Towards School Improvement

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Journeys of School Improvement

Sujatha Rao

After the Union Cabinet of India approved the National Education Policy (2020), a key announcement was made. A new National Assessment Centre 'PARAKH' would be established as a standard setting body for all recognized school boards in India. 'PARAKH' which stands for Performance, Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development will set the standards for the 60+ examination boards in the country. The Union Cabinet also approved a World Bank aided scheme called STARS (Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States) to help set up this assessment centre and to pilot this scheme in the learning and assessment space in six states in India. The aim of this project is to move school boards away from high-stakes examinations towards more holistic assessment of students as well as of schools themselves.

The setting up of a National Assessment Centre for assessing the performance of schools and students signals the intent of education policy makers in India to seek more accountability from schools and their governing institutions for student learning outcomes and student development. A key statement from the NEP (2020) reads "educational outcomes and the transparent disclosure of all financial, academic, and operational matters will be given due importance and will be incorporated suitably in the assessment of schools."

The focus on assessing and evaluating schools to help them move towards 'standards of performance' has been an integral part of the school effectiveness and school improvement movements around the world. Many countries have adopted the 'standards-based assessment' approach.

At the same time, other countries have moved away from such an approach and focused instead on completely decentralized and localized education with tremendous autonomy provided to schools and teachers.

These very different country level responses provide a glimpse of the contentious history of school improvement and the various attempts made to enable schools to provide meaningful education for all children. In this article, I will attempt to provide a short 'moving picture' view of this journey and look at the current scenario of school improvement in India.

How Can Schools Become Better? Perspectives of Different Stakeholders

The journey of school improvement really starts with the question – how can schools become better? But that leads to the question – better at what? To answer the 'what' question, one must step back and look at how different stakeholders perceive the value of education for children and their beliefs around how and where children are to receive such an education.

The belief that schools are the spaces where children are educated has now been institutionalized. Implicitly we understand that learning happens all the time, and through different experiences in homes, families, society, etc. There are worldwide trends such as unschooling and home schooling on the rise as well. Nevertheless, the focus of attention on educational systems still remains on schools as the place where children are educated.

So, this then leads to the other question – what is a good education that can be imparted in schools? For educationists, the

question is deeply and inextricably connected to the question of "What is the purpose of education itself?" To become rational, empathetichuman beings with critical reasoning skills is one such perspective. Parents often see 'good' education as instrumental in the development of children as economic citizens who will build good careers and lives. For governments, it has often been individuals contributing to society productively and so on. So, the purpose of education itself is contested, making it difficult to standardize the definition of what it means to be running a 'good' school that delivers 'good education' and how schools can get better at providing such a quality education. These contestations are revealed when one looks at the history of school improvement.

Historically, two main approaches began to define the understanding around how schools can become better. The first approach has focused on understanding what do schools really look like in their daily operations, a snapshot of what schools actually do. The second approach has focused on how schools develop and improve over time towards some institutionally and normatively established goals and criteria.

The first approach, and the research and literature around it, have come to be known as 'school effectiveness research'. It is like taking a picture of a school and comparing that with pictures of other schools, with the aim of identifying what effective or good schools do differently as compared to poor or failing schools. The second approach has come to be known as 'school improvement practice'. This is like telling stories about development and change that can happen within a school (Reynolds, Bolan and others, 1996 and 2005).

Both approaches have significantly influenced interventions and change processes in schools around the world, and both have different underlying beliefs.

Researchers exploring school effectiveness, work with the belief that schools are complex entities that deal with a lot of complexity. Therefore, there is uncertainty about what are factors that indicate 'good' schools, what factors can be compared between schools and how cause and effects can be examined. Because of these uncertainties, the knowledge base around school effectiveness is built around facts and figures derived from a substantial number of school studies and relies significantly on quantitative research and approaches.

What the history of school improvement tells us is that this is a complex journey, and it requires trust in the people tasked with bringing about changes in school.

School improvement approaches and studies have explored schools from the perspective of identifying what and how systematic and sustained efforts can be made inside a school that can change the learning conditions and other internal conditions in that school to accomplish established educational goals more effectively. There is, therefore, a common sense understanding of the words 'school improvement' which relates to general efforts that are made to make schools better places for students to learn. The more technical sense of 'school improvement' is the strategy that schools adopt for educational change that "enhances student outcomes as well as strengthens the school's capacity for managing change" (Hopkins, 2001, page 13).

