

Samuhik सामूहिक पहल Pahal

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The Learning Journeys of Fellowships

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Thinking About Fellowships

Samuhik Pahal Editorial Collective

Fellowships are increasingly becoming an important mode of intervening in the social sector. This is especially true in the case of the domain of education. Wipro Foundation itself runs three different fellowships – the Wipro Education Fellowship (for founders of early-stage educational NGOs), the Wipro Organizational Development Fellowship and the Wipro Media Fellowship. We also support many organizations who run fellowships and see them as an important part of their organizational toolkit.

Because of their burgeoning popularity and wide usage, fellowships now mean many things to many people. For the purpose of discussions in the present issue of Samuhik Pahal, by fellowship we mean the following.

A fellowship is a specific kind of organizational intervention in the education sector, with the help of fresh talent, which the organizations try to get and groom in cohorts through a structured program. Such a program provides the fellows opportunities to engage with school/classroom level teaching-learning processes - with children and/or teachers and/or school leaders for a specified period.

Fellowships are increasingly a popular way of structuring educational interventions due to many reasons. They are a relatively effective way of attracting new talent, with arguably low costs. Some organizations also see it as a way of getting potential employees without any formal commitments for the relationship at the beginning.

For young people, it can be a good way to build their capacity, get exposure, and source opportunities for networking and exploring long-term career opportunities with a relatively short commitment – a year or two.

A well-chosen mix of fellows opens up their minds to the world, can change perceptions, and can challenge long held prejudices, through peer interactions and learning.

For the system as a whole, it facilitates the entry of more people into the ecosystem and provides frameworks for new entrants to become educational/social entrepreneurs. For the education ecosystem, it also works as a broader advocacy tool.

When organizations in rural areas and small towns take fellows from communities, it creates opportunities for capacity building for local people. At large, fellowships can also potentially increase sensitivity among young people about various social issues and diverse realities.

However, as with everything else, fellowships have a flipside. There is the possibility of fellows being financially exploited. In the new positions, they are often expected to play the role of experts, sometimes with only a few weeks' training. The challenges that such situations create for fellows are many. Some are willing to take it on, but for some others it might be intense and overwhelming.

Organizations start fellowships with multiple objectives. Some of these goals may become sidelined over a period of time. How easy is it for organizations to mediate between the various competing objectives – e.g., attracting talent to the social sector vs. intervening effectively in a chosen domain of work - of fellowships?

The idea/concept of fellowships, as dominantly operational in India now, is often premised upon the understanding that we have figured out how to work in specific domains, and fellowships can be used to expand/multiply the work.



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However, one observes that often organizations starting fellowships in specific thematic areas themselves are nowhere close to solving the problems they have chosen to work on. Therefore, scaling up through fellowships at this stage may only upscale confusions and problems.

One might also argue that even if one has figured out solutions, scaling these is not necessarily going to work because of the very context dependent nature of social issues.

Those who want to work in the social sector perhaps must also do their own thinking, imagining and experimentation. How much do the present crop of fellowships in India in the education sector are able to do this is an important question to consider.

The dominant paradigm of fellowships is based on certain assumptions of which some of the smaller NGOs who have started fellowship programs might not be aware. These assumptions include, amongst others - scaling as being only an organizational/operational issue, the ease with which capacities may be built, etc.

Large-scale social experimentations often have high social costs. In the case of fellowships, do we have a way in which we can even begin to assess these costs, especially with those fellowships that have a large geographical and social spread?

Is the fellowship process equitably beneficial for everyone involved? Does the teacher or the school leader gain as much from the process (in terms of skills, social capital, identity etc.) as a fellow?

Our interactions with a number of potential grantees as well as existing partners reveal an important fact. Many of them are not quite clear about why they are running or plan to run a fellowship.

Perhaps it is time to relook at fellowships as a way of structuring work and as a tool of intervention in the domain of education and unpack certain assumptions that might have been made uncritically?

Perhaps we need to examine anew what it takes to solve a social/education problem, what is entailed in building the capacity of fellows to deliver what they are supposed to (e.g., being a teacher or a teacher trainer), and what it means to work with people in the system to improve their practices.

We hope this issue of Samuhik Pahal is a step, even if a very small one, in starting these conversations.

A Case for Greater Research on Education Fellowships in India

Tanushree Sarkar

I was tasked with writing an article to provide a research-based view of fellowship programs in the Indian context. I came up short. Instead, this article presents a case to invest in research on fellowship programs. Before I begin, I must state that I have not participated in any fellowship programs. But, as an education researcher, the influence of fellowship programs cannot be understated. NGOs that run fellowship programs have a tremendous influence on education policy, pedagogy and practice. Yet, as I will explain below, it is difficult to understand this influence, globally and in India.

Fellowship programs in the social sector are flourishing in India. The Indian Development Review (IDR) lists 97 fellowship programs in its social sector database. Eleven are categorized under education. This is not an exhaustive list. It indicates the range of options for those interested in pursuing fellowship programs. The ‘fellowship model’ is an increasingly popular intervention design in the education sector. Fellows constitute a critical mode of action and impact for several organisations. Examples include Asaadharan Foundation in Gujarat, Gramurja Foundation and Apnishala in Maharashtra, and Saksham in New Delhi.

These fellowship models cover a range of issues and geographies, including social-emotional learning, STEM education, education governance and leadership, and foundational literacy and numeracy. Fellows are not the primary mode of intervention for all organizations. There is immense diversity in how education fellowships are operationalized. There is immense diversity in duration, design, geography and domain

across fellowship programs. This means, it is quite difficult to define what makes up a fellowship program.

Overall, fellowship programs can be seen as contractual positions aimed at professional development or contributing to a cause within a limited duration. Besides, there is a focus on recruiting talented youth across education fellowship programs. There is a widespread critique of the idea that recruiting ‘the best and the brightest’ is a credible solution for complex social problems. First, is the assumption of energy and commitment to work in low-paying and gruelling circumstances. Second, is the notion that young, smart, talented individuals need to be sensitized toward pervasive social problems. This is done by exposing fellows to ‘low resourced’ and ‘grassroots’ India, which allows them to carry this sensitivity to future endeavours.

It is difficult to think about education fellowships without examining the influence of Teach for India (TFI), Teach for America (TFA) and Teach for All (TFAll). The first is because of their enormous scale. As per TFI, “1 in 10 Indian children is now reached by a Teach for India Alumni”. The TFI program is part of the larger TFAll network; founded by Wendy Kopp, who established TFA in the early 1990s. Currently, TFAll represents a global network operating in 55 regions. The second reason one cannot ignore their influence is because of the existing research focus on this program. For instance, TFA emerged as an alternative teacher certification program in the United States. Research suggests this undermined teacher engagement with socio-cultural and political aspects of teaching.

In the Indian context, TFI approaches to teacher education contradict the ethos of teacher education policy in India. Scholars critique TFA for promoting deficit-based perspectives of children belonging to marginalized communities. Further, TFA is unable to support fellows to cater to children with disabilities. TFA is charged with promoting standardization and a rigid focus on measurement. It is difficult to make similar claims in the Indian context. But, evidence indicates that NGOs promoting fellowship programs support market-oriented reforms in education.

Market-oriented education reforms exist in tension with equity and social justice. At the same time, the intention is not to present a generalized picture of fellowship programs. Fellowship programs can serve democratic and social justice goals. They can provide crucial access to employment for those at the margins, serve as affinity networks for minoritized communities, and promote engagement and participation in decision-making within one's own communities and contexts. An example of this is the NCPEDP – Javed Abidi Fellowship on Disability, which is a three-year fellowship for disabled youth to conduct grassroots disability rights advocacy.

As I previously noted, research on fellowship programs, especially on their growth in the Indian context, is scarce. It is difficult to provide an overview of how fellowships influence education. In this vein, I offer more questions than answers. There is a need to examine the influence of fellowship in classrooms and schools, and in the lives of fellows who choose to take part.

How do fellowships influence policy and practice in schools and classrooms? How do teachers view their fellow counterparts in schools? The presence of fellows in schools is likely to reshape and reconfigure how teachers view their professional development, how they think about teacher education, and how particular teaching

practices are taken up. This is not to say that teachers are not critical of fellows' teaching practices. Instead, we must examine how fellowship programs influence beliefs, pedagogy and the curriculum.

Further, how do fellows influence the lives of students they interact with? How do young people perceive fellowship programs? What are the trajectories that alumni follow? It is important to note that alumni and fellows do not take up uncritical stances toward fellowships. They develop nuanced perspectives on school reform and educational inequities. Yet, there is likely to be continued influence of the fellowship 'networks' in their newly founded organizations. Alumni networks are likely to be important forms of social and network capital. These networks provide access to credibility, funding, knowledge, opportunities, human resources and support.

Crucially, what visions of quality, equity, and inclusion are envisioned within these fellowships? The regions where fellowships operate are marked by poverty and exclusion. But we know little about representation and diversity within fellowship programs. Who is recruited and who can afford to take part?

Another set of unanswered questions focuses on the 'why'. Why are fellowships gaining immense popularity as an intervention design? Is it because of a lack of skilled human resources in the education non-profit sector? Is there systemic support for new founders to develop fellowship programs? For instance, TFIx mentors and incubates TFI alumni to develop their own fellowship programs. It would be helpful to examine how many fellowship programs are founded or supported by alumni of fellowship programs.

