, and empowering all stakeholders in the education system. She is currently Associate Director, School Outreach Services at [Ummeed Child Development Center](https://ummeed.org), Mumbai. She holds a doctoral degree in Education (specializing in Inclusive Education), and an MPhil degree in Social and Developmental Psychology from University of Cambridge, UK.

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Laying the groundwork of education

How a school leader sets up a school for success

Shraddha Agarwal



The Akanksha Foundation

Education is the foundation of progress. School leaders are the architect of that foundation. The effect of an influential leader translates into the growth of an educational institution, and moves from teachers, to students, to parents and their communities. In every aspect, the leader with their behavior and a learning mindset sets the tone for the school.

Akanksha Foundation runs 10 schools in Mumbai city, in partnership with Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). Sheetal Murudkar, Director of School at Akanksha, Mumbai, believes every school leader needs to spend at least the first six months in vision setting in consultation with

teachers, parents, the government and other stakeholders involved.

“Running a school is no less than a prime minister running the country. It is very challenging but also immensely enriching. At Akanksha, all school leaders are aligned and working towards one vision - one day, all children will be equipped with the knowledge, skills and values they need to lead empowered lives. They are striving to make full human beings out of their students, and help them achieve their highest potential, both academically and socially,” says Sheetal.

There is enough written on the importance of teachers, but what drives a school to

success is the leader holding all the parts together. According to Sheetal, an effective leader is one who can prioritize the most important tasks and is also able to create a second line of leadership. With the amount of responsibilities on a school leader's desk, it becomes important to not lose sight of the larger vision. This can only happen when all stakeholders are able to play their parts while a school leader manages and monitors them.

School leaders as agents of change

"Before making any decisions, it is important for leaders to involve children in conversations that will impact them. I encourage all school leaders to spend time outside school for a few hours to objectively look at what other systems are working and what the gaps are. It gets difficult when you are caught in a vortex managing affairs internally," adds Sheetal.

For Akanksha, one of the biggest wins are their school leaders, who have spent more than 10-15 years in a dedicated manner to achieve the schools' vision. Sheetal says, "They are all visionary leaders, willing and open to learning at every opportunity. We have a very evolved leadership with students' academic, emotional and social well-being at the center."

School leaders play a crucial role in managing administrative affairs, fostering a collaborative environment, and creating a positive learning space for both teachers and students. This eventually helps in achieving the school's mission and vision. However, the challenges of running a successful school are plenty. Mandira Purhohit, a school leader at The Akanksha Foundation for over a decade, understands these challenges the best.

In the past year, the Akanksha-run Sitaram Mill Compound Mumbai Public School (SMCMPS) has had to adapt and adjust to continuously changing circumstances. Their school leader, Mandira, was recently faced with the uphill task of vacating their school

premises overnight and shifting to an entirely new location. Despite pushback from parents and communities due to the change in the school's location, Mandira persisted through it all. She marshaled all the resources, motivated the teachers, and ensured that new classrooms were up and running within a week. The teacher even went above and beyond to decorate the classes, put up posters on the walls, and helped students settle into their new classrooms.

As a school leader, she faces new battles every day. "From increased learning gaps due to COVID-19 to lack of staff in the school, has left us all stretched beyond our limits. It gets exhausting, but it's also rewarding to see our children turn into such special human beings who are still very much connected to us. This I feel has only been possible due to each and every teacher in the school," says Mandira.

The paucity of adequate numbers of good teachers is one of the biggest challenges in India's public education system. This lack has substantially affected the ability and performance of teachers as they are overextended trying to fill this gap. "Teachers often get caught up in admin work which gives them less time to innovate and pay attention to each student in the class. Teacher vacancies have led to us school leaders teaching classes," adds Mandira.



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Collaborating with stakeholders for student well-being

Mandira strongly believes that the education provided in public schools should be on par with the private education system. Along with academic outcomes, a strong team culture is required. She says, “Whatever I expect from the team, I first do it myself. I do the remedial work with them. For instance, after COVID, we were focused so much on [academically] struggling kids that we didn’t pay much attention to students at the top quartile.”

In Akanksha schools, the school leaders and teachers ensure equal participation by the community. Parents have been a strong pillar in the holistic development of their children with the help of social workers, helpers and other staff. In SMCPMS, Mandira has partnered with many external partners like Music Basti and Lighthouse Foundation, and conducts monthly events that focus on students’ mental well-being.

“It is important for children to have a strong pulse on their mental state. These workshops help students get exposure and build a strong rapport with parents and other members of the community. There have been many instances where communities have rallied and gotten the help required for their children. Thirteen years ago, this is also how our school came to be. The parents saw their children studying at an Akanksha center and insisted that we start a school in their community.”

Giving back to the school community

Under Mandira’s leadership, SMCPM has a strong volunteer involvement. Since the inception of the school, there have been volunteers both in the form of the alumni and people from outside the community who come and give their valuable time at the school.

One such volunteer, Nalini Panday, has been teaching at the school for the past



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20 years. There are alumni who have been running different clubs (yoga, self-defense, handwriting, etc.) at the school and are very committed to giving back.

“Given that our kids come from underserved communities, the challenges are multifold. But I believe in setting the bar similar for these kids as my two biological children and others from privileged backgrounds. It also means learning for us at every stage. When our donor, Apple, gave us iPads, I was paranoid about giving them out to our students. But then we all took training and over time learnt how to make use of it. Only when we learn ourselves first can we expect the best outcomes from our students,” says Mandira.

Similar to the expectations from a prime minister, school leaders also need to be innovators, problem-solvers, learners and role models themselves. From corridors being converted into counseling rooms to alumni substituting for teachers, school leaders deal with issues ranging from infrastructure to managing community problems in the middle of the night. It is a 24/7 job, which, in the end, inspires and changes lives, one student at a time.

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Examining the systemic approach to the development of education leadership

Rucha Pande and Sushant Kumar

Introduction

In the context of the ever-evolving landscape of education in India, the role of effective education leadership has gained increasing recognition. As a result, we see an upward shift in organizations working on systemic reform and education leadership. This connection between effective education leadership and school transformation encompasses some key areas.

These include establishing clear goals and vision for the school, cultivating leadership capabilities within the school leaders, promoting continuous teacher professional

development, and many more. This article draws insights from our practical experiences and some scholarly research to establish the relationship between leadership elements and their impact on school transformation.

The common trap: balancing system reforms and school transformation

The recognition that societal challenges like education need to be addressed with a systemic lens has been present for over a few decades. However, the recent few years have seen a surge in the efforts that governments and CSOs have taken on this front. This has led to leadership, governance, policies



Primary school students and their teacher

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and other such factors in improving school performance being increasingly recognized and focused on. Sometimes governments and civil society find themselves focusing too much on these “system” level factors.

In a small exercise done in a university, students were divided into groups. Each was given the role of a stakeholder in education, such as parents, teachers, school leaders, teacher mentors, etc. They were asked to discuss the school development plan. In each of the groups, there was also an observer. Unbeknownst to the rest of the group, the role of this observer was to count the number of times references were made to how children’s lives would improve because of some efforts taken to improve the school. Most groups tended to *not* talk about children and their lives. This was *precisely* because they simply assumed that all efforts were for that goal.