It is interesting to look back and trace the patterns of how research and work in both these spaces began. As with any large socio-cultural-political institution, the school system has been deeply influenced by broader socio-economic and political contexts of different countries at different

points of time. In addition, beliefs about the aims of education and schooling, ideas of schooling as public vs private goods, assumptions about schools as organizations, their goals and processes, prevailing approaches and preferences in terms of change strategies, and empirical evidence built from both studies on school effectiveness and improvement, have all influenced the broader movements of school improvement and effectiveness.

Consistently, studies on school improvement indicate that change and improvement in schools and school systems are more successful when the change is owned by the school rather than imposed from outside. Some key assumptions that have driven countries to adapt this as their key change strategy are that schools have the capacity to improve themselves, school improvement involves cultural changes that need all members of the school to own the process of change, there are system level, community level, school level and classroom level conditions for change all of which need to be supported, and that fundamentally school improvement is concerned with building greater capacity for change within the school itself.

School improvement journeys, approaches, models, frameworks across countries reveal deeply rooted belief systems about not only education but also beliefs about people and cultures.

Research studies have also suggested some key factors that prevent school improvement from taking place. These include schools having unclear purposes and goals about the change initiative and rationale (they are unclear what they need to do and

why), schools facing competing priorities (key stakeholders demanding different accountabilities, lack of resources, etc.), a lack of support from key stakeholders within and outside the school, insufficient attention paid to implementation, inadequate leadership and the change initiative being piece-meal and not holistic.

School Improvement in India

In India, apart from small pockets of innovation and experiments with alternative education, school improvement has worked within centralized governance mechanisms, mostly mechanistic reforms. From the perspective of alternative education, how schools should be organized, run and improved have been intimately connected with the philosophy of education advocated by particular educationists. For instance, Nai Talim schools organize curriculum, teacher development and school governance around Gandhi's principles of 'head, heart and hand' (Sinha, 2015).

A Nai Talim school operates quite differently from a school anchored around J Krishnamurthy's idea of education. The Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources (RIVER) offers teacher training programs and resources and curricular support which is uniquely linked to the Rishi Valley school's philosophy of how students enquire into the nature of truth. Similarly, Montessori schools operate within the overarching philosophy of learning advocated by Maria Montessori. So, while alternative schools broadly advocate that schools operate differently from 'mainstream' schools, the nature of how they operate and what they are expected to do, differ within the alternative school system itself.

In the absence, therefore, of a common mandate and direction of change, school improvement initiatives in India have predominantly been seen as an exercise in standardization of school operations. Most

The Global Context of School Improvement

Before examining school improvement interventions and strategies in India, it is useful to look at some of the more significant pieces of research that influenced this process in other parts of the world. One of the first and perhaps most significant reports about schools and their performance was the 'Equality of Educational Opportunity' report, more commonly known as the Coleman Report (1966), that came out in the United States of America (USA).

This was one of the first large scale studies that asked questions about learning outcomes and what influenced a child's capacity to learn, including the role of teachers, peers, and families. This report indicated that a student's family background and the socio-economic mix of classrooms were the biggest determinants of how a child would perform in school. The report coined the term 'achievement-gap' to show that African American children where several grades below their white counterparts in the same school. The idea that the social capital of a child had more influence than schools was met with increasing resistance by governments who began investing more money into research on schools and how schools could be made more effective (predominantly focused on reducing the achievement-gap).

Another influential study at that time in the USA was one by Ronald Edmonds, who was seen as a pioneer of the school effectiveness movement. Edmonds identified and studied schools in very poor districts who were performing better than schools functioning in similar contexts. These were called outlier schools. Edmonds came up with five characteristics of effective schools (1979) and these characteristics of 'good or effective' schools significantly influenced the criteria on which schools would begin to be assessed in the coming years. It is worth looking at these characteristics because we find evidence of these characteristics in almost all school standards and evaluation frameworks around the world, including in India.