Is it attractive to funders as an established model in the education sector? At what point will we saturate the field of fellowships? Why are these programs attractive to young people? What are the socio-cultural and

political circumstances that allow for the proliferation of fellowship programs? Is there expansive demand in a time of competitive and inaccessible higher education and labour market precarity?

What we currently know is based on reports from established organizations running fellowship programs. The lack of research is not limited to India but is a global concern. Given the rapid growth of fellowships, research is urgently required to promote critical examination of these programs.

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Social Transformation through Small Heroic Acts

Stories of Fellows and Fellowships

Hitanshi Gandhi

When I started to write my experience and understanding about fellowships and their impact on the ecosystem and stakeholders, there were multiple questions that arose.

Questions like

“What is a fellowship?”

“Who are defined as fellows?”

“Why do we need structures like it?”

“How do we define education?”

“How do we define leadership?”

And so on...

There are fellowships in every sphere now - be it medicine, entrepreneurship, education, self growth, etc. Fellows usually are individuals who are working towards a particular vision by building a movement of leaders in the ecosystem. Here we are largely talking about educational fellowships. In Teach For India's context we believe that there is a huge deficit of leadership in education. Hence, our fellowship model has a two-fold theory of change.

In simple terms, it brings a short term and a more long term shift at different levels. In the short term we see a shift in the learning outcomes of students at a classroom level and some behavioral changes. In the longer term, we see how Fellows become leaders and advocate for educational equity choosing different puzzle pieces in the ecosystem to bring shifts at a higher level.

An alumna of the TFI Fellowship myself, I taught nearly 40 low income private school children in an under-resourced community

in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. My understanding of the structure evolved every single time we spoke about leadership and exposure to challenges in the education space. From being a class teacher to becoming a ‘didi’ for them was a journey which helped my students grow in every aspect, be it learning outcomes or shifts in them individually. This helped me build an awareness of the puzzle pieces in education and ground realities of the ecosystem as well.

Incubating Fellowships

Largely, the fellowship experience helped my students and me in becoming more aware individuals with a better understanding of the need for leadership on the ground.

Now that is where TFlx - Teach For India's incubator and growth model comes in. It was launched because Teach For India operates in eight major cities in India with a distant vision of reaching all children. The rationale for launching TFlx was to reach all children by collaborating with other education organizations on the ground and together designing a contextual teaching fellowship model.

Through the last six years I have experienced different fellowship models in our country by visiting organizations on the ground to immerse in the needs of their context. One clear realization is that for any region to be empowered, self sustenance is fundamental. Moreover, self sustenance comes with people of the community taking ownership of their processes of growth and empowerment.

Gary Lawrence, a Sociologist has said, “Sustainability is a political choice, not a technical one. It’s not a question of whether we can be sustainable, but whether we choose to be”. From multiple conversations, what is strikingly true is that sometimes this choice is not even known.

For us to be aware and let communities own their development, there needs to be a start, a strong start! In my experience, fellowships have proven to be that ‘zariya’ - medium - to channelize the potential of a region through education. The undivided focus of TFlx, hence, is to enable edupreneurs launch, sustain and strengthen contextual teaching fellowships by building local leadership in their region.

Over the past five to six years, we have worked with nearly 42 education organizations, collectively reaching close to 2.5 lakh+ children across the country. We have predominantly discussed the depth vs. scale in models and have always believed that a balance of both is essential to create impact. Let’s talk about some fellowships in action that have impacted individuals and communities at multiple levels - some through scale, some through depth, and some through both.

Experiences and Voices of Fellows

One of our 2019 cohort entrepreneurs, Sajida Vadgama works with Ummeed, an organization based in Mumbai with a vision of creating inclusion in every sphere. They run a Fellowship named Ummeed Inclusion Fellowship Program, where the focus is to start with mindset and approach. At Ummeed, language is their tool to express their mindset. Through the fellowship they are trying to reimagine how we look at neuro-diverse children, how we cultivate the language which includes everyone, how we move from addressing ‘children with special needs or developmental disabilities’ to ‘children being diverse learners’ or ‘children who are neuro diverse’, etc. The moment we

say ‘special needs’ it means the children need something else, something which is not otherwise normal.

The fact is that, “All children are diverse learners.” Through some very close examples, through our fellowship model we have realized how people who have lived these experiences feel excluded. Ummeed Inclusion Fellowship currently has 6 fellows across 3 schools where they work with children from nursery to 4th grade. One good thing with a fellowship model is that we see the impact at multiple levels, since it caters to multiple stakeholders at scale. A challenge however is that it takes a long time to see this impact at all these levels. Their fellows are working with teachers, students, parents and leaders of the schools.

According to Sajida, their fellowship is modelled to lead to shifts at three layers. For their fellows, it has been a personal transformation journey. They have reflection as a daily component and explore the way they see a problem, solutions they come up with, and build on their evolving understanding of inclusion. For the schools they work with, there is change needed at grassroots to really see a shift. Lastly, for the ecosystem as a whole, it is important to have dialogues on how inclusion is possible, to see what it looks like in action, and to contextualize inclusion to India. It is important for every educator to think, “How do we contextualize inclusion for children in our region?”

Through this fellowship, they see the learning outcomes of children shift in the short term, along with delivery of pedagogy in the classrooms. In the long term, they envision to see mindset shifts in the larger society with respect to inclusion. Their fellows work towards inclusion through facilitating social emotional learning and mental health spaces for all stakeholders, supporting teachers in the classrooms for pedagogy that is inclusive with a focus on functional literacy and

numeracy. Sajida says, “Inclusive education is not parallel education. It rather needs to be mainstreamed.”

Let’s look at another example of fellowship which is a perfect example of scale and depth. Surender Yadav, our 2018 cohort entrepreneur who runs Self Reliant India in Rewari, Haryana, focuses on building sustainable communities to bring historically under-resourced families out of poverty.

His fellowship ‘Nanhe Kalam’ is a two year intervention initiated with the goal to increase the number of students from historically under-resourced schools to get admitted in the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (JNV)/Sainik Schools. For this they select local youth who aspire to become future teachers and equip them with the latest teaching pedagogy and skills. These youth prepare government school students for the entrance test of different model schools. In the last 5 years, they have assisted 125+ such children get into JNV with a success rate of 10% which is five times the national success rate.

When students from government schools clear the entrance exam of a model school, it builds the credibility of the school and through this they motivate influential and resourceful members to enroll their children in the government school. This eventually motivates the community to invest resources and time in the management of the schools and hence, encourages the community to own the school. They have successfully implemented this model in a few schools in Haryana where the community invested in their government school and have taken ownership of the school.

They are currently working with 22 schools through 44 fellows and are planning to start with a few more this year. The impact of the fellowship has been quite prominent and they have seen a 10-12% success ratio of students getting into Navodaya, dropout

rates being reduced to 5-7% and a 20-25% increase in learning outcomes of children. All of this in just one year!

Surender envisions a village to take the ownership of the school there. ‘One Village One School’ is what he calls it. Through his Fellowship, there has been a shift in the leadership of his fellows. They are more aware of class structure, more confident in communication, more proactive in leading themselves and others. His ultimate goal is to bring families out of poverty and help them lead sustainable lives.

Surender says, “At Self Reliant India, we believe in building the capacity of the youth from the communities who would lead the transformational change in the communities. For us, the fellowship model has played an effective approach in summarizing all the learnings/skills/exposure required by the rural youth to become future effective teachers. It has given us the right amount of time with our fellows to build their understanding, provide them with enough hands-on experience, and give them real-time feedback on their learnings. Secondly, understanding of the ecosystem which they are part of in that district versus the different avenues they have to go to, helps us build solutions and define skills that would help the fellows in their development.”

Adwait Dandwate, an entrepreneur from the 2018 cohort of TFlx, runs Vardhishnu in Jalgaon, Maharashtra. Adwait shares about the importance of having local leaders to bring a shift. Through the Anandghar Fellowship, they work with ragpicking children in Jalgaon.

He says, “For nearly the first five years of Vardhishnu we only had local people joining the organization. We now have fellows from different parts of the state with diverse qualifications (from engineers to MSWs to B.Ed.s to commerce graduates). This has brought a lot of diversity in the team and the

culture, as they bring their own experiences and perspectives. We continue to have fellows from the community which has largely helped build grassroot level leadership and to ensure lasting impact within communities.”

Ashita Nath co-founded The Good Harvest School (TGHS) in Unnao, Uttar Pradesh. Through TGHS they are working towards every girl child in rural Uttar Pradesh to be empowered to reach their full potential, break the multi-generational discriminative mindset and lead happy, fulfilled and dignified lives. They envision the girls to steer the community towards growth and development by being role models and advocates of gender equity through education.

According to the NCCE report, it is estimated that for every 100 girls that enroll in school in rural India, 40 will reach grade 4, 18 will reach grade 8, 9 girls will reach grade 9 and only 1 will make it to grade 12. ASER (Rural) 2016 Report suggests that in UP, 9.9% of girls in the 11-14 age group are out of school. This rate is the highest in the country. The proportion of girls out of school in UP are almost double the all-India rate of 5.2%.