Now if this dilution of goal can happen even at a school level, imagine the challenges that organizations and governments face. Think about your own organization. How many times do conversations mention children? How often do children’s experiences and their lives come into everyday conversation? In the pursuit of school improvement, many organizations have set their sights on implementing system-wide reforms. This is a common trap. We focus on improvements in layers above the school. We often do not have a clear logic for how these finally impact the school.

When organizations fall into the common trap, the focus shifts away from the core purpose of education: the holistic development of students. Instead, energy and resources become directed towards bureaucratic compliance, paperwork, and rigid protocols. As a result, the original vision of meaningful school transformation becomes clouded, and the potential impact on student learning diminishes. To avoid this trap, organizations must consistently remind themselves of their initial purpose

and reevaluate their strategies considering their mission. While system reforms are undoubtedly important, they should also serve to facilitate the desired transformation in schools.

Thinking first mile

Constantly enabling everyone to **think school first** helps ensure that all our efforts are truly aimed at the goal. Additionally, this focus enables the following aspects. It helps **align** all actors toward a common goal, a common area of convergence of multiple interventions. While there may be initiatives and interventions for different stakeholders, it is important to have a common vision for how these impact schools – as at the end of the day it’s just four common stakeholders who make the magic happen: teachers, school leaders and administrators, students, and parents.

It also helps if all actors connect to the **purpose** of their everyday work, which sometimes may seem removed from schools. “Thinking school first” brings **agility and agency** to actors by helping them focus on the goal, and not just immediate interventions and activities. The latter may change over time or adapt to achieve the goal of school improvement.

Education leadership: a critical element in school transformation

Schools with high levels of student achievement typically have education leaders who set high expectations for students and teachers. They create a culture of collective leadership that encourages the active participation of teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders in decision-making processes. This collective approach ensures that the notion of academic success for all becomes a shared vision within the school. Education leaders ensure that this vision underpins a schoolwide learning improvement agenda focusing on specific student progress goals. This vision provides a clear direction for the school, aligns all

stakeholders, and motivates them toward achieving a shared goal.

Research conducted at the universities of Minnesota and Toronto and seven other cities in the US in 180 schools demonstrates a strong link between effective education leadership and improved student achievement. Principals who establish high expectations for students and teachers and pay attention to various measures of student success are more likely to lead schools with higher levels of achievement. Furthermore, they foster a culture of collective leadership where teachers and other stakeholders actively engage in the decision-making process. Effective school leadership is instrumental in creating conditions where various individual factors combine to impact student achievement significantly (Louis, Karen Seashore, et al., 2010). Principals and district leaders exercise a substantial influence on school decisions, which reinforces the importance of their leadership in the pursuit of educational excellence.

Teacher motivation and increased competence are crucial factors that influence student outcomes. Effective education leadership plays a significant role in enhancing teacher motivation, which is found to have the strongest relationship with student achievement. Moreover, leadership strengthens the professional community within the school. Teachers' engagement in this professional community enables the use of instructional practices associated with improved student achievement.

Leadership practices targeted directly at teachers' instruction have notable, albeit indirect, effects on student achievement. When school leaders share leadership responsibilities with teachers, it leads to stronger working relationships. This, in turn, contributes to higher student achievement. Creating a supportive school climate, underpinned by professional community building, encourages student effort beyond



An interactive classroom

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what individual classrooms can offer. (Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., Anderson, S. E., Michlin, M., & Mascall, B., 2010)

Stories of education leaders enabling school improvement

To illustrate the significance of education leadership in school improvement, here are a few stories from our experience of working with education leaders where they enabled positive changes in schools, classrooms and communities.

Story 1 - reading campaign in Bihar: In 2022, over 20,000 schools implemented reading-focused projects across the state of Bihar, under the “Padhe Bihar, Badhe Bihar” campaign. These projects were implemented by teachers and school leaders of the schools, with support from multiple leaders across the state education system. State level institutions like SCERT developed the concept and ideas, and mobilized others. District offices and DIETs supported schools and nudged through reviews and recognition.

Story 2 - learning spaces at home in Tumakuru: In 2021, over 22,000 parents set up small learning spaces at their homes to support children through the period of school closures. This was enabled by 1,000+ schools supporting parents through Parent-Teacher Meetings, among other means. Cluster Resource Persons supported leaders and teachers in implementing the parent-

teacher meetings and seeing the significance of engaging parents. The DIET in Tumakuru conceptualized, planned and implemented the entire program.

Story 3 - Nali Kali in Anekal block: In 2022, over 200 teachers took on a challenge of revamping their classrooms into more “print rich” environments, and teaching in a more activity-based manner. All of this was possible because of a Block Resource Coordinator (BRC) who noticed that schools in their block could be more inviting for students, and teaching practices more innovative. The BRC didn’t stop at noticing the problem. They went on to develop the capacity of teachers through workshops. Then they regularly provided coaching support through classroom observations.

Story 4 - teacher coaching in Punjab: In 2020, teachers at secondary schools in Punjab showed an improvement in how interactive their classrooms were. This included using more teaching-learning material in classrooms, increasing student participation and voices in the lesson, and incorporating more peer and group work. Teachers were supported by regular coaching and mentoring by Block and District Mentors across the state.

School visits had always been a key role of these mentors. However, they would earlier have less clarity about what needed to be observed in the schools. Their observations were also not being properly recorded anywhere. This is what the Department of Education observed. It took on an initiative to develop digital tools which the mentors could use to record and track their observations. This helped them plan their school support in an effective manner.

In conclusion

As these stories would have demonstrated, school leadership has a key role in facilitating a facilitative school culture, in building teachers’ capacities and motivation, in

improving learning outcomes, and creating connections with communities. Effective school leadership might be the missing link that can help us transform schools into spaces that honor teachers’ agency and support effective student learning.

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A Political Science graduate from Banaras Hindu University (BHU) and a Masters in Education from Azim Premji University, **Sushant** is a passionate writer, editor and facilitator. Currently, he is part of the strategic functions team at Mantra4Change. In his role as a social impact communicator, he utilizes his skills to effectively communicate the organization’s mission and initiatives. He takes pride in his ability to create engaging and impactful communication strategies, leveraging his background in development and education. Sushant can be reached at sushant@mantra4change.com.

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The current rhythm in school leadership

Unheard voices from the education space

Vidhya Meenambal M.

Mr. Praveen Kumar G., Faculty, School of Continuing Education, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru

Students experiencing the best learning journey is the ultimate purpose of the school as an educational institution. One of the major set of people who could maximize this impact are the school leaders or principals. They are the topmost decision-making authority at the school-level. A school leader is the driver of change in the school. They have a huge role to play in creating an environment in schools that ensures high teaching quality and promotes student engagement. For many of the students, school is still the only accessible institution to build their academic knowledge and social skills. The school leader, who is the power center of the school, has to step in and identify the different needs of the students, teachers and parents. For them to be able to respond to differing needs, it is essential that state governments invest in leadership development programs. Crucial skills like problem-solving, building and leading teams, conflict management and building partnerships need attention. The state system is the most sustainable agent to build these knowledge and skills among the school heads.

Mr. Ravi Kasi Venkatesan, Headmaster, Maraimalai Adigal Higher Secondary School, Pallavaram, Chennai

I have been a school leader for five (5) years and worked in two (2) schools.