The first was the leadership of the principal, in particular the principal's focus on what was going on in classrooms (instructional leadership). The second characteristic of these outlier schools was that they had a lot of focus on learning and establishing clear curricular outcomes. As a third quality, these schools provided an orderly and safe climate conducive to teaching and learning. Fourthly, these schools had high expectations of every student; every child was expected to succeed. And finally, measures of pupil achievement were the basis for evaluation (planned achievement levels).

This was a fairly simple five-point check list for an effective school. This model was increasingly adapted into policies, practices, and research not just in the USA but in policies around many western countries. And ideas of effective school characteristics began to influence how governments assessed schools for funding and resources, how teachers were trained, and how teacher training curriculums were designed. Governments in many parts of the western world were also influenced politically by the philosophy of New Public Management (NPM).

Funding was linked to outcomes and evidence that the services being provided to the public were of value. This approach began to influence funding of schools. The better that schools could provide evidence that they were adding value to children's learning, the more the schools would get rewarded. This resulted in a school improvement effort broadly called the 'restructuring schools' movement.

The 'restructuring schools' movement happened in two waves. The first wave was top-down and centralized, and standards and outcomes led. Here, governments prescribed standardized curriculum, accountability of schools were measured through standards, teacher standards were established, and teacher training institutes were established with standardized curriculum.

As ideas of decentralization and localized governance began to be more widely accepted in the space of public policy and governance, western countries began to exercise

centralized control while decentralizing responsibility for implementing changes and improvements in their school systems. Government institutions were established to regulate curriculum, inspect schools and establish tighter controls on teaching. Sanctions were imposed and targets set for schools to improve across specific areas. Chief amongst these, were schools being assessed on student performance on standardized curriculum.

School improvement interventions began to take the shape of assessment led reforms, where schools were increasingly asked to look for data on student learning (using standardized tests); standardization of teacher professional development was seen as a key area of focus within school systems, governments encouraged public-private partnerships for setting up schools and in supporting school improvement efforts. As schools began to be asked to demonstrate achievements against standards, schools demanded greater decentralization in decision making and being allowed to make decisions on teacher recruitment, classroom management and resources at the level of individual schools.

This decentralization of improvement efforts led to several grounded school improvement research taking place. Interesting models of school improvement began to emerge. Two broad approaches of school improvement emerged in the 1990s.

One approach may be classified as 'organic,' which suggests that schools are given broad principles or general strategies of school improvement within which they are allowed to experiment and flourish. The second approach may be categorized as more 'mechanistic' wherein schools are provided direct guidelines and very specific strategies prescribed for their improvement – on which they are evaluated.

Some of the examples of the 'organic' approach to change include the International School Improvement Project (14 countries, 4 years, OECD, School as the centre for change), projects with particular philosophies (e.g., the Small-Schools movement), improving quality of education for all (e.g., building collaborative cultures in schools), partnership models (e.g. Schools that make a difference). Examples of the 'mechanistic' approach to school improvement include Slavin's (2005) 'Success for all', 'Sand, Brick and Seed', Joyce and Weil (2003) 'Models of Teaching' and 'High Reliability Schools' project (conformity between schools).

As research on school improvement began to provide more data on schools and various approaches to change, a few common features began to be noticed in these studies. By the 2000s, common characteristics of effective school improvement began to be advocated.

Key amongst these were change processes or school improvement methods that: Focused closely on classroom improvement; Had pedagogic strategies that were explicit in describing the models of teaching that they prescribed; Applied pressure at the implementation stage to ensure adherence to the program; Collected systematic evaluative evidence about the impact upon schools and classrooms; Mobilized change at a number of levels – classroom, teacher, parent, community and governance; Generated cultural as well as structural change within schools; Engaged teachers in professional development and dialogue.

More clarity also emerged on the need for 'whole school improvement' where all aspects of the school were seen as influencing student learning. This included clarity on the vision of the school, its culture, the role that parents played in the school, teacher autonomy and expertise, student agency, specific pedagogic tools and methods of learning, and continuous formative assessment of students. The role of school leaders in maintaining a culture of learning in the school and building professional learning communities for teachers in and across schools were seen as important aspects of school improvement.

school improvement initiatives have taken on a program-like approach with central and state governments providing funding for schemes such as teacher professional development, standardized teacher training programs, standardized curriculum, standardized pedagogic methods, etc.