To address this issue, TGHS runs the Good Harvest Fellowship (GHF). Aspiring girls, preferably from rural communities, are selected as fellows, where they are trained to co-create an inclusive, engaging and effective learning experience for girls in schools and communities. The goal is to achieve academic and holistic growth and excellence. GHF aims at the fellows getting a deeper understanding of the discriminative mindset, challenges and gaps existing in the rural school system and in the community, which hampers the girls from reaching their full potential. It hopes that the fellows would become advocates of change for gender equality through education. In the long term, fellows and student alumni are expected to steer this movement by engaging in diverse roles in the system, and by working towards

impacting various stakeholders in the community. Hopefully, fellows and student alumni will work as role models and enablers for other girls to follow suit and lead more equitable lives. This would lead to gender equality through education by breaking multi-generational, discriminative mindsets.

TGHS started the fellowship with four fellows through a school and community intervention. The niche is that they have a curriculum which is integrated with agriculture. These are people who grow food (farmers largely). Hence when men migrate, women can still grow food and take care of their nutrition. Farming is a way of life here. Hence, they made sure that the curriculum is integrated with the core activities of these communities.

Ashita, when asked why GHF is a great intervention for them to reach their vision, say, “We are working in the community. Till the time the community is not involved, it will be difficult to bring shifts. The fellowship allows the community to be a part of the larger model, and it is important to hear the voices from the ground. It creates a ripple effect. When one or two girls from the community come and participate, it attracts more girls. So that is how impact is being created in the community and change is happening. We are envisioning that girls get opportunities to make their choices and leadership develops at grassroots. We envision our fellows to inspire girls to dream big.”

Let’s now look at a sports-based fellowship and see what works similarly and differently there.

Abhijeet Barse, our entrepreneur from the 2021 cohort runs Slum Soccer in Nagpur, Maharashtra. The organization runs the Playmaker Fellowship with the idea to fill the gap of physical education in primary schools. The Playmaker Fellows work in municipal schools. Through football they try to build language skills, 21st century skills, math, etc.

One fellow works with around 25 children and that is how they work in depth with each child.

When Abhijeet was asked why he believes that the fellowship model is an effective intervention for their organization, he shared, “Program outcomes aside - a structure gets created about evaluating outcomes, communication channels, and sequencing the systems that are already in place. More importantly - aligning the local youth to the vision of the organization and for the region also takes place. One of my key learnings has been to leverage the existing network, that is the strongest tool and a critical one to the start of a fellowship. I have realized how the young (fellows) of today can become absolute changemakers of tomorrow, hence building a cadre of leaders in the ecosystem.”

Abhijeet is now working towards replicating the same model for children and adolescents with hearing difficulties. All of these, and many more of such educational fellowships, have set examples of what building a movement of leaders might look like.

So largely, there are fellowships running across diverse domains from sports to STEM, to fellowships in regional languages to those running as a part of the government system, from music-based to civic education focused. The best part is how each model can be as contextual and meaningful for the audience they are catering to. There are fellowships running throughout India - from Kashmir to Karnataka and from Gujarat to the North East, covering regions with conflict, regions with the least literacy rates, regions facing child labour, child trafficking and early child marriages as major challenges.

How the Fellowship Model Works

These are just some of the fellowships we have co-designed with education organizations. We have realized how this model has enabled our entrepreneurs in different ways. Some are discussed here.

Scalability: More Fellows you have, more children and stakeholders you reach. Some are also easily replicable in other regions. Some partner with other organizations in the network and scale through partnerships.

Strong Partnerships: The education ecosystem is decently big now and hence many organizations know many strong players here. Most are part of multiple incubators together, or have worked on some projects together. Some have partnered with local champions or government sector to have a strong hold on the ground. This has resulted in strong and meaningful partnerships which has also helped in leveraging funds for the program.

Grassroots Leadership: People from local regions going through a rigorous fellowship model and learning about self and others through the process has helped build grassroots leadership. This facilitates the process of people of the community staying in the community to make it grow.

Shift in Mindsets and Perspectives: Working with young people who understand the context of their regions and their needs, our entrepreneurs have been able to shift lenses for self and communities.

Sustainability: Once the model is set and the program has stakeholders invested, this is an enabler in the region as a whole.

All these fellowships are reaching vulnerable children across the country to create a cadre of leaders in the education sector who can then reach more such children.

What Makes Running Fellowships a Challenge

With all these highlights there are definite challenges too. The concept of fellowships is still growing and hence people's understanding is limited as of now. At times this leads to missing out on good talent investing themselves in such models.



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The impact of education fellowships generally becomes visible only in the long term. Hence, it becomes challenging to procure funds for such a model when impact may not be immediately visible.

Another challenge with funding is that there are quite a few fellowship players now. Hence, funders investing in your fellowship becomes critical. It takes efforts to sustain the model year on year. With the passage of the years, the model should scale, and with scale there is a need for more resources.

With time, the term 'fellowship' has seen multiple forms. Today TFIx has enabled nearly 25+ fellowships running across the country. Some more are in their pilot phase.

In Conclusion

To bring it all together, from a personal fellowship experience to working with multiple other edupreneurs on the ground, a core learning has been that this sector thrives on collaborations. Collectively working with others, and going back to the stakeholders you are reaching, is crucial. Any fellowship model will be proactively nurtured

if the stakeholders are invested in the idea and investments happens when there is the slightest of impacts seen.

The fellowship model is a perfect example of what Howard Zinn, an American historian, playwright, philosopher, socialist thinker and World War II veteran, shares, "We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world."

Many like Sajida, Surender, Adwait and Abhijeet are trying to bring the change through their acts so that we move towards reaching all children. This is their story of bringing shifts and changes. What is yours?

Hitanshi joined the TFIx team in 2018 post her Teach For India Fellowship. Before that, she worked as an HR professional for a few years. She is an animal lover and enjoys watching Animal Planet or Nat Geo in her free time.

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Connect On:   

Journey of i-Saksham to Build Local Women Community Edu-leaders

A Reflection

Ravi Dhanuka

Neelima: I want to go to Patna to write an entrance test.
Parents: But why would you want to do that?

Younger brother: You will not go alone.

Neelima: I wish to go to good colleges in the country, be self-reliant.

Younger brother: You will not go. That is all.

This is a real-life incident that took place in Jamui, Bihar around 2016-17. The name has been changed to maintain confidentiality. The story of Neelima is not her alone. As we surge forward as one of the fastest growing economies in the world, young women in the country, especially from marginalized communities, continue to be vulnerable.

The denial of opportunities to be yourself, to realize your potential, and to gain respect for who you want to be, often compel them to lead a life of unacknowledged identity and unexplored aspirations.

During our stint in the Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellowship between 2012 and 2015 in the hinterland of Bihar, we witnessed numerous such instances and asked ourselves, "Can the foundation of a vibrant democracy be laid when the potential of 10 million young women in Bihar alone (100 million in India) remains untapped to contribute to the socio-economic growth of their communities?"

Early Thoughts

We envisioned that the solution lies in mainstreaming the contributions of local

young women, giving batons into their hands to bring change in real life, and showcasing how they can lead their communities from the front.

We chose early-grade education as an area of intervention because:

- a. It is the best investment to generate long-term human capital in backward communities
- b. It puts children on a solid foundation to be lifelong learners
- c. In the process, our young women would learn group facilitation skills, communicate assertively, set goals and gain confidence.

Hence, the i-Saksham fellowship program was started to build local young women as 'Leaders of Change' to leverage education to bring personal and community transformation. We call them 'edu-leaders'.

Fellowship Program's Objective

The objective of the fellowship program is to enable edu-leaders to grow across these three integrated leadership tracks:

- a. Personal Leadership: Grow as female role models, and inspire other young women to pursue their dreams.
- b. Educational Leadership: Develop a learning foundation in children by teaching in local government schools for two years and transform learning norms. In the process, edu-leaders learn to lead as champions.
- c. Community Leadership: Enhance parental engagement and build networks to

become local community change agents in the long run.

Principles

This articulation of the basic principles of the fellowship program draws from the USAID Framework of Positive Youth Development.

a. Building relationships of care and challenge for growth: The journey of leadership starts with the self and with the ability to form meaningful relationships with others. A ‘buddy’, peer mentor (mainly an edu-leader alumnus) is assigned to an edu-leader fellow to be that best friend we all need.

They provide non-judgemental spaces to share vulnerabilities, push them to take the plunge, and celebrate achievements. The tools used are monthly coaching calls, onsite classroom-level support, regular goal setting, and performance reviews.

“I was scared to do parent meetings all alone. I never thought I could do it, but my buddy Sakshi didi and my school teachers supported me. Today, parents did come and resolved that they would encourage their children to go to school daily. I am very happy.”

-Shrishti, Edu-leader, Munger

b. Imparting edu-leaders with relevant technical and social skills: We strongly believe in building domain expertise, and that leadership is as much about setting examples as inspiring others.

With 200 hours p.a. of training and follow-up support structures, we ensure that edu-leaders engrain relevant pedagogical and community facilitation skills.

c. Giving real-life opportunities to bring change: Edu-leaders intervene for 10 hours per week to transform learning norms in schools. They enliven classrooms with charts and print-rich materials. They create an inclusive learning atmosphere by sitting with them on the floor and interacting with them respectfully.