The most discussed, yet what continues to be the most challenging, aspect for a school leader is wearing the hat of an administrative head. School leaders have to deal with day-to-day hurdles such as teacher vacancies, teacher absenteeism, and the lack of office staff, subject-specific teachers, sanitary workers and basic infrastructure like toilets and drinking water. The challenges are beyond the circle of control for a school leader. Ultimately, the price we are paying for it is huge. The high teacher-to-student ratio and difficulty in meeting basic needs have a huge connection to student learning outcomes. As a leader, my success lies in ensuring quick student challenge redressal and improving infrastructure accessibility. Unless the other administrative burden is removed off our shoulders, we will find it challenging to enhance the quality of the teaching-learning experience for teachers and students alike.

Mr. Jeyakumar V, Joint Director, SCERT Training, Department of School Education, Tamil Nadu

Though we make decisions at a state level, only the school head knows what is best needed for their school at any moment. They are the people who continuously engage with all the internal and external stakeholders of the schools. Leading a school is a tough job. The challenges are multi-faceted and most often arise

randomly. Being prepared to face this rapidly changing environment is the biggest job in front of school leaders. Failing to equip them with the right skills and knowledge at the right time will make the future scarier. It becomes important that state governments consider school leadership development to be of high priority. The aspects could involve from diving deep into students' learning outcomes to building a team in the school. Interestingly, the quickest and most efficient way to reach every child in the school is a school leader as compared to the high teacher and student ratio. In this scenario, the state plays a significant role in understanding their needs and equipping them to do their best. This ensures that every child is best supported both academically and holistically and the school is on a continuous development journey. By capacitating leaders we are ensuring better future leaders in the system who understand the reality and take need-based actions.

Deeksha Sudhindra, Communications Associate, Samarthya

It is extremely challenging for a school leader to be the only person to make all the decisions for an entire institution that has multiple contributors and actors. There is a need to move from individual school leaders to collective leadership, greater participation and collective decision-making. This spirit of collective ownership comes alive in government schools through School Management Committees (SMCs) that serve as a platform for parents, students, teachers, school leaders and local government representatives to come together for school development. SMC is an avenue to bring the concerns and aspirations of different stakeholders to the table, to

brainstorm collectively and align on key decisions that impact the local school ecosystem. They deliberate on how school grants can be spent effectively, how student attendance can be improved and how appropriate learning resources can be arranged. This, thereby, ensures need-based actions and initiatives based on the school context. Since the decisions on these matters are taken in a collective, collaborative and inclusive manner, an SMC functions as a regular and sustainable check on all school-related issues. Decisions taken by SMCs can ensure a tangible impact on the learning experience and outcome of students.

Vidhya Meenambal M. is the Director of the School Leadership Development Program at Vidhya Vidhai Foundation. She has been working in the education sector for the past six years. The two years she spent at Teach for India Fellowship made her experience how the autonomy of a teacher can enrich the learning experience of their students. This made her visualize how the education ecosystem would transform if every actor in the system utilized their autonomy to the fullest. Thus, she began her journey with Vidhya Vidhai Foundation, an organization that believes education leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring this experience. She can be reached at vidhya@vidhyavidhai.org.



Capacity building for school leaders

Modeling leadership styles

Through the lens of leaders?

Rekha N

In this piece we talk to people working in the field of school leadership to gain insights into various leadership styles. Our panel of educators and education leaders comes from diverse backgrounds and contexts. They are all working towards a common goal: nurturing children. From **Jhamtse Gatsal** in Arunachal Pradesh to **Sandeepani Academy for Excellence** in Bengaluru and a Municipal Corporation of Delhi School partnering with **Kshamtalaya**, they represent different regions and approaches in Indian education. These educators and leaders share their experiences and insights on how they are shaping the future of their students. They discuss their leadership models. The discussion focuses on creating safe and inclusive environments and emphasizes the school cultures they cultivate to realize their values and vision.

Established in 2006, **Jhamtse Gatsal Children's Community** is a loving home and learning environment for 107 orphaned, abandoned and vulnerable children ranging from toddlers through young adults. The children primarily belong to the local Monpa tribe. They come from diverse backgrounds of adversity. Jhamtse Gatsal, in the local language, means “garden of love and compassion.”

Kshamtalaya is a non-profit organization founded to support school children in disadvantaged settings so that they develop into socially and economically active young adults. They intervene to improve school enrolment, attendance, academic outcomes and life prospects for students in rural and marginalized settings. They want to actualize

a rural India in which children successfully make a transition from compulsory school education to having happy and productive lives.

Saandeevani Academy for Excellence is a progressive school inspired by the philosophies of Rabindranath Tagore. It tries to create a fear-free and joyful learning environment, instil a love for learning, joy in creative expression, and nurture young minds to become life-long learners.

Rekha N: How do you see your role as a school leader? What have been your priorities as a school leader?

MCD school principal (Kshamtalaya's partner school): I have a long history in this school, starting as a teacher, then as a school in-charge, and now as the principal. To me, understanding each child's background and context is key to their education. Teaching and learning must align with the child's context, shaping every decision, including curricular choices. In our corporation school, most parents haven't had an education. We don't view our work here as a profession but as a responsibility to provide the best education to the children.

In my journey, instilling moral values and a strong foundational education have been top priorities. Many of our students come from challenging backgrounds, so we dedicate 5-10 minutes daily to discussing moral values. A robust foundation and value-based education have been our focal points. Our efforts have borne fruit, as alumni still cherish the values they imbibed here.



Older students teaching farming to younger ones

We continue to support our children even after they move on to middle school and beyond. Our goal is to prepare them for life. What brings us immense joy is the enduring connection our children maintain with us.

Divya (Sandeepani): Our primary focus is to create a safe and inclusive environment for our students. Safety, encompassing emotional, physical and mental well-being, is our utmost priority. We prioritize safety over rigid adherence to a set curriculum, acknowledging that each child's unique needs must be met.

Vasudha (Jhamtse Gatsal): We are a community of people who live together with the similar intention of raising children mindfully, consistently and in many ways to bring them up as safe, healthy and happy adults. We see our community as a family, and we refer to it as the “garden of love and compassion.” Our responsibility is to nurture and provide guidance to the children who often come from difficult backgrounds.

Rekha N: How do your actions as a school leader ensure that the above priority areas are catered to?

MCD school principal (Kshamtalaya's partner School): My role as a school leader encompasses diverse responsibilities. I collaborate with parents, support teachers in navigating challenges, and embark on new initiatives such as inclusive education for

children with diverse learning needs. This initiative is particularly close to my heart. We have six children with special needs in our school. I have an accessible room where I can observe and ensure their safety. I personally engage with two of these children, offering morning hugs that fill me with joy.

Our school is embracing inclusive practices. We consult experts to provide necessary accommodations, ensuring emotional safety for these children. We also maintain a close connection with parents to assess the impact of the interventions.

Divya (Sandeepani): Our teachers undergo extensive training, including an orientation at the beginning of the academic year. This training emphasizes our teaching methodology, the “5A” approach: Aim, Activity, Analysis, Application and Assessment. We also teach our educators how to ensure students' physical safety by always keeping them within the vicinity of an adult, even outside of regular school hours.

Emotional safety is equally important. We educate our teachers on how to communicate with students, both individually and in group settings. This training helps prevent bullying and fosters a supportive atmosphere. It's essential that teachers create a trusting environment where children feel emotionally secure. Mental safety is another facet of our approach. We continually assess students' understanding of concepts and provide additional support or re-teaching as needed. Regular reflections, debates and discussions on our policies ensure we adapt to evolving needs.