The last two decades have also seen an increase in public-private partnerships in school improvement projects. These include private and non-governmental organizations participating in teacher professional development, institutional capacity building of state institutes, remedial teaching, provision of teaching and learning resources, infrastructural resources and school level improvement projects such as setting up libraries, infrastructural improvements, activity-based teaching in the classroom etc.

The NEP (2020) signals a subtle shift in the school improvement strategy for the public school system. It talks about a 'tight but light' regulatory and assessment mechanisms for educational institutions with key assessment bodies (like PARAKH) establishing quality assessment frameworks for schools to use as their improvement journey map.

The focus on assessing and evaluating schools to help them move towards 'standards of performance' has been an integral part of the school effectiveness and school improvement movements around the world.

In India, assessment led reforms have become increasingly important as part of the State agenda for school improvement. For example, the School Quality Assessment and Assurance (SQAA) framework for CBSE schools provides a model for CBSE schools

to assess themselves against eight domains of focus areas and four levels of school performance. The four levels are: inceptive (starting), transient (early corrective), stable (most processes in place), dynamic-evolving (strong performance on bench-marked standards).

The eight domain of focus include the following. Scholastic processes that include curriculum planning, teacher learning processes, student performance, assessment of learning outcomes and feedback and other sub domains. Co-scholastic processes including mainstreaming co-curricular activities, art education, skill education etc. Infrastructural aspects that involve adequacy, functionality, aesthetics and safety of infrastructure in schools. Human resources invoving staff, teachers, non-teaching staff, recruitment, selection, training etc. Inclusive practices in schools, management and governance (including record keeping), leadership, and beneficiary satisfaction (i.e., satisfaction of all stakeholders in schools) are the other domains of focus.

Similar to the SQAA framework, is Shala Siddhi (which is part of the National Program on School Standards and Evaluation – NPSSE) which consists of seven domains: Enabling resources of schools, Teaching-learning and assessment, Learners' progress attainment, Managing teacher performance, School leadership and management, Inclusion, health and safety, and Productive community participation. These domains suggest both inputs that schools must work towards as well as outcomes that indicate their progression through stages of improvement.

Frameworks like these suggest focal areas for schools to target and move in a stage-wise manner towards better functioning and improvement. Within the NEP (202), this is an indication that while there will be standards that will be used to evaluate schools, there will also be some choice provided to schools

to localize their change initiative to suit the context in which they work, and to move towards bettering their performance in stages.

School Improvement in India From an International Perspective

India's current school improvement approach is reasonably aligned with the route taken by countries like the USA and the UK. However, a very different approach has been used for decades by Nordic countries such as Finland. There is a foundational difference between the two approaches. In the United States, education is mostly viewed as a private effort leading to individual good. The performances of individual students, teachers and schools are therefore at the center of the school improvement approaches. In contrast to that, in Finland, education is viewed primarily as a public effort serving a public purpose.

Consequently, education reforms and improvement efforts in Finland are judged more in terms of how equitable the system is for different learners. When school improvement efforts have been driven by the idea of 'excellence', countries focus extensively on standardized testing and assessment guidelines. In contrast, when school improvement efforts are driven by the need to capacitate schools to cope with individual differences and social inequality, then the focus of school improvement is not on standardization but in enabling agency and choice oregarding what and how to teach with the schools themselves. In Finland, the school is the main authority of curricula. And the teacher is the sole authority monitoring the progress of students. There is no external inspection of schools or standardized testing of all pupils in Finland. For national analysis of educational performance, Finland relies on testing only a small sample of students (Sahlberg, 2011).

School improvement, therefore, becomes an exercise in equitable educational experience in Finland and not standardized educational experience. Improvement efforts consistently focus on teacher professional development, and in teacher education programs where teachers are capacitated to design their own curricula, assess their pupils' progress, and continuously improve their own teaching and that of the overall teaching-learning processes in their school. Further, all children in Finland have, by law, access to childcare, comprehensive health care, and pre-school facilities in their own communities. Every school must have a welfare team to advance child happiness in school.