Through activity-based methods, children show improvements in their commitment to learning and grade-level outcomes. And edu-leaders demonstrate what community

Current Status

Since 2017, i-Saksham has grown from 15 edu-leaders in two blocks to a cadre of 200+ community edu-leaders working across 100 government schools and impacting 7,500 children. This has achieved success in four backward districts of Bihar including Gaya, Jamui and Munger.

A recent Third-Party Party Assessment shows the following significant achievements:

- a. The edu-leaders scored 80% on a self-efficacy scale. With their enhanced confidence and assertive communication skills, they negotiated for their dreams.
- b. Almost 100% of edu-leaders enrolled for undergraduate degree courses while the state average is just 12%.
- c. 40% of the children taught by edu-leaders could learn to read in 2021, despite COVID constraints.
- d. Fellowship alumni have become role models, professional mentors (‘buddies’), run community learning centres, improved parental participation and joined NGOs.
- e. Edu-leaders have formed cluster-level collectives to network for change and provide mutual support. Around 50% reported delays in their own marriage and raised voices on social issues such as early marriages and student drop-outs.

participation can achieve and how women's potential can unlock value in and for others.

d. Developing a sense of agency: In the process of bringing educational change, we encourage edu-leaders to reflect on their true calling, and realize the power of their self-worth.

Once this sense of self-determination is stimulated, no one could stop her from pursuing her life goals and raising her voice against injustice. We do monthly reflection check-ins where edu-leaders share progress against their broad life goals.

e. Creating an enabling environment: Supportive relationships are very critical for success. We encourage this by showcasing edu-leader's achievements and learning progress in children before the wider community. We conduct regular interactions with parents, school teachers and other immediate stakeholders.

Reflections

a. Is a two-year period enough for building lifelong leadership? i-Saksham's idea is to make this two-year fellowship one of the best periods of their lives wherein they experience just being themselves, experiment without fear, share with trust, realize their strengths and contribute to the betterment of their communities.

This sense of achievement, competence, and belongingness is not ephemeral. Once tasted, our edu-leaders will always strive to live



i-Saksham

and negotiate for the life of their dreams. As Kanak (an edu-leader of the 2018-20 batch, currently serving as 'buddy' to a new cohort of edu-leaders from her community) says, "Edu-leaders will not be able to hold themselves back if they see injustices around."

"Previously I used to think that my presence in school did not matter much. But it has now begun to change. My teachers do ask about my whereabouts if I am absent. What to say of my kids! They barge into my house and fight with me saying, 'What happened? Why didn't you come? Now you will have to feed us rice and daal as well.' I just fumble and smile. My mother feels very proud of me and blesses me."

- Isha, Edu-leader, Munger

Edu-leaders do feel very sad in the last quarter of the fellowship. Like all beautiful relationships in life, they do not want to let it go. The real challenge for i-Saksham would be to nurture their peer-driven collective so that they continue to provide the same sense of security and opportunity to edu-leaders to push themselves.

b. Contributions to strengthening the system: We take Robert D. Putnam's (1993) comment - "Through participation, citizens influence the institution and make it more effective to their needs" - very seriously.

National Education Policy 2020 sees enhanced community engagement as critical for the universal achievement of



i-Saksham

Foundational Literacy and Numeracy and improved accountability of the public education system in the long term.

Leadership is contagious. We have ample evidence of edu-leaders' good work triggering positive reciprocal actions from Head Masters and School Teachers. These range from unlocking resource materials from the closet, using activity-based pedagogy methods in classrooms, shifting mindsets, and organizing parents' meetings.

The next steps are enhancing collaborations between government teachers and edu-leaders to achieve the common educational goals for their communities, and replicating the learnings with other teachers in the system through the work of the 'Knowledge and Research Centre'.

c. Integration of leadership and education: How do we balance the goals of enhancing the learning experiences of children with that of building a community leader? Fundamentally, we don't see a conflict here. Enriching the learning of children becomes

a cause for edu-leaders. Thus, it becomes an important marker for them in the journey of achieving credibility as leaders and for actualizing their sense of purpose.

d. What is education for? Conditioned with assessing the ranking of colleges with average job placement packages, it took us almost half a decade to experience in action the unleashing of the conscious self and building of a sense of community through education. Social capital and empowerment are the two most important aspects of education based on which the fabric of civilization is created.

Way Forward

Having stimulated the sense of purpose in edu-leaders, the self-belief that they can achieve, and a network of relationships that is accommodative of their aspirations, i-Saksham has the following options:

a. Not do anything additional and trust that edu-leaders will find their way: We have been following this strategy since the graduation

of the first batch of edu-leaders in 2019 and experienced that they indeed tried to find their own ways as reflected in increased enrolment in higher education, working with other NGOs, and delays in their age of marriage.

b. Act as a conduit for partner expert organizations and enable them to leverage the cadre of edu-leaders to deliver last-mile services: i-Saksham started working on this strategy at the beginning of this year and received a phenomenal response from other organizations. They are keen to enter or expand in Bihar and trusted local human capital would be valuable. This would create more structured opportunities for edu-leaders and deepen the fellowship program's impact on the community.

c. Facilitate a collective of edu-leaders: i-Saksham is currently exploring this initiative where power shifts to their hands and in the long run they become a conduit to partner with other organizations. It can become an institution, by them and for them, to enhance young women's participation in various spheres of socio-economic life.

d. Institutionalize the learning of edu-leader's efforts: i-Saksham is curating coaching

resources and learnings of the half-decade of building local human capital to enable an open-source movement of grassroots leadership. We envision that marginalized communities must not always be on the receiving side of services of the government and the market. Young women from these communities have the potential to lead from the front as representatives of society to build the Saksham (capable) society of our dreams.

Two years after the incident mentioned at the beginning of this article, Neelima went on to pursue an M.A. in Women Studies degree from TISS, Mumbai.

Ravi Dhanuka is a founder and CEO of i-Saksham. He has more than a decade of experience across government, NGOs, and multilateral institutions in education, poverty alleviation schemes, financial inclusion and livelihoods. He is an ex-PMRD Fellow and completed his post-graduation from Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA).

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Teach For India: A Path of Learning

Shaheen Mistri and Manasi Jain

Why We Do What We Do: The Crisis

India, with 250 million children enrolled in 15 lakh schools, has the largest school system in the world. Over the past decades, we have made strides in enrollment for all grades across rural and urban areas. However, we have failed to see a rise in student outcomes with the vast majority of our students not building grade level competencies.

According to National Education Policy 2020, over five crore students in elementary grades do not attain foundational literacy and numeracy. According to UNICEF, more than 80% of our children fail to receive the foundational academic skills and 21st century skills required to succeed.

Post-pandemic, UNESCO estimated that our children have lost two months for every month they have not attended school. This amounts to more than 30 months of learning loss. This educational inequity has lasting implications on individual happiness, fulfillment and well-being. It has the potential to further perpetuate the cycle of poverty as well.

Teach For India (TFI) believes that all children can and must attain an excellent education, and that collective leadership is the path to that vision. With the scale and diversity of India, and the depth needed to truly unleash

an individual's greatest potential, we see that it will take a movement of leaders - teachers, students, parents and others - to educate every Indian child.

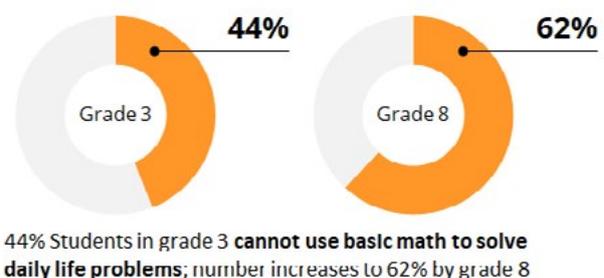
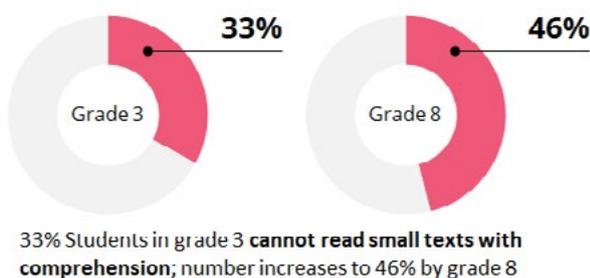
Our Journey

The Teach For India Fellowship is for bright, committed young people, recruited to teach full-time in low-income schools for two years. In 2009, Teach For India began with the conviction that every child had the right to an excellent education, and that developing leaders committed to educational equity was the single biggest thing we could do to realize that conviction. Since then, our journey has seen three distinct phases.

Phase 1 (2009 - 2013): We started with 87 fellows spread across 34 schools and 2,400 children in Mumbai and Pune. The team faced multiple challenges in the first few years. The first was finding high need schools that also met the basic criteria for success - classrooms, blackboards, bathrooms - for fellows to teach in.

In India, career and life choices are largely family decisions. The TFI team had to ensure that the strongest young people - those with the most options available - actually chose a two-years long Teach For India Fellowship.

By 2013, the idea of Teach For India had gained momentum. We had expanded to Delhi, Hyderabad, and Chennai, and were in



the process of opening an Ahmedabad site. Our fellow count had increased from 87 to 500 and the student numbers had increased by 10x to 23,500.