Moreover, classroom observations, led by coordinators, help us assess the effectiveness of our teaching methods. We provide constructive feedback, not just on academic progress but also on the language and communication used in the classroom, as the way teachers convey intentions can affect students' perceptions.

Yogita (Sandeepani): In my role, I serve as a crucial link between the school's teachers and external organizations, such as those that offer behavioral support for students on the autism spectrum. With over 40 students under our care, my responsibilities involve facilitating the flow of information and support.

When a teacher identifies a student struggling academically, they report it to me as the coordinator. My duty is to share this information with the academic team and external experts. These experts assess the situation and determine whether a diagnostic report is necessary. We also consider when and how to involve parents, always seeking their permission for further observations.

Once we have a comprehensive understanding of a student's needs, we decide whether inclusion in specialized programs, such as therapy or remediation, is needed. My role is to ensure that this process runs smoothly and that we provide tailored support to each child, helping them thrive academically and personally.

Vasudha (Jhamtse Gatsal): In our community, teaching and learning are intertwined in a constant cycle. Teachers are not just providers of knowledge. We don't see the children as empty vessels waiting to be filled. Instead, we view them as seeds with the potential to grow into healthy, thriving individuals. Just like an apple seed has everything it needs to become an apple tree, children have unique talents and abilities within them. Our role is to nurture and guide them.

While we do cover traditional subjects in our school, our education model goes beyond that. We aim to educate the heart, the mind and the body. This is because we believe that all these aspects define us as human beings. The mind guides our actions, the heart nurtures compassion and empathy, and the body serves others and humanity.

Our culture is centered on service. This is what we instill in our children from a young age. We don't see ourselves as leaders but as servants of the community. In our culture, service is a two-way street. This is unlike the Western concept, where the giver is on the top, and the receiver is at the bottom. We believe in serving each other and all of humanity.

Our approach to education involves holistic development. We start the day with meditation or prayer sessions to promote mindfulness. Throughout the day, children engage in various activities, both academic and practical. They learn about sustainability by growing their own food and practicing rainwater harvesting and blackwater recycling.

One remarkable aspect of our education is "SEE learning." This involves focusing on social, emotional and ethical learning. We believe in building emotional equanimity from a young age. This prepares children for the conflicts they will inevitably face in life.

Rashmi (Jhamtse Gatsal): Interdependence is a core value in our community. Children are assigned duties on a rotating basis. They quickly learn that they must rely on each other. We avoid using the word "help" and instead emphasize "service." This is done to ensure that everyone feels equal and interconnected. Furthermore, our community members, regardless of their roles, are considered teachers for life. We celebrate a "Staff Day," because we believe that everyone on our campus has something valuable to teach and learn from each other. We create a learning space for everyone, not just students.

Vasudha (Jhamtse Gatsal): In every situation, we understand that we can be both givers and receivers. Learning how to receive with gratitude is as crucial as giving. We have seven core values that guide us: interdependence, equanimity,

generosity, gratitude, love, compassion, and responsibility.

These values are woven into our daily lives in an organic and natural way, promoting personal growth and creating a harmonious community where learning and service go hand in hand.

Rekha N: What does leadership look like in your school?

MCD school principal (Kshamtalaya's partner school): In our school, leadership is synonymous with shared vision and responsibility. Every member, including teachers, takes ownership of our vision. Shared responsibilities are integral to our approach.

I use different strategies to encourage active participation. We have teachers managing additional responsibilities. I have organized WhatsApp groups to streamline communication.

I take a hands-on approach initially, guiding them through their responsibilities. Over time, I empower them to handle tasks independently, under my supervision. With 1,000 students and 30 teachers, our responsibilities are immense. We collectively tackle unforeseen situations, fostering an environment where no one doubts our ability to navigate challenges.

While I maintain discipline, I prioritize creating an atmosphere of love, care and connection. I have worked hard to establish a bond with the teachers, fostering emotional safety and trust. I strive to ensure that the rigid hierarchies of the past do not stifle openness and communication.

Quality education is our foremost goal. I encourage teachers to be role models for their students. Children keenly observe and learn from us. They mirror our mannerisms and behavior. Discipline is essential. However, I also aim to nurture an environment of love, care and connections.

I closely observe and understand each teacher. I try to identify those with potential and encourage initiative. For instance, a recent TLM exhibition saw enthusiastic participation even from previously reserved teachers. One new teacher who initially struggled, came to shine, displaying remarkable TLMs for children with diverse learning needs. Our goal is to empower teachers and make them realize their importance in shaping education.

Divya (Sandeepani): We have around 700 students. In our school, leadership takes on a unique structure due to our commitment to a flat hierarchy. The flat structure means we don't have traditional grade-level coordinators. Our leadership begins with our founder. She serves as the managing trustee and founder of the school. She actively participates in decision-making across all aspects of our institution, from curriculum to co-curricular activities and even infrastructure.

Following her, is our school's director, who oversees all academic matters. Essentially, all coordinators and those at the next level of hierarchy report to her. Our school principal focuses on matters related to the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), Board-related issues, and parent communication. Additionally, we have coordinators responsible for various grade levels, including



Students immersed in a tribal community during their annual education trip

Jhamtse Gatsal

preschool, grades 1-2, 3-5, 6-7, and 8-10. This organizational structure helps us cater to students at different developmental stages.

Regarding decision-making, until grade five, academic coordinators play a significant role in shaping our educational approach. We also have subject coordinators, each with expertise in specific subjects, contributing to our comprehensive curriculum. This setup ensures that academic decisions align with our pedagogical goals.

In summary, our leadership structure promotes collaboration among staff to ensure a safe and joyful learning environment for our students. We prioritize safety, both emotional and physical, and employ a holistic teaching approach that emphasizes individual growth and development. This commitment to our students' well-being drives our school's success.

Vasudha (Jhamtse Gatsal): In terms of leadership style, we have a decentralized and egalitarian system. Each department has its own leaders whom we empower. While we offer support and direction as needed, the real work happens within these independently functioning units. We believe in enabling individuals and teams to find solutions to challenges within their own domains. Whether it's the older children supporting the younger ones, or the various departments like education, kitchen and so on, each unit contributes to providing layers of nurture and guidance.

If there's a conflict or a difficult situation among the children or the teachers, we encourage them to solve it among themselves rather than coming to us. It is very important that everybody feels equipped and has ownership towards the place and towards the situation. It is not the leadership's job to always provide top-down guidance or solutions. Often, our founder conducts workshops with us to help us understand our vision. Our hope is that one day the world

will live in one unified community based on love and compassion. Compassion is the foundation that carries through all our actions.

Rekha N: Could you give some examples or instances demonstrating the leadership model in your school?

Jyoti (Kshamtalaya): We would like to highlight a community initiative here. During the Covid-19 pandemic, our approach to engaging with communities underwent significant changes. Initially, when children ceased attending school, it became evident that reaching them was a formidable challenge. After consulting with our teachers, it became clear that many students lacked access to the internet or even basic phones. To address this issue, we initiated home visits. However, we soon realized that this approach was unsustainable and we couldn't reach all the children in need.

Recognizing the need for a more comprehensive strategy, we introduced the "Family Champions" program. The idea was to engage community members as volunteers who could effectively connect with all the children in their respective communities. We identified proactive parents who were willing to participate and provided them with training. Each of these parents then shared their knowledge and skills with other parents, each reaching out to at least 10-15 families within the same community.