The journey of school improvement really starts with the question – how can schools become better? But that leads to the question – better at what?

The current, broader school improvement approach in India sits quite comfortably with the 'excellence' approach advocated and implemented in countries like the USA. However, the diversity of the socio-cultural-economic and political milieu of India suggest that, at the policy level at least, there are spaces for contextualizing the school improvement approach to the specific needs of communities and stakeholders. However, the administrative system in India is deeply bureaucratic and runs on a command-and-control model. Therefore, a standards-based assessment approach to improvement, where schools are given frameworks like Shaala Siddhi or SQAA will most likely lead to schools only responding to the requirements of the frameworks and their reporting requirements.

This more mechanistic approach to school improvement may drown out contextual and innovative improvement approaches that the

NEP (2020) suggests should be encouraged. In the past, school improvement efforts have been largely programmatic with funds coming in from Central and State schemes. This has acclimatized schools to report on improvement 'projects' rather than see school improvement as "a strategy that schools adopt for educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthens the school's capacity for managing change" (Hopkins, 1996).

It is unclear how the new National Assessment Center 'PARAKH' will implement the 'tight but light' model of schools evaluating themselves for improvement. Further the STARS scheme being set up in a few select states, is also in a programmatic mode. This may strengthen the movement of schools towards some standards-based school improvement projects.

School improvement journeys, approaches, models and frameworks across countries reveal deeply rooted belief systems about not only education but also beliefs about people and cultures. In highly bureaucratic societies like India, where there is little trust in teachers or schools to carry out their responsibilities, centralized projects of school improvements tend to become the dominant change management approach and become institutionalized. We have not had a lot of success in centralized school improvement approaches in India in the past.

In Conclusion

However, the hope of school improvement in India today is that there is a wealth of knowledge, research, and data on what works and what does not. For instance, the role of distributed leadership in schools, where teachers have the agency to respond to the needs of students and stakeholders in schools and where school principals understand positive school cultures, have consistently been proven to aid in successful school transformations. Accessing these bodies of knowledge can greatly aid in successful school improvement journeys in India.

Another space for hope and innovation lies in a structural change that the NEP suggests – that of establishing a unit called the 'school complex' consisting of one secondary school with primary schools and Anganwadis in a neighbourhood who will share resources and provide improved support for teachers and students across the complex. The NEP suggests that such school complexes/clusters be given significant autonomy by the Directorate of School Education to innovate and experiment with pedagogies and curriculum etc. (while adhering to the National Curricular Framework and State Curricular Frameworks). These could provide opportunities for clusters to experiment with innovative school improvement models and frameworks.

What the history of school improvement tells us is that this is a complex journey, and it requires trust in the people tasked with bringing about changes in schools. There is no silver bullet to this change process. It requires an understanding of the purpose of education, and spaces to innovate and collaborate with multiple stakeholders. School improvement must keep the welfare of children and teachers at the heart of the change process. This takes time. Whether large systems like the Indian school education have the patience to build the capability of the system to bring about equitable school improvement across the plethora of school systems in the country remains to be seen.

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Building a Muscle for Improvement

Rucha Pande

Meet the students of Little Flower School (name changed) - a school in the peri-urban area of Bengaluru. A common sight you would find in this school is young business leaders working on their projects. The school runs a student entrepreneurship program - helping students develop skills like conceptualizing and designing a product (like earrings or bags), marketing and selling that product, thinking about the pricing, and collaborating with others to run this business.

The program began with the school leader and teachers thinking about the needs of the community the students came from. It then matured into a vision of enabling holistic development of children and nurturing an entrepreneurial mindset. Today, this program is supported by a few teachers, as well as the students themselves. Parents are involved in the progress of the program, and local communities are often 'customers' for these little leaders.

Both teachers and parents have talked about how this initiative has led to their children having greater confidence, creativity and communication skills. Being able to see this kind of impact gave the school team - leaders and teachers - enthusiasm and confidence for taking up further such improvement initiatives in their school.