Phase 2 (2013 - 2017): As the model got validated, we started asking some hard questions - what was our vision of student and fellow impact? How could we go beyond the curriculum, and find ways to create a deep impact on our students? In 2013, we established a 'Student Vision' which defined

The 'Maya Musical' Transformation

Maya is a musical, collaboratively developed by TFI, with an original script, that tells the story of Princess Maya's journey. Maya Musical took 30 children on a life-changing journey of self-discovery. The Maya children traveled across the country, performed at conferences and public spaces, did acts of kindness to practice their values, and spread happiness in 100 ways through the arts. It culminated in ten shows across Mumbai and Pune. Maya was a demonstration of what is possible for low-income children with no previous exposure to the arts. It was a symbol of the kind of education all children deserve – one that integrates academics, values and mindsets, and exposure and access.

Priyanka started as a student at Epiphany High School, Pune, and was raised by a single mother. Before Maya, Priyanka dreamed of being a housewife. However, the musical experience showed her that she had the courage to take risks and achieve much more than she imagined. She went on to secure her diploma from UWC, Italy. She later studied psychology, theater and the Italian language at Franklin and Marshall College in the US. She has returned to her community in Pune, and is currently teaching 4th and 7th Grade students as a TFI Fellow.

three components of an excellent education: academic achievement, values and mindsets, and access and exposure. Our hypothesis was that these were the most effective when they were seamlessly and consistently integrated. Our student vision was accompanied by three commitments for fellows: commitment to personal transformation, collective action and educational equity.

In this phase, along with deepening our impact, we expanded our fellowship program to our seventh city - Bengaluru. By 2016, our alumni had outgrown the number of fellows each year. We began thinking about what it would mean to accelerate the potential of our alumni as we infuse the system with more leaders.

We launched InnovatED, a nation-wide education incubator for early-stage alumni entrepreneurs. We also launched Firki, an online teacher education platform, that houses carefully curated teaching resources and teacher development courses to change how teachers teach.

Phase 3 (2017-2022): In this phase we laid out the goal of helping one million children attain an excellent education by 2022. Two years into Phase 3, tensions started to emerge against the ambitious goals that we had set for ourselves. How do we maintain quality in our recruitment, programs, and everything else we do, while scaling significantly? Are we here to build teachers or lifelong leaders for educational equity?

After a year-long exercise aimed at strengthening the organizational backbone, the team made some hard choices. We stabilized the fellowship size for a few years, while bringing consistency in the quality of the program across our regions and supplementing it with innovations that would help us scale our impact beyond the fellowship. We embarked on our first attempt at capturing the impact of our alumni over the last 10 years.

As a part of Phase 3, we launched TFlx, an incubator to support entrepreneurs to start fellowships across remote parts of India that serve the most vulnerable children. We set up the platform 'Kids Education Revolution' with the goal of making India's children partners in reimagining education.

In 2020, we released our Leadership Development Journey 2.0. We also evolved a version of the 2013 model of student and fellow impact. We laid down three commitments to Self, Others, and India, for students, fellows, alumni, and anyone else who is on the path towards educational equity. When the pandemic struck, we expanded our work to relief and rations, holistic support for our children and communities, and pivoted to a new blended form of education.

Today, we are a movement of 1,000 Fellows teaching 32,000 children and 4,200 alumni who are collectively reaching 33 million children across India. Our students have a graduation rate of 96%. We are the largest fellowship in the country working with 270 schools across the nation. 99% of the principals in the schools where we work believe that we are having a positive impact. 77% of our alumni continue to work in the social sector across a multitude of roles. Our community is thriving with entrepreneurs who have founded 150+ organizations working towards different problems in the puzzle of educational inequity. We have recently launched our eighth site - Kolkata!

Our Model

We find promising leaders: We recruit and select high-potential candidates to serve as fellows who commit to teach for two years, full-time, in India's low-income schools. The selection process is highly selective. Only 6-8% of applicants make it through. Over the past 13 years, over 120,000 people have applied to the Fellowship. Our applicants are fresh graduates from reputed institutions

such as Lady Sri Ram College, St. Xaviers College, Fergusson College, and New York University. We have professionals from companies like Citigroup, American Express, Amazon, ZS Associates, KPMG, etc. applying as well.

Our fellows impact schools and communities: Fellows work as full-time teachers in government and low-income private schools. They receive training at induction, and are supported with on-going training throughout the two years.

Our fellows and students not only work towards ambitious academic outcomes, they also impact their schools and communities through targeted initiatives. A longitudinal study by Columbia University over a period of 4 years (2012-2016) showed that Teach For India students grew 5 times in English and 2.5 times in Math, as compared to students in non-TFI classrooms. In their second year, fellows undertake a 'Be the Change' project to solve the pressing problems they see in their

The Magic of Pencilbricks

Rehan and Basit are two 9th graders from a Teach For India classroom in Ahmedabad. Four years ago, they started an organization called Pencilbricks with their Fellows that works towards providing quality education to the children of their community. They run 10 mini learning centers through which Teach For India students teach the younger children in the community.



communities. Many of these projects have gone on to become social organizations in the future.

We cultivate life-long leadership: We believe that great teachers do what great leaders do. Our fellows face diverse challenges in their classrooms and communities. Throughout the two years, they are supported with training, a dedicated program manager, and exposure to organizations exploring solutions to problems they see every day. At the end of the two years, the fellows graduate as leaders committed to working relentlessly towards realizing educational equity.

“Objectively, none of this would have been possible without the fellowship. Would I have thought of building a career in the ed-sector (forget actually doing it)? Would I have gotten the opportunity to contribute towards building a solid NGO? Would I have met the people who have inspired me to stick around? No.”

- Tanvi Metre, 2015 Fellow, Senior Manager, iTeach Schools

We help match our alumni across the education sector: Our alumni create impact through positions of leadership and influence, at all levels of the education ecosystem. To enable this, we incubate alumni entrepreneurs, create platforms to foster connection and collaboration, and support growth of alumni-led projects and learning initiatives.

Till date, we have infused the system with 4,200 leaders. These leaders are running their own schools or organizations, designing

policy and training teachers. Many of them continue to serve in classrooms, non-profit organizations and corporate institutions.

Our Innovations

Over the last 10 years, we have launched and sustained three innovations - Firki, TFlx and KER (Kids Education Revolution).

Firki is Teach For India's online teacher education platform, which was envisioned as a way to share best practices in teaching with all teachers in the country, free of cost. The platform offers learning experiences in the form of courses, webinars, learning paths, online learning circles, and curated resources in partnership with several organizations.

Over the last 8 years, Firki has garnered over 120,000+ users. It hosts 250+ courses translated into regional languages, and 2,500+ resources across grades I-XII on topics including science, math, social science, English, computer science, well-being, general pedagogy etc.

TFlx was envisioned as a growth model that will spread our impact beyond urban areas and English medium schools, and reach the vast numbers of marginalized children who are out of school in remote areas of the country. TFlx supports entrepreneurs to build their own fellowships based on the TFI model in their own geographical and social contexts. Today, the program has led to 25 Fellowships

The Anubhuti Fellows' Story

Sakshi Srivastava is a TFlx 2021 entrepreneur who works towards achieving life skills for children from Uttar Pradesh slums. Through a two-year fellowship, they work with fellows to improve student learning outcomes and build leadership skills. Anubhuti fellows are exposed to the ground realities of the education system and work with different stakeholders to drive change at the local and systemic levels. The fellowship has enabled them to reach 25,000 Children.

across states such as Bihar, Assam and Kashmir. Collectively, these Fellowships have brought in 3,800 fellows and are reaching more than 200,000 children.

“Being part of Firki’s Teacher Coach Development program was truly amazing and one of the best learning experiences. I am thankful and grateful to all the individuals over here that helped me to operate with courage, confidence, collaboration and compassion, which in turn supported me to be the best version of myself.”

- Sonali Khanna, Program Manager, TFI

Kids Education Revolution (KER) is the result of the stark realization that an excellent, equitable education for all children cannot happen without students as our partners in this mission. Today, KER functions as a collective of schools and educational organizations working to reimagine education through the approach of love, and the following three principles: Safe spaces for voice; Kids and educators as partners; Kids as change makers.

Every year, KER identifies 100 Students who are running projects for change in their communities and brings them together at a national summit where hundreds of students and educators experience what student voice, partnership and changemaking looks like in action.

Till date, KER has engaged and spread this idea among 80,000 students and educators through conferences, musical productions,

and finding innovations that are reimagining education. In 2021, it was selected as a part of the 100 most impactful innovations in K12 education by global education nonprofit HundrED due to its unique approach and potential to create sustainable impact in education.

Our Future

In the next decade, we have big dreams. Scaling our impact beyond the TFI Fellowship, we plan to launch programs that build more leaders across the system among students, teachers, government officials, volunteers and entrepreneurs, etc.

Our alumni will work in careers across three areas: in transformational schools or direct work with children; in enabling transformational outcomes; in policy and governance for educational equity. We hope that these leaders will take on careers that impact education, bring more people into the movement, and act collectively for educational equity in partnership with TFI.