To further bolster the program and address the identified need for increased support, we initiated training sessions for parents on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). These trained parents established learning centers within their homes, where they engaged with groups of 25 children to enhance their FLN skills. This concerted effort led to the development of 65 family champions who, in turn, reached an impressive 1,600 children in the community.



Segregation of plastic by students

In addition to these efforts, the family champions organized meetings with other parents to discuss their children's progress and offer guidance on child safety. Currently, we are collaborating with an additional 50 family champions to expand our reach and impact.

The school leader of our partner school played a pivotal role in the success of the Family Champions Program. She provided essential support by conducting training sessions for the family champions, attending meetings, engaging with parents, and offering motivation. Moreover, our school leader guided us to reflect on our program approaches and initiatives, continuously seeking ways to strengthen the program.

Our school leader also facilitated the integration of family champions into school events. This ensured their active participation and contribution. We organized a learning festival at our school where parents taught for a week, sharing their skills and knowledge. Our school leader observed these sessions, provided constructive feedback to the parents, and publicly recognized and appreciated their work.

Furthermore, our school leader has been proactive in ensuring that our teachers actively engage with parents and foster strong partnerships. She has even recommended certain parents to us. We have subsequently recognized them as family champions. These efforts highlight how our school leader has been instrumental in

promoting effective community participation in our children's learning journeys.

Divya (Sandeepani): The policies of the school are from the management, but in consultation with the coordinators. When we are making a policy, for example, the idea may start from the management, the director, and the founder of the school. And it may be discussed with the coordinators. When the coordinators are involved, everything should be data-driven. The actual data is available with the teachers, the class teachers, and the subject teachers.

So, we do take it to the SLMs, which stands for "Sharing Learning Meetings." The SLMs create a place where we discuss our challenges, our successes, our failures, everything. As the name suggests, it's about sharing learning. In these meetings, we find out the reality. Then we take it up to the school's director and founder. The process is formulated, and it may change according to the requirements of the team.

Yogita (Sandeepani): We have "Drop Everything and Read (DEAR)" in our timetable, where children read for pleasure. There is no stress of academics during this time. The modification in the timetable to create this space is provided by the school management. When it comes to teachers, they have the flexibility to design how the DEAR classes are conducted. They can read to students, students can read to each other, or they can sit in the library and read. Teachers can devise worksheets or strategies based on the diverse needs of their students. The autonomy allows teachers to adapt and innovate as needed.

Divya (Sandeepani): Teachers also have the autonomy to identify and address individual student needs, whether it's providing extra support or challenging advanced learners. The decision-making process is collaborative and transparent. We constantly assess our students through regular formative

assessments. The teachers work together to design interdisciplinary revision worksheets. This approach provides a clear understanding of where each child stands and helps us tailor our support accordingly. So, from classroom teachers to subject teachers, there is a hierarchy of support and guidance while allowing room for creativity.

Vasudha (Jhamtse Gatsal): In our school, leadership takes on a collaborative and empowering approach. We recently appointed a principal after a considerable effort. He is currently in a learning phase as a new member of our community. The principal does not adopt a top-down approach. He provides guidance, resources and logistical support for the day-to-day operations of the school. He engages in regular meetings with teachers and house mothers, who play a parental role for the students.

These meetings occur every two weeks, but the frequency can be adjusted based on the needs of the community. During these gatherings, discussions about individual students' challenges are approached in an egalitarian manner. Instead of one person struggling in isolation, the community collectively addresses the issue. This approach promotes peer learning and harnesses the wealth of knowledge within the community. Peer learning is a crucial component of the leadership style followed in the school.

The founder also plays a significant role in providing guidance and support, and external resources are sought if necessary. Our leaders don't just share their learnings, they also seek learning from other teachers and children.

Rekha N: What kind of school culture does the leadership nurture to ensure these values and vision are realized?

Divya (Sandeepani): First, let's talk about autonomy. It's crucial, but quality must be

ensured. As Yogita mentioned, we have ready-made lesson plans. However, it is up to the individual teachers to infuse their teaching style and expertise to enhance these plans. This platform guarantees a minimum quality standard. So, what I as a teacher bring to the table matters. We don't just blindly follow the lesson plans. We are encouraged to customize them according to the classroom's needs.

Moreover, what applies to students also applies to teachers. We promote a non-judgmental atmosphere. There's no dress code. It is just about maintaining a decent appearance. Similarly, students are never judged based on their performance. If a child is struggling with a particular subject or skill, we never label them. We focus on assessing their strengths and skills rather than their weaknesses. For instance, we had a student who struggled academically but excelled in balancing his body. These skills were identified by the teacher, and we celebrated them. So, the same principle applies to both students and teachers – a safe, non-judgmental space where failure is seen as a learning opportunity.

We emphasize teachers' emotional and psychological well-being. Only when teachers feel emotionally safe can they encourage students to embrace their failures. We have a daycare, for example. Teaching is a profession where 80% of the teachers are women. And we are in a society where childcare responsibilities are largely on women. We provide a daycare for teachers. So, your child is safe. Your child will be taken care of. So, we also feel safe. The teacher is allowed to have the time to think creatively, because this is not bothering her the same way.

We have a program called PBL, which is project-based learning. In the starting of the year, we identify a problem which is socially relevant. When we start working on it, we have no idea where we are leading to. We, the teachers and the students together, find out

what all we are going to learn and how the journey will be and what we are going to find out. Sometimes we plan for something and maybe the direction totally changes. This is how teachers and students collaboratively find solutions.

So that is how autonomy is given, because you have the liberty to fail. At the same time, it's not like you are empty handed. A base is given to you, upon which you can build the castle. So that is how autonomy can be ensured, ensuring the quality of education given to the students.

This emotional safety extends to our inclusion program. We ensure that children with special needs receive support. The decisions are made collectively, with teachers, subject experts, and therapists involved. Flexibility is key. We tailor our approaches to each child's unique needs. This autonomy is rooted in the belief that failure is acceptable, as long as efforts are made to improve.

Yogita (Sandeepani): I would like to add that our support structures are present at every level. We invest heavily in initial training and annual induction to instil our school's vision, mission and core values. We focus not just on subject knowledge but also on creating a conducive learning environment.

Our teachers participate in regular academic sessions, workshops and CBC trainings. We collaborate with external organizations and universities to provide additional training opportunities. We even have an on-campus counsellor for teachers, students and parents. In the classroom, teachers are encouraged to try new teaching strategies, even if they don't always work out perfectly. The emphasis is on the efforts, not just on the results. For example, we don't have traditional competitions. Instead, we encourage students to focus on improving their skills without the pressure of comparison.

In events and programs, we ensure that every child gets a chance to shine based

on their skills and interests. This culture of collaboration and support extends to student-led activities. Here students take the lead, and teachers guide and support them. Our school thrives on the belief that happy teachers lead to happy students and a happy learning environment.

Finally, we don't mandate rules like self-awareness, empathy, or self-discipline. Instead, we foster these qualities through conversations and their natural consequences. This creates a unique and positive learning environment.



Jhamtse Gatsal

Older students serving in the kitchen during the Losar festival, in preparation of the khapse

Vasudha (Jhamtse Gatsal): The school culture we nurture is deeply influenced by our founder's teachings, who draws from Buddhist principles as a philosophical perspective. We focus on values like love, compassion, patience and understanding as fundamental human emotions. We also emphasize the importance of transparency and accountability within the community.