Let us look at another story. This story is from a cluster of government schools in semi-rural Karnataka. These schools are located close to the border of two other states. This results in a diverse body of students who came to the schools. Teachers and Headmasters recognized that a big part of language learning is from the environment around children - words, text, sounds that children

pick up from people and print material around them. Therefore, while teaching in the classrooms continued, teachers and school leaders came together to imagine what a 'print-rich' and enabling environment would look like for children in their schools and how they might transform their schools into such environments.

They realized that this would need support from multiple stakeholders. School leaders and teachers worked with the School Development and Management Committees (SDMCs) for mobilization of resources and funds for material. They also held parent-teacher meetings to gain support from parents for enabling a similar environment at home. School leaders and cluster level leaders also supported teachers in using such materials on a regular basis - their school rounds and classroom observations focused on the same. In fact, it is the children themselves who co-created some of the materials. These schools not only became vibrant, print-rich environments after this, but school leaders and teachers also spoke about how they had been able to engage the school community so well - something which they had found challenging in the past.

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A few things would jump out as common, when we look at these two stories together: the central focus on children's development; the entire school coming together to contribute to children's development; and, the support systems for the school. These stories give a glimpse into what 'school improvement' means to us: a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthens the school's capacity for managing change (Hopkins et al., 1994, Chapter 1).

At Mantra, we focus on all these three aspects. First, for planned educational change there needs to be thought-through and data-based planning of focus areas and pathways to improving schools. Second, we focus on student outcomes. Schools exist to serve students. Any school improvement initiative must have explicit student-level outcomes (not necessarily just learning outcomes) at its center. Third, develop school capacity. As in both the stories, the schools not only were able to improve student outcomes, they also developed a 'muscle for improvement' along the way - in the ways in which they were able to collaborate with each other, in planning the schools' journeys, in leveraging data, and so on. This 'muscle' would help the schools sustain such initiatives, as well as lead further such initiatives in the future.

The School As a Unit of Change

Like the stories of the two schools, our experience has been that for any sustainable, effective improvement in student outcomes, all three environments that the student is a part of - the classroom, the school, and the home and the community environment - need to be addressed. For anything from foundational literacy and numeracy, attendance, physical health, and socio-emotional development, the three environments need to improve in alignment to effectively impact student outcomes.

In our work at Mantra, we believe in enabling school leaders to nurture these three areas in their schools. The classroom environment includes teaching-learning practices, student-teacher interactions, peer interactions among students in the classroom, and the curricular materials to which the children have access. The school environment includes the overall school culture and norms, interactions among students, teachers, and administrators, the physical school's environment, as well as key school processes like assemblies, staff meetings and teacher support mechanisms. The home and community environment includes parental involvement in students' development, interactions with other family members and siblings, the physical home environment, as well as community perception and involvement in children's education. There are some aspects like child safety, which are spread across all these three environments.

Classroom Environment

School Environment

Home & Community Environment
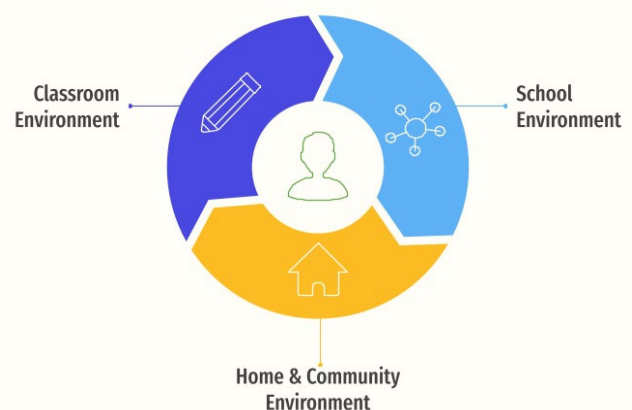
The Critical Role of School Leadership