Our ten-year plan proposes to create 50,000 leaders, and by working collectively with love, transform the lives of 1 in 10 children from low-income families in our regions through an education that unleashes the potential of self, others, and India.

This reflects our belief that every child deserves to live in an India free of poverty and filled with love. The best route to get to this India is through an excellent, equitable education.

What struck me most was the notion that at the heart of revolution, must be love. If we put love at the centre, then we can embrace everything in the right spirit.

- Wendy Kopp, Founder & CEO, Teach For All

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Shaheen Mistri is the founder and CEO of Teach for India, a nonprofit that addresses educational inequity at scale. Shaheen also founded Akanksha Foundation in 1989 and led its operations until 2009.

Manasi Jain works as the Chief of Staff at Teach For India. She is passionate about

collective action and finding solutions to the biggest problems in the social sector.

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Exploring the Self, Serving Communities

The Journey of Gandhi Fellowship

Vivek Sharma in Conversation with the Samuhik Pahal Team

Vivek Sharma is a co-founder of Gandhi Fellowship.

Samuhik Pahal: Please share with us the story of how Gandhi Fellowship began and what it was like in the first few years. What have been the thinking, inspiration and objectives behind the fellowship?

Vivek Sharma: What is interesting is that two great fellowships to emerge from India started at the same time, in the same year – Teach For India Fellowship and Gandhi Fellowship. Both these fellowships have been transformational for India. Fundamentally, we believe that a sector, an industry or a domain grows on the basis of the talent that is available. We believed that the social sector required a new kind of a push, so far as talent was concerned. The pedagogy of classic, old schools of social work needed to change.

“These days in the social sector, community aspirations and our theories of change are not in any degree of synchronization.”

We wanted to create a group of social professionals who have a fundamental orientation of *seva* or service – service of the community. If you have to serve the community, you have to live among the community. Therefore, we thought of embedding Gandhi Fellows in communities.

Government missions, NGOs need talent. So one of our goals was to meet this demand for quality talent. Another objective was to facilitate the creation of new kinds of organizations by social entrepreneurs. Our challenge was attracting the brightest talent for the social sector who would have *seva bhav* and would contribute to the public system’s change - that is in the government sector, besides the social sector, media and academia, and a small proportion going into the corporate world. The hope was that this network of people would, in the future, contribute towards reimagining India.

Therefore, we believed that investing in young people was the key. Gandhi Fellowship was visualized as a self-exploratory journey after which young people would take the decision of deciding what they would want to devote their lives to. Because if you love what you do, you would hammer away, chip away at it, for 365 days a year. If you are chipping away at a problem 365 days a year for ten years, then you would end up making a dent. Therefore, we wanted to create this pause between college and university.

We read the millennials well. We thought young people do not want to lead boring lives; they probably want to take some risks and expect more out of their lives. We read the future in the sense that, young people would not necessarily want to read texts alone, that they would want to do things with their own hands. We worked with this adult learning principle, which we call action-reflection pedagogy.

Samuhik Pahal: How is the fellowship structured? What is the logic behind this structure?

Vivek Sharma: The structure of the fellowship is very simple. We selected our fellows from the Indian higher education system. In the first years, we did not have many people from engineering and sciences backgrounds. So initially, there were some arts people, some law folks, some education guys; but this has changed now. Now we get a good number of fellows from engineering and science backgrounds and a fair number from professional courses.

The four semesters were very simple. We thought if we create these cohorts of five Gandhi Fellows in a small block town, give them laptops and dongles and a scooty and they live in the community, and these five fellows along with the supervisor become a last mile micro team and springboard into the block, can they cause significant influence?

Each fellow used to work with five government school headmasters, almost as executive assistants. That was during 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. The time period from two p.m. to eight p.m. ended up becoming community time around the school. Therefore, that became a personal learning lab for the fellows, wherein they experimented with a whole range of ideas - from menstrual health to science education in the community.

They tried to work with headmasters and teachers from a position of collaboration rather than expertise. These collaborations ranged from sprucing up walls in classrooms and playgrounds to making school assemblies and meetings more effective. These young people ended up facilitating many different types of interventions in the schools in both classrooms and non-classroom contexts in a nonthreatening way. That is how they made a dent.

We were also thinking about how to place rigor at the center. The supervisor was not a

mentor. He just ensured that the fellow did not sham through the 14 hours of the day. What was non-compromisable was sitting for debriefs in the evening. These debriefs became important learning opportunities. These showed fellows from privileged, metropolitan backgrounds, how it is that folks from smaller cities and towns, especially women, became successful at their work with a much more compassionate and nuanced understanding of the state of affairs.

Through these debriefs, the fellows learnt what works, and what does not work. These debriefs happened six days a week. Every six weeks the fellows sat together with the supervisors for 2-3 days over a long weekend and consolidated. People shared work and learnt from each other's initiatives. So that's how the intellectual property, the library of solutions – micro solutions, not grand ones – got created.

“If markets can scale, why can't social processes scale? It is an organization design issue. It is not a pedagogic issue.”

Another important part of this process was that of community immersion – one month of living in the community without a laptop, a mobile phone, even any money. The fellows were inventive. They found homes, did errands, did things useful for the community. They were humble in the community, because they had to figure out food and shelter there.

This process rewired the young person. An upper caste Hindu kid experienced a Muslim woman, because only an elderly Muslim woman was willing to let him inside the house. For the first time, he experienced living in a Muslim household and realized that “They are just like us.”

All these processes - going to the school everyday, going to the community everyday,

and then a mandatory Vipassana course, and forcing silence upon oneself – continued across the four semesters.

There was so much of noise that these young people experienced. Good ideas and inventions are a product of silences. It requires a certain quietude and deep thinking through the microcosm of the problem to figure out solutions.

Therefore, vipassana was just for your own selves' sake, and for the sake of social change as well. It is still an important feature of the fellowship program. Gandhi Fellows do feel that here is a tool, a practice, which is so good, it is gold standard.

We used a whole set of such design elements in the fellowship program. Then fellows had their sandboxes to make their own experiments. We also organized master classes for them. The higher education system is teacher-led and centered around examinations. Here we were firing different neurons.

These days in the social sector, community aspirations and our theories of change are not in any degree of synchronization. Communities have their own *jugaad* solutions. Replicating them is the problem, not invention itself.

Therefore, community orientation was one of the logics of the fellowship's structure. We wanted this community focus to become a paradigm for everyone else – that is, for the government and the market as well.

We were also thinking about facilitating a young person who is 20-25 years old to explore herself and figure out what is it that she is good at. The structure aimed to create rigor excellence models, to create empathy before you started seeking solutions, to first have listening skills, to understand the needs of the communities.

We also wanted the fellows to imbibe a culture of teamwork. In our schools, colleges,

universities and nuclear families, we have all become self-obsessed. However, we need to work in teams to move the mountains.

How do you build teams? How do you learn from the other? How do you build relationships? How do you narrate the problem? How do I get you interested in the project that I am trying to create?

Moreover, you are not a leader in all seasons. Sometimes you are a leader; most times, you are a follower. How do we build rigor into our following? Therefore, the fellowship was structured around these elements.

The total amount of time envisaged was 10,000 hours under supervision and involved building rigor, creating lasting friendships, discussing and learning from people with a diverse set of backgrounds, working together and figuring out something that is bigger than individual possibilities.

Because we were sure that if the orientation was technical, it was not going to solve anything. What is unique about India, what is unique about Mahatma Gandhi, is service leadership. Therefore, the fellowship aimed to foster seva and empathy and tried to discourage any tendencies towards technical solutions.

The buck stopped with the program leaders. The fellows could not be given orders; they had to be inventive. Therefore, the program leaders were constantly listening to the fellows, the program manager was listening to the program leaders, and the program director was listening to the program managers.

As a result, we became a listening organization. This produced an interesting organizational architecture. It is rare that the last mile person is transformational to the organization.

Because the fellow was learning non-violent communication, we were also learning non-violent communication. Because the fellows

were learning to be empathetically listening, we learnt to empathetically listen as well. Listening to the fellows, we realized that so many transformational possibilities exist in our communities.

Samuhik Pahal: What have been the key milestones in the process of growth of the Gandhi Fellowship? What are the key challenges that you have faced in this journey?

Vivek Sharma: The key challenge involved the adults. Adults did not believe that young people could do something useful in the first place. The headmasters did not believe that young people could help them. Education administrators did not believe that 22-year olds could help 55-year olds transform. Parents did not believe that if young people stepped out of the comfort zones of their houses, this would be an appropriate decision for them.

“If you are looking for new ways of engaging with communities, for things to emerge bottom up, for becoming a more compassionate and listening organization...then you stand a chance to run a valid fellowship program.”

Nevertheless, some adults also believed in us. Some parents trusted us. However, the challenge was that parents fought us. They fought their children as well. We lost a lot of beautiful talent as a result.

There was the young woman from rural Rajasthan who thought joining this fellowship would help her fight the patriarchy she was experiencing. She felt this experience would be extremely useful for her. Her professors supported her, but her parents did not.

Once the headmasters found that here was this nonthreatening person helping her find her own meaning, learning, joy, pride, then it became a game changer. Then our fellows were going to the houses of these headmasters and teachers. They were feted by the sarpanchs.

These were good hearts, putting in their rigour and toil creating small artefacts in the community, with the community, for the community. So that challenge of adults not believing in us was short lived.