Rashmi (Jhamtse Gatsal): Our founder consistently asks us why we are here, what value we are adding to our personal lives, and how we are contributing to the organization and community. This reflection helps us understand our purpose and reinforces our sense of responsibility. Additionally, the founder openly shares information about community happenings, fostering a sense of belonging and unity. Overall, our culture is one of empowerment, learning and shared responsibility. There is a strong emphasis

on personal growth and contributing to the collective well-being of the community.

The **MCD school principal** we connected with leads an MCD school located in East Delhi catering to children from Pre-primary to Grade 5. She has over 30 years of experience as a teacher and a leader. She believes that compassion is at the core of being an educator. She ensures that everyone in her school, from the students to the staff, have a nurturing environment, one in which they can reflect, learn and grow.

Divya G. is an academic coordinator for Grades 3-5 in Saandeepani Academy For Excellence. She has five years of experience at the institution and can be reached at divya@saandeepani.in.

Jyoti is from Delhi. She is currently working in Kahamtalaya Foundation as a program lead, and her job is to ensure that the community can support the school and to train parents. Jyoti can be reached at jyoti@kshamtalaya.org.

Rashmi has a BSc degree, a postgraduate degree in travel and tourism, and a postgraduate diploma in teacher's counselling. She has 13 years of corporate experience in international freight forwarding.

She has also been a Teach for India Fellow, and currently works with Jhamtse as an administrative coordinator, working closely with the founder. Rashmi can be reached at rashmi@jhamtse.org.

Vasudha Wanchoo is the managing director of Jhamtse Gatsal. Vasudha actively started living at Jhamtse Gatsal in 2011, although she was involved in the work as a volunteer with the US-based supporting organization, Jhamtse International, before its inception. After visiting Jhamtse Gatsal Community for three months, she fell in love with the work that is being done in shaping kind-hearted and thinking future leaders. Vasudha can be reached at vasudha@jhamtse.org.

Yogita Prashant Godse is the school inclusion coordinator at Saandeepani Academy For Excellence. She has been with the institution for six years and can be reached at yogita@saandeepani.in.

Rekha N, Implementation Lead, Vidhya Vidhai Foundation, is a budding professional in social work practice. Her keen interest in learning innovative educational practices led her to join Vidhya Vidhai. Rekha now leads a school improvement project in affordable private schools in Chennai. She can be reached at rekha@vidhyavidhai.org.



Jhamtse Gatsal

Older students serving in a vermicomposting unit

The road to excellence

Lessons on school leadership from around the world

Karunya

Take a walk through the following resources, from Tetsuko Kuroyanagi's autobiographical novel to Linda Cliatt-Wayman's TED Talk and explore the inspiring stories of school leaders who defied the odds. Also, gain insights from case studies on strategic leadership and delve into thought-provoking articles from Learning Curve. Lastly, "The Principal Story" offers poignant portraits of dedicated principals shaping America's public schools. Overall, the next few pages will paint quite a picture of the significance of school leadership in transforming education.

A review of empirical research on school leadership in the Global South

Nature of the resource: Report

Around the world, there's a learning crisis in education. This is especially true in the Global South, where students struggle with basic numeracy and literacy. This report talks about a potential cost-effective solution that remains underutilized and under-researched - school leadership. Take a look at this report to understand how the quality of school leadership plays a crucial role in impacting student outcomes.

This report reviews over 70 studies, primarily from the Global South, and covers four main areas. These include the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes, the status of school leaders, training programs, and policies affecting school leadership. Findings reveal that many school leaders lack training and essential skills, and often have to focus on administrative tasks instead of student learning. [Click here for the report](#)



Capacity building for school leaders

Vidhya Vidhai Foundation

Totto-chan

Nature of the resource: Book

"Totto-chan" is an autobiographical novel by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi. She is a famous Japanese actress and television host. In the book she recollects her childhood years as Totto-chan under the positive influence of her headmaster Sosaku Kobayashi. Despite the hardships of World War II, Totto-chan and her classmates enjoy the vibrant atmosphere of the small school called Tomoe Gakuen. Here mornings were reserved for studies and the afternoons for walks, sketching, singing or plant-collecting. Read the novel to know how a visionary school leader like Kobayashi was able to transform a train car into a space of endless possibilities and what happened to the school due to the World War. [Click here for the book](#)

How to fix a broken school

Nature of the resource: TED-Ed Talk

When a leader decides to stand against all the odds, what happens? This inspiring 17-minute TED Talk, given by Linda Cliatt-Wayman, a Principal from North Philadelphia, takes us through her experience of leading

and transforming a school that was labeled as “low-performing” and “persistently dangerous.” Her work shows us, “Leaders make the impossible, possible!”. [Click here for the video](#)

Inspiring change in the face of adversity

Nature of the resource: Film Review

“Inspiring change in the face of adversity” is a movie review of Schindler’s List. It is written by Kushboo Awasthi. She is the Co-Founder & Chief Operating Officer of ShikshaLokam and Co-Founder of Mantra4Change. In the review, the author captures five leadership lessons she gained from the movie. [Click here for the movie review](#)



Vidhya Vidhai Foundation

School leader focusing on teacher engagement in school development

Not just grades: schools that educate differently

Nature of the resource: Book

This book is a collection of 10 schools’ case studies. These schools have proved that it is possible to deliver academic excellence, together with positive personal development, with limited available resources. These case studies were written by Prof. Rajeev Sharma and his colleagues at Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad, over two decades, to deliver “Strategic leadership for

schools in a changing environment”, a senior leadership development program designed for Indian school leaders. [Click here for the book](#)

Learning Curve - School Leadership

Nature of the resource: Journal

This particular issue of “Learning Curve,” a magazine published by Azim Premji Foundation, is centred around school leadership. This edition presents you with in-depth articles and reflections that broaden our perspective on various aspects of school leadership in the context of India. [Click here for the magazine](#)

Good schools

Nature of the resource: Video Series

Have you ever imagined a mountaintop as a classroom? What are the hardships of a single teacher who manages the whole school? Can a school in a tribal community transform the entire community? This video series presented by Azim Premji Foundation compiles impact stories from government schools across India, highlighting the positive influences on students’ learning experience. Each video of the series inspires and motivates us to understand the relentless efforts put forth by the schools’ headmasters and teacher-leaders, despite all the hardships they face. [Click here for the videos](#)

Karunya is the director of the School Leadership and Teacher Empowerment Program at Vidhya Vidhai. She is a medical microbiologist, who developed a profound interest in the development sector, and has been involved in the education space for seven years. She has led the School Leadership and Teacher Empowerment Program (SLATE) at Vidhya Vidhai as well. Karunya’s expertise is deeply rooted in enhancing the teaching-learning experience with innovative pedagogies.

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Child-centered leadership: nurturing budding leaders

Preethi G

V. Arun is a teacher at Marudam Farm School. He makes decisions that alter every child's learning journey in the best possible way. With the school values and beliefs at the center, Arun encourages a proactive learning environment amidst nature for children to collaborate, learn and thrive in. In this photo essay, immerse yourself in the lives of children of Marudam.