Both research, and our experiences of working in the field, converge on one very important aspect of school improvement: the development of school leadership. Education reforms often focus on student achievement, and the role that teachers play in enabling student achievement. While this is critical, the role of school leadership is often underemphasized. If any sustainable, school-wide initiative were to be implemented, lack of involvement of school leadership would ultimately lead to the failure of such an initiative. A focus on school leadership also enables developing the 'improvement muscle' spoken about earlier.
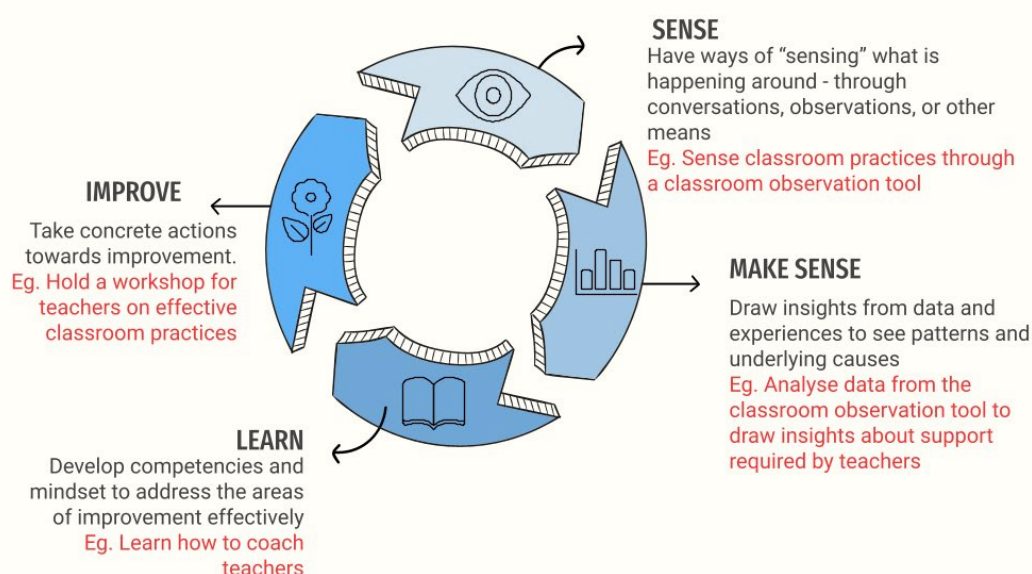
Our focus is to enable school leaders to lead the school's improvement journey over time. This involves, in essence, to be able to sense what is happening in the school, make sense of the data and observations to draw trends, learn new skills and concepts, connect with other peers and mentors, and finally, take concrete steps to improve. Our aim at Mantra is to enable schools as a self-healing system that can lead their own improvement journeys over time - run these cycles of 'sense - make sense - learn - connect – improve'. Keeping this in mind, our programs also focus on 'early wins' during the first phase of the programs. This is to instill enthusiasm and confidence in the school's beliefs about driving change.

Since school improvement is a long-term, intensive process, schools also need to be chosen with care. A combination of criteria help decide which schools may benefit from such a program. School's acceptance of the areas that need improvement and a willingness to take effort in improving them is critical. Collaborating with the school on a whole school assessment and discussing the findings with the school gives a good sense of the school's acceptance and willingness to change.

Motivation of school leaders in driving the change process is important. Ultimately, keeping the sustainability of the intervention in mind, school leaders would need to take the school's improvement journey forward. Investment of school leaders in the improvement process is another significant aspect. School leaders' motivation is insufficient unless they are also able to take time out to invest in the school improvement journey. Sufficient availability of teachers is critical, as teachers may not otherwise have the time or energy to engage in school-level processes. While this could be difficult

Our Approach to Leadership Development

SENSE
Have ways of "sensing" what is happening around - through conversations, observations, or other means
Eg. Sense classroom practices through a classroom observation tool

MAKE SENSE
Draw insights from data and experiences to see patterns and underlying causes
Eg. Analyse data from the classroom observation tool to draw insights about support required by teachers

LEARN
Develop competencies and mindset to address the areas of improvement effectively
Eg. Learn how to coach teachers

IMPROVE
Take concrete actions towards improvement.
Eg. Hold a workshop for teachers on effective classroom practices

At the heart of the school leadership development program is the idea of enabling leaders to drive improvement. This involves developing school leaders' muscle to identify opportunities for improvement, leverage learning spaces, and take the initiative to take concrete actions to improve their schools. In other words, be able to carry out "sense - make sense - learn - improve" cycles

in government schools, a cluster approach (looking at a cluster of 10-15 schools as a 'distributed school') may be helpful.