Samuhik Pahal: Has the design of the fellowship changed over the years? If yes, then in what ways and what has informed this evolution?

Vivek Sharma: Initially the fellows worked with the headmasters. Later the fellows started working at the district level, with DEOs, with DMs, with Collectors – helping them bring convergence around education. It became a district level fellowship. Later it even became a state level fellowship.

The fellows support the government design their organizations and help them with learning, development and technology; basically assisting the government in building the wireframes of a design. So that is what the fellowship has morphed into, working more at the district and state levels. This change happened when six to seven years ago we launched our district level program and four years ago when we started our state level interventions.

The fundamental features of community engagement and having one's own personal project and vipassana etc. have not changed. However, the school visit is not available to the fellow who is working at the state level. The fellow working at the district level goes to the schools, but not as actively as she is engaged with the district administration.

The design of the processes and the functionalities have changed. Nevertheless, the underlying principles are similar. We try to

create competencies like the older ones, but using the district toolkit.

At the district level the fellows are organizing district PMUs, ensuring that the district administration listens to the headmasters, etc. We became a listening organization and now we are trying to ensure the creation of listening organizations within the educational administration and the state-government level bodies.

The first seven years involved deep headmaster level work. The headmasters could not succeed if the district administration was not compassionate and functional. So building that organizational capacity is a task at the district level. Similarly, the state also needs to support the districts. Therefore, you have to do a host of things at the state and district levels.

The headmaster level fellowship is now confined to territories where we are doing deep school-based work. Before we can advocate for whole child development models at the state or district levels, we ourselves need to be convinced about what works and what does not. For that, we have a school level fellowship program. It is the size of the old fellowship. Those numbers have not increased. The expansion has been at the district and the state levels.

Samuhik Pahal: In retrospect what were the things that you would do differently, when you look back at any stage of the fellowship's journey?

Vivek Sharma: We could have launched the district and state level programs earlier. Organizationally we were experimenting as well. It took us some time to move from that organic model. Introducing seva bhav as a concept, as a central theme, early on in the first semester, as a part of the induction, could have been done better.

When you are driving rigor, often there are discipline issues with young people. It took us a while to figure out the ideal mix for the

program. I think we could have been far more efficient in issuing yellow cards.

Samuhik Pahal: How do you think non-profits in India, especially those working in education, can use fellowships as an intervention tool in furthering desirable social change? What are some of the key mistakes to avoid and important markers to keep in mind?

Vivek Sharma: The statutory warning is that nonprofits should not launch fellowship programs unless they are in love with young people. Nonprofits are very focused on the change that they are trying to make. Moreover, nonprofits sometimes believe that a fellow equals to cheap labour. Which is not true.

Therefore, I always tell my friends who have launched fellowship programs or want to launch fellowship programs, and heads of NGOs, that fundamentally young people are disruptive. You have developed a theory of change. If you need to distribute that theory of change, why do you need a fellowship program? You need a staff. Moreover, if you think fellows are a cheap staff, that is an incorrect hypothesis.

“The statutory warning is that nonprofits should not launch fellowship programs unless they are in love with young people.”

If you are looking for new ways of engaging with communities, for things to emerge bottom up, for becoming a more compassionate and listening organization, looking for error margins – and error margins can be from 10% to 100% - then you stand a chance to run a valid fellowship program.

Samuhik Pahal: In periods of expansion, things tend to come into sharp focus. So if you could please reflect a little more on Gandhi Fellowship's expansion process ?

Vivek Sharma: The expansion phase is past us now. We expanded in a particular era. The first three batches were all of fifty. When the fourth batch was starting, all the adults in our life told us, “Look! You guys have created a human lab. It is not scalable.”

We thought that if it cannot be scaled, then what is the point of creating a boutique program? We did not want to create an elegant program for 30-40 people.

We wanted to create a program where the adult was not required for learning. In India, where would you get good teachers? In India we do not even have teachers, forget about good teachers. However, can adults learn on their own? Yes, adults can learn on their own. That is the possibility we created with the Gandhi Fellowship Program. The first scale up was the fourth batch, which was 110 people or so. We said we will scale up and if it were not possible, then we would probably not pursue it.

In the early batches, we were personally involved. Now we are hardly involved in running the fellowship program. I do not even get to see the fellows.

We have been able to simplify processes. The program leaders and the program managers are able to run the fellowship program. The senior staff stopped running the fellowship 7/8 years ago. It is the younger people and ex-fellows who are running the fellowship now.

Today the issue for me is not of scale anymore. That question has been answered. Young people will learn if you create the right ecosystem for them. That ecosystem is a little bit of a bubble. Inside that bubble, it is for them to explore their selves, to explore social issues and universal concerns that are connected to the self and the social issues...

My sense is, that is a scalable model. That can be done on scale. Human processes are scalable. Quality education is scalable. We are headed there, so far as state level processes are concerned. The district program has stabilized. Different programs are going through different life cycles, so is the fellowship as a whole.

If markets can scale, why can't social processes scale? It is an organization design issue. It is not a pedagogic issue.



The Learning Journeys of Fellowships

Aastha Maggu

“**W**hy do nonprofits choose a fellowship model?”

“How do nonprofits develop fellowship models that are suited for their context?”

“How do nonprofits make fellowship a meaningful learning experience for an individual?”

In the last decade, there has been a surge in fellowships launched by nonprofits. In this piece, we speak with four organizations working in varied contexts to understand their rationale and approach to designing and implementing fellowship programs.

Universe Simplified Foundation

Universe Simplified Foundation (USF) is a nonprofit working to make inquiry-driven, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) education accessible to all. The team envisions creating a world where hands-on, inquiry-driven STEM education empowers students and communities to find innovative solutions to real-life challenges. USF is working in the outskirts of Mumbai, in villages along the Kalyan-Murbad road. The parents of most of the students are farmers. About twenty percent of the children belong to Adivasi communities and their parents are daily wage labourers.

In 2017, the Teach For India team piloted the yearlong TFlx incubation program where they partnered with eight entrepreneurs from across the country, supporting them to adopt Teach For India’s Fellowship Model and launch contextual teaching fellowships in their own geographical and social contexts. With the support of TFlx, USF began its



Universe Simplified Foundation

journey of developing a STEM fellowship in 2018.

Henna from USF shared, “With the help of the TFlx team, we got access to resources such as courses, webinars, etc. and networks that helped us design our fellowship model. Peer learning sessions and mentoring from domain experts were also an integral part of the fellowship. As an alum, you can reach out to the TFlx team and network for support. For instance, I was speaking to the team recently and they shared some helpful resources. The team is also helping us secure funding for running the fellowship. Their support has been integral in the fellowship design.”

The USF team hosted two fellows in the inaugural cohort. In 2020, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent

travel restrictions, it got difficult to host fellows from other parts of the country. The team pivoted to hosting local youth for the STEM fellowship. Henna shared that the involvement of local youth deepened USF's community ties.

Through the STEM fellowship, USF envisions to capacitate young educators with the skills and knowledge required to drive inquiry-driven STEM learning. The team wishes to create a holistic thriving ecosystem for STEM in rural areas. They chose to not limit themselves to working with children and through this fellowship expanded to involve the village youth.

She added, "Since the youth hail from the communities, they were aware of the context and the needs of their children. The fellows knew that the learning of children during the pandemic had stalled, and it was heartening to see them speaking with parents and encouraging them to support their children with their lessons."

The USF team had hosted interns before, and they found the freshness in the perspectives of the fellows to be valuable. The team is open to having fellows join the organization as employees.

Henna shared, "Since we operate in rural areas, we find it challenging to recruit people. Another advantage that we initially had not imagined was that the fellowship allows us to

prepare a pool of prospective employees who understand our program and are attuned to the culture of the organization. We want the fellows to become STEM educators. We are also happy to offer opportunities to fellows that help them grow within the organization. Sujata, one of our fellows has a remarkably high sense of ownership. In the second year of her fellowship, we are giving her additional responsibilities. We want her to join our team after the fellowship ends."

The two-year fellowship program has a hands-on inquiry-driven approach. With each project that is introduced, the fellows are never given a set of instructions. They are encouraged to figure it out and design it themselves. For instance, if a [balloon car project](#) is being introduced then the fellows will design it independently. After a few days of designing projects, the team starts discussing if the fellows were to take this project to a child, how they will plan it.

The fellows come up with session plans where they are made to think of examples to explain concepts. Each fellow is required to conduct mock facilitations for varied projects. Other fellows engage as any child would do in the session and share feedback with the facilitator. When the fellows start taking lessons, they get support for each session from the USF team where the team continuously shares their observations and feedback.

The USF team is hopeful that local STEM educators will be able to facilitate an ecosystem where communities can leverage inquiry-driven learning to solve problems.

Recognize Rise and Empower Association (RREA)

RREA is based in Kamjong district, Manipur. The organization strives to provide opportunities to learn inside and outside the classroom for children from at-risk communities in and around the troubled peripheries for North East India. It runs programs on early literacy and numeracy,



Universe Simplified Foundation

and sports, which strengthens the overall development of students in three schools in Kamjong.