Diverse pedagogies for a diverse population: 75% of the school's students hail from rural areas, and much of the rest are from other nationalities. Some of the children have disabilities. There are some who belong to indigenous groups. Conscious attempts to adopt pedagogies helps the school meet the diverse learning needs of all children.



The body as a learning tool: At Marudam, they believe that children learn from their bodies, senses and movements. There is high importance given to physical activities. Every student spends one hour on physical training and another one hour on unstructured play time.



Learning through nature: Interacting with and experiencing nature occupies half of the children's day. Most of the promoted pedagogies are experiential. So, nature plays a crucial role.



Play = Learn: Learning is not restricted to the cerebral and the verbal. Communication, interpersonal relationships, life skills and many other cognitive skills develop through play. Play ensures children's interest to come to school and enjoy learning as they play.

Preethi G is a Communications Manager at Vidhya Vidhai Foundation. With a blend of journalism and social work experience for the past seven years, Preethi has been cocreating school improvement projects with education leaders and communicating impact at Vidhya Vidhai for four years. She can be reached at preethi@vidhyavidhai.org.

This piece has been written with inputs from V. Arun, who can be reached at marudamfarmschool@gmail.com.

Aspirations of school leaders

One micro-decision at a time

Meena Krishnan

Alokit is a team of dedicated educators devoted to transforming K-12 educational leadership. It empowers school leaders to strengthen their potential, leading to schools ensuring better student learning outcomes. In this photo story, the Alokit team have captured moments of strong leadership that have benefitted teachers and students.



Culture comes first: Ms. Madhavi, Vice Principal, TSWR Boath, Adilabad, Telangana, passionately implores the teaching staff during a staff meeting to delve deep into the cultural elements that would define their dream school, and to develop a positive school culture.



Extracting learnings from everywhere: Ms. Devasena, Principal, TSWR School, Narayanpet, Telangana, urges the residential school staff to watch the movie 'Hichki' for a meaningful discussion on school culture and the Pygmalion effect.



Teacher professional development through coaching: Ms. Rupa, Principal, TSWR School, Addaguduru, Telangana, promotes active learning strategies among the teachers during the monthly staff meetings. Ms. Rupa believes that sharing strategies through hands-on experience helps teachers to observe and learn to implement.



Enhancing teaching-learning through feedback: Mr. Vasudevacharya, Principal, TSWR School, Gajwel, Telangana, is actively monitoring classroom teaching and learning to provide valuable feedback for the teacher. His action of sharing continuous feedback showcases his belief to improve teachers to enhance learning in the school.



In and out - ensuring child safety: Ms. Evangilene, the Principal, APRS Vomravalli, Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh, along with the Child Safety Committee is conducting an awareness session on Good Touch and Bad Touch by showing the Komal video to students.



One of the many roles of a school leader: Ms. Vijayalakshmi, the Headteacher of MPPS Manthronipally, Narayanpet district in Telangana, in a single-teacher-primary school conducting a TaRL-inspired targeted instruction lesson.



Strengthening student-school leader relationship: Mr. Jampa Cheodar, the school leader of a primary school in Karnataka, creates a safe and barrier-free environment for students to feel free around him. Interacting with students informally and sharing teatime with them is one of his strategies to bridge the gap between him and the students.

Meena Krishnan is “Associate School Transformation Lead” at Vidhya Vidhai Foundation. Meena’s passion to work for students has navigated her journey in the domain of education for more than six years now. For the past two years, Meena’s work with Vidhya Vidhai has been facilitating change among school leaders and teachers to create improvements that help students flourish in schools.

Meena has developed and implemented a variety of interventions to upskill leaders and make a difference in the larger ecosystem of schools. She may be reached at meena@vidhyavidhai.org.

This piece has been written with inputs from Apurva Shankar, who can be reached at apurva.sankar@alokit.org

Unlocking potential through collective action

The power of collaboration in educational leadership

Poulomi Sen



Creatnet Education

Collaboration serves as a pivotal factor in ensuring effective educational leadership. It begins within schools, where leaders collaborate to make informed decisions, improve instructional practices, and cultivate nurturing learning environments. However, its impact extends far beyond the school gates. It also encompasses the sharing of best practices among educational institutions and partnerships with external organizations, mentors and funders to drive school development.

In this article, we explore four compelling examples that illustrate the transformative potential of collaboration and collective action in educational leadership. From nurturing school leaders into “edupreneurs” to fostering a culture of collaboration and shared learning, these stories illuminate some key elements of successful collaboration. These include a shared vision, peer learning, mentorship, and a commitment to enhancing the educational experience for students. Through these case studies, we underscore the pivotal role that collaboration

plays, serving as the cornerstone of effective leadership in today's educational landscape.

Collaboration for learning enhancement

Effective educational leadership often begins at the grassroots level within schools. Leaders collaborate to ensure that every aspect of the school experience aligns with the growth and development of students. A prime example of this collaborative approach is Simple Education Foundation (SEF), a nonprofit based in Delhi. It partners with schools to emphasize a shared vision for learning enhancement.

SEF facilitates collaborative school vision and goal-setting sessions, bringing together school leaders, teachers and parents. This practice aligns the school's direction with the needs and aspirations of its students, and informs priorities, action plans and shared beliefs.

Each academic year commences with workshops and one-on-one conversations, where participants revisit the school's vision. This ensures collective ownership and a continued focus on students' growth. This collaborative environment empowers

school leaders to set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) goals, and establish external partnerships that directly benefit students.

Throughout the academic year, school leaders and teachers engage with learning and school culture data periodically with the SEF team. These spaces enable them to celebrate children's growth, classroom practices and identify focus areas collaboratively. In the process, teachers identify specific teacher practices and focused content areas to enhance learning. It also helps school leaders identify their action steps, such as classroom visits, to support teachers toward their learning goals.

Kanavu recognizes schools as dynamic systems influenced by diverse stakeholders shaping the educational experience. Kanavu is a nonprofit which empowers rural schools and communities of rural Cuddalore, in Tamil Nadu, by bridging gaps in skills and opportunities.

Over the last six years, the organization has nurtured leadership in teachers and school leaders, enabling individual and collective learning, and cultivating a culture



Kanavu

Pitch it Up

Barefoot Edu's Rehnuma Program employs an entrepreneurial framework to enhance the capacity of school leaders. The evolving responsibilities of principals now mirror those of corporate managers, thus casting them as "institutional entrepreneurs." The demands placed upon a school principal encompass team leadership, resource allocation, opportunity cultivation, comprehensive management, and effective school operation within a rapidly transforming world. These demands extend far beyond administrative proficiency and call for the integration of entrepreneurial thinking and skills with school leadership.

To enable this, Barefoot Edu Foundation (BEF) runs a two-year incubation program for principals. Here they go through leadership workshops, personalized coaching and peer learning and become "edupreneurs." "Pitch it Up" is the flagship event of this program.

In Pitch it Up, school principals present their innovative 21st-century school projects. The objective is to secure mentorship, funds, partnerships, and other forms of support. This is toward the primary goals of achieving better student outcomes.

In the lead up to Pitch it Up, school principals are expected to identify a challenge they are facing with respect to quality education, school development, or in the community. They are then coached to come up with a shared vision for the project, develop an action plan, identify and leverage resources, create project success criteria, and finally, execute their pilot project.

These pilots are then pitched to a jury consisting of a funder, an entrepreneur and an educator. The larger audience consists of NGOs, mentors and potential funders. The school principals go through three months of training on pitching their project to this jury and audience. They stand to win reward money which they can use to get their pilot to the next stage. Further, the audience can also volunteer their support in the form of funding, partnerships and mentorship, etc.

that encourages collaboration, initiative and ownership. This collaborative approach enhances school leaders' ability to meet student needs effectively, whether through after-school programs, remedial instruction, or differentiated learning. Furthermore, it promotes the exchange of best practices among educators.

A powerful instance of the above from Kanavu's work with these schools is the creation of honest spaces to talk more about the demands of the roles of educators. This has led to finding strategies to help school leaders be in classrooms more than earlier - modeling lessons, co-teaching or working with small groups. Breaking the notion that a school leader is supposed to be at the office has been instrumental in driving change

for students. Similarly, moving beyond the practice that a teacher must be at the board, talking to students, has led to teachers working in small groups, students leading parts of the lessons and differentiated instruction.

Collaboration for school development

Effective school development is not merely about administrative proficiency. It requires collaborative efforts that transcend the conventional boundaries of leadership. Barefoot Edu Foundation's Rehnuma Program provides a compelling example of this approach. Over a two-year incubation program, school principals undergo transformative experiences. These include leadership workshops, personalized coaching, and peer learning. The



Simple Education Foundation

program molds the principals into dynamic “edupreneurs” who take charge of their schools and drive innovative change.

A pivotal element of this program is the “Pitch it Up” event, where principals present innovative 21st-century school projects. The goal is to secure mentorship, funds, partnerships and support, and foster a culture of collaboration and innovation. This collaborative approach empowers school leaders to identify challenges, develop actionable plans, and execute pilot projects that significantly benefit students.

A remarkable success story within this program is that of Shaheen Jabeli. She introduced Project-Based Learning during the pandemic, demonstrating the transformative potential of collaborative school development. She identified that families in the community had access to only one phone at the most.

This meant it would go to the oldest child for their studies, leaving behind their younger sibling in preschool, depriving them of an education. Shahin Ma’am introduced Project Based Learning (PBL) with simple to-do

projects at home, which even uneducated parents could administer to their children.

She achieved a remarkable 97% participation rate, with over 90% submission of homework from children. Shaheen’s smart planning was proven, when her PBL project won the top prize at Pitch it UP, bringing in Rs. 90,000. This allowed her to hire a dedicated partner who co-created a customized curriculum for the school, making the project stronger. Now, all the 28 teachers smoothly use PBL, benefiting 600 students who are learning through real-life, hands-on projects.

Collaboration for entrepreneurial leadership

Education leadership requires entrepreneurial thinking and skills to navigate a rapidly changing educational landscape. Barefoot Edu Foundation’s “Pitch it Up” event embodies this innovative approach. School principals are coached to present entrepreneurial projects and secure support from a jury, mentors and potential funders. This integration of entrepreneurial skills equips leaders to adapt and innovate within their school communities, fostering a spirit of innovation and adaptability.

What makes this initiative even more impactful is its reach beyond geographical boundaries. It enables principals from different parts of the country to come together and learn from each other's solutions.

The organization further captures these implementable best practices for others to learn and have published their first book "Edupreneurs of the Future" as a step in this direction. This collaborative endeavor benefits the individual schools and enriches the broader educational landscape.

Collaboration for peer learning and mentorship

Central to collaborative leadership is the concept of peer learning and mentorship. Creatnet Education exemplifies this approach by focusing on the growth and development of school leaders through peer learning. Their emphasis lies in creating a culture of listening within a safe space, where problems can be openly discussed without judgment or hierarchy. School leaders, who volunteer as facilitators, work with their peers to build a culture of continuous learning.

Cluster development, aligned with India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, plays a crucial role in this collaborative approach. Facilitators create safe spaces, nurturing connections within peer groups where each member is equally accepted, respected and valued. Mutual trust and belief lay the foundation for peer-based learning, allowing individuals to construct knowledge within small groups and provide authentic feedback to one another.

This enables individuals to give and receive feedback openly, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. The practices of silence and self-observation further enhance this process. These empower individuals to reflect and gain multiple perspectives. As leadership expands, a

larger common purpose emerges, fueled by interconnectedness, gratitude, empathy and compassion. Communities form and unite to bring this vision to life, echoing the ethos of distributed leadership.

Principal Lata Sagar's journey, as exemplified in her transformation from a participant to a judge at Barefoot Edu Foundation's "Pitch it Up" within one year, underscores the importance of mentorship and peer support.

Her passion for improving English language proficiency among underprivileged students led her to extend mentorship and co-learning opportunities to other principals. The exchange of knowledge and best practices among education leaders enhances individual leadership. It also contributes to the collective growth of the education community.

SEF's virtual online Principal Learning Circles (PLCs), which were conducted during the COVID-19 lockdowns, exemplify peer learning and collaboration. School leaders leveraged the PLCs to share, reflect, upskill and learn best practices from each other. Connecting with each other now continues on a School Leaders' WhatsApp Group.

The school leaders anchor quarterly celebrations and well-being check-ins. They also share best practices to foster good interpersonal relationships between educators, build a culture of appreciation, and strengthen trust on school leaders. Teachers share and express themselves more openly now. An educator shared in a quarterly survey, "It really brings a smile on my face to receive small encouraging notes."

Collaboration for resource sharing and partnerships

Collaboration extends to resource sharing and partnerships, both within and beyond school boundaries. Kanavu recognizes the delicate balance between competition and collaboration among schools. While individual

excellence remains crucial, there is an acknowledgment that sharing resources and challenges can drive collective progress. Honest spaces for reflection enable schools to adopt a win-win approach.

In recent years, the advent of WhatsApp groups has facilitated cross-school communication, providing insights into classroom practices, and fostering a culture of shared learning. This collaborative approach ensures that schools receive the necessary support to bring their innovative ideas to life, ultimately benefiting students and the educational community.

In SEF's partner schools, school leaders co-plan and co-facilitate Parent Teacher Meetings (PTMs) and School Management Committee (SMC) meetings with the SEF team. They invite community voices, enabling families to envision their role towards children and schools.

This contributes toward strengthening school-community partnership. In planning and debrief conversations, school leaders consider suggestions from parents, and work on their practices related to facilitation, reflection and anchoring safety.

The core of SEF's approach is human centeredness: relationships and collaboration. For children to thrive in safe learning environments, teachers must create these in classrooms and experience it themselves. SEF leverages school leaders to foster safety, collaboration and reflection for themselves and other stakeholders. When school leaders experience safe spaces, they are more likely to lead it for others which will ultimately reach children.

Collaboration also involves resource sharing and partnerships with external organizations, mentors, and funders. Through "Pitch it Up," school leaders identify and leverage resources and partnerships to execute their projects. This collaborative approach ensures

that schools receive the necessary support to bring their innovative ideas to life. This has the potential to ultimately benefit students and the educational community.

In conclusion, these examples underscore the multifaceted nature of collaboration in educational leadership. Whether it's for learning enhancement, school development, entrepreneurial leadership, or resource sharing, collaboration can be the driving force behind progress in education.

Poulomi Sen is the Impact Lead at Vidhya Vidhai Foundation. She is a passionate researcher and has a keen interest in enabling an equitable public education system in India. You can reach her at poulomi@vidhyavidhai.org and <https://www.linkedin.com/in/poulomis/>.

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Kanavu



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