In 2018, the team launched the RREA Fellowship, a six-month pilot fellowship program where two volunteers were inducted. The team identified Kamjong High School for intervention. Mathanmi Hungyo, founder of RREA shared that in the school, the RREA team with the volunteers started taking classes in Math, Science and Languages and bridge remedial classes for children enrolled there. Bridge remedial classes were conducted to bring the students to grade appropriate learning levels. After six months, they sat for the board examinations. It was the first time in the history of the school that a student got more than eighty marks in math. Most of the other students secured good marks as well.

Mathanmi added, “Before the pilot, parents and teachers were of the opinion that the students are not serious and are not performing well. In the six-month pilot program, we got evidence of what was possible. We saw a huge shift in the mindset of the community and the teachers. They understood that our children are not at fault, but that they have not been provided with the right set of opportunities.”

In 2019, the team reached out to TFlx and it helped RREA revamp the earlier fellowship. With a vision of every child in the region one day having access to quality education, RREA launched ‘Teach for North-East’ in 2020. Rohit Agarwal from the RREA team shared, “The earlier launched RREA Fellowship was born out of the immediate need to provide remedial bridge support to students in science and math. There was not any rigorous program design for the fellowship in place. The year-long TFlx incubation program helped us in developing a structured program design and a monitoring and evaluation framework for launching the Teach For North-East fellowship program in 2020.”

Through the two-year Teach for North-East fellowship program, the RREA team, with committed and passionate young people, plans to work towards transforming under-resourced government schools. The fellows, in the two years, are made to develop an understanding of the ground realities of the education system in the North-East and they work towards improving the learning outcomes of students.

In the two-year teaching fellowship, the fellows work in under-resourced government schools with school headmasters, students, full-time teachers, and with the community. The fellowship begins in June wherein during the orientation the fellows are trained to become reflective practitioners. They learn lesson planning, executing these, and using social emotional learning tools to connect better with children and their parents. In the first year, a retreat is also organized where all the fellows share their learnings and experiences, and resource people are brought in to augment learning.

The fellowship runs only in government schools in Kamjong district, Manipur. The fellowship began during the pandemic. It was difficult to get people from outside the state. Currently, for each cohort, the team is open to having 50% of the fellows from the state and 50% of the fellows from outside.

The second year focuses on preparing fellows for opportunities after the fellowship. The fellows are encouraged to look for internships during the month-long summer break where they can get involved with organizations working on development issues in Manipur. The RREA team is trying to search and streamline post-fellowship opportunities.

Mathanmi shared, “It made us happy that four fellows from the first graduating cohort were recruited by System Transformation and Revitalizing (STAR) Education. This is the flagship program of the Government of Manipur to transform the education system of the state by transforming physical

infrastructure, excellence in teaching and ensuring strong learning outcomes for children. The candidates applying for the roles are required to have formal training in education. However, they made an exception for our fellows. These fellows will now work with the government and create impact on a bigger scale. I am sure more such opportunities will emerge for them.”

Mathanmi shared that the team does not want a parallel system running with government schools. They do actively think about making schools sustainable in their functioning, and phasing out the involvement of Teach for North-East fellows from the schools.

Sanjhi Sikhiya

Set up in 2018, Sanjhi Sikhiya has set out on the path of bringing systemic reforms in the public education system of Punjab. It presently operates in Patiala, Ropar and Fatehgarh Sahib where the team implements the Cluster Transformation Program (CTP) through its flagship Punjab Youth Leaders Program (PYLP).

The team believes that to make the public education system a top priority for all stakeholders, they need many more advocates and champions. This led to the inception of PYLP, a two-year-long fellowship program that inducts individuals with societal concerns and passion for working with underserved communities, who are eager to learn about the education system, and develop leadership capacities.

Ishpreet Kaur, founding team member of Sanjhi Sikhiya shared, “We call each fellow a young leader because we believe that the state of Punjab needs the youth to solve complex problems, such as lack of employment opportunities, high migration, poor education levels, drug abuse, etc. we are mired in. We have designed the program to develop leadership capabilities of young individuals and provide them access to

networks and resources so that they can effectively contribute to the progress of the state and the country. In the recently held Punjab state elections, two of the fellows from earlier cohorts worked with the teams of candidates contesting elections. We want these two years to help the youth to reconnect and solve the problems that plague our state.”

At the beginning of the fellowship journey, Sanjhi Sikhiya conducts a four-week long orientation where the fellows, through discussions and field visits, are made to understand the context, policies and relevant institutions in the education ecosystem.

The team facilitates theatre workshops that help the fellows express themselves better. Simultaneously, the Young Leaders learn about the cluster transformation model and visit their own clusters to get familiar with the community.

Under the Cluster Transformation Program, each fellow works intensively in one cluster, i.e., with 9-10 schools. The fellows get an opportunity to work with the Department of Education and other stakeholders in the primary schools – teachers, school administration, school leadership at the block, cluster, district and state levels, and community members.

Ishpreet shared that the fellows focus on enhancing the knowledge, mindset and competencies of stakeholders across the ecosystem. For instance, the fellows help the cluster head teachers with facilitating monthly meetings to discuss academic issues, strategies for better school performance, etc.

As the fellows start working with the stakeholders, the Sanjhi Sikhiya team remains connected with fellows through weekly in-person reflection meetings, check-ins, etc. There are workshops and learning sessions frequently organized with resource persons from their network. At the end of

the first year, the fellows are also given the opportunity to intern in an organization outside of PYLP.

The fellows are encouraged to choose an organization that is not restricted to the education ecosystem. For instance, in the past, fellows have interned with organizations such as [Delhi Commission for Women](#), [Itisaras](#), and [Chalo Chalein](#), among others that work in the domains of safeguarding women's rights and historical and architectural heritage perseverance etc.

The alumni have found meaningful roles with Slam out Loud, Mantra4Change, Haryana Chief Minister's Good Governance Program, Language and Learning Foundation etc. Two fellows from the inaugural cohort are now part of the Sanjhi Sikhiya team.

Ishpreet added that the team is consolidating its learnings from the past cohorts and is focusing on building strong alumni engagement processes.

Aavishkaar

Aavishkaar is based out of Palampur, Himachal Pradesh and the team strongly believes that a hands-on experiential mathematics and science program is important. The unique and innovative modules used by them help children to truly engage with these subjects.

The Aavishkaar team had previously interacted with a few Teach for India fellows and were impressed how young minds with new ideas and passion are working to eliminate educational inequities across the country. The team felt that to address the lack of good STEM educators, young minds must be capacitated with relevant knowledge, skills and mindsets.

In 2017, under the TFlx incubation program, Aavishkaar started its journey of designing and launching a contextual Teaching Fellowship. The Aavishkaar team inducted the first cohort in 2018.

The Aavishkaar STEM Fellowship is a two-year program created for motivated scholars who aim to create a change in the science and math education landscape. The fellows are encouraged to learn and use hands-on experiential ways to make math and science a visual and non-abstract process.

In the first year, the fellows are expected to become comfortable in engaging with all stakeholders, and gain proficiency in making lesson plans and teaching children with experiential learning methods.

Sandhya Gupta, founder of Aavishkaar shared, "In the first year of the STEM fellowship, the fellows start taking lessons in nearby primary and middle government schools. They get an opportunity to understand the context of government school systems in the Kangra district by engaging with key stakeholders – students, parents, teachers, principals and the government administration. The Aavishkaar team also involves the fellows in creating and delivering residential and online sessions to students, teachers and educators."

Sandhya shared that recently a team member had gone to Assam to conduct training for government school teachers. The team felt that a STEM fellow could lead that training session and they encouraged them to do so.

Sandhya added, "We wish to create opportunities for our fellows that give them



Aavishkaar



Aavishkaar

hands-on experience in teaching children and training educators.”

Babli is part of the Aavishkaar team. She graduated from the STEM Fellowship and now manages the Aarohan Fellowship Program. As a part of the Aarohan process, young women from rural India are prepared to become mathematics educators in a year-long residential training program. Babli recounted her STEM fellowship experience and shared that she was impressed with Aavishkaar’s experiential approach. The first time she saw Sandhya conducting a class for students in a nearby government school, and explaining multiplication through a story of goats, was when she realized that teaching these subjects could be joyful. She soon embarked on the two years long journey of the fellowship.

In the second year, the fellows learn about the work of a different organization of their liking. This exposure helps the fellows expand their knowledge and skills in this space. The fellows are expected to interact with the organization’s members to understand their approaches and methods and they share their learnings with their peers.

Some of the graduating fellows are pursuing higher education. A few others have opted for roles with organizations such as Mantra4Change, UpGrad, among others.

Sandhya shared that the fellowship gives young educators the chance to understand the extreme disparity that exists in STEM education. It also provides learning opportunities in communities that have not been able to access quality education.

In Conclusion

These fellowships give youth an opportunity to make a foray into the education ecosystem. The fellows get to explore different roles as educators and facilitators. Non-profits are keen on making these journeys a meaningful learning experience. Fellowships could pave the future of learning and development.

You can reach out to the organizations featured in the story at: info@universesimplified.org (Universe Simplified Foundation), rroe4438@gmail.com (Recognise, Rise and Empower Association - RREA), team@sanjhisikhiya.org (Sanjhi Sikhiya), and info@aavishkaar.palampur.org (Aavishkaar).



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