While there is baseline data collected on these selection criteria, as well as the areas of school improvement mentioned above, there are also continuous sense-making exercises done by the Mantra team to gauge how leadership practices, teaching-learning practices, student development, community engagement, and school culture are improving. However, for the program to be truly owned and taken forward by the school, the school stakeholders must also own such data.

Over time, school leaders and teachers are equipped with tools to continuously sense how their school is improving. Classroom observations done by school leaders, peer teachers or mentor teachers are an important source of data. Holistic school self-assessments, which can be done on a half-yearly or yearly basis, are important. Feedback/survey tools can be used to sense parents' perceptions and engagement. Student attendance and performance data can be made available in an easy to use manner for utilization on an ongoing basis.

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To sum up, our model of school improvement includes three principal components. First, empowering leaders by making tools, research, and guidelines readily available to schools so that they may lead their own improvement journeys. Second, developing the capacity of school, cluster, and block level leaders to support school improvement. Third, enabling districts and states to develop conducive support systems such as rewards and recognition systems, allocation of resources and communication mechanisms that help schools thrive.

While the focus remains school improvement, our programs can be co-created with block, district, and State institutions such as State

School Support System: Our Model

A few months into (physical) school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools realized that remote learning was here to stay for a while. This also led to a reflection on the greater role that parents and community would play in supporting their children in learning. This would mean that school leaders and teachers would need to orient and support parents. School leaders in Uttar Pradesh focused on improving this area. School leaders organized school-wide parent-teacher meetings, and helped teachers plan the meetings in an effective manner - which not just included sharing certain information with parents, but also supporting and addressing parents' queries and concerns.

School leaders were supported and encouraged through three key means. They were provided with tools, resources, and guidelines which they used for planning their parent teacher meetings. School leaders were given some capacity enhancement (including peer learning) in terms of planning parent-teacher meetings, and supporting teachers in the implementation process. Finally, they were also given opportunities to share their experiences and learning with the rest of the schools as a celebration of their efforts. You may want to watch the video here to know more about this initiative.

Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) - who then become the primary stakeholders we work with.

The programs in turn are focused on enabling school level actors - school leaders, teachers, parents and students. These programs are co-created based on an in-depth analysis of both system level indicators such as involvement and support of state and district departments, as well as school level indicators on school leadership practices, pedagogical practices, student development, parent and community involvement, and overall school culture and environment.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Mantra's journey began with the journey of a single school. While we worked closely with schools and took a 'school by school' approach, three things became apparent. First, school leaders play a critical role in enabling school improvement, and ensuring sustainability of efforts towards student development.

Second, if we truly want to see a different state of education, nurturing lighthouse schools or islands of excellence would not be enough. We also need to shift the equilibrium to enable system-wide change.

Our third key learning came when we began working with state and district institutions. It becomes easy to start focusing on the larger system and think about state level or district level needs.

These include how the budget is utilized in a state, or the way capacity enhancement programs are planned by the state government's departments, or in how data is collected and used. We have learnt to remind

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ourselves that we need to focus on systemic school improvement and not on just 'systemic improvement'. Keeping our eyes, ears, and feet firmly on schools has rooted our planning, communication and perceptions of success.

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Connect On:

School Improvement Models and NGOs' Role in Our Current (NEP) Context

Rishikesh B S

There has been a recent focus across the education domain on Whole School Improvement or Transformation models. I would use the latter term for both these aspects in this article, though there can be a distinction made between school improvement and school transformation, as opposed to specific school level interventions. These models are not new and have been part of school interventions for over half a century and quite prominently for nearly three decades. Given the long period over which these models have developed, there are many of them available today. Many of these models have gone through appropriate reviews providing for robust frameworks that practitioners can use with very little tinkering.

The aim of this article is multifold. I will present some key aspects of Whole School Transformation using a well-known framework for studying schools. Along with this, I will attempt to draw out some common aspects of the various models on Whole School Transformation. This would help us understand the idea better and thereby appreciate the idea of 'school complexes' that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents. This in turn would help us identify the role that all of us, interested in improving school education, can play in the context of the implementation of NEP 2020.

Most Whole School Transformation models consider schools as organizations. Thereby they acknowledge that schools consist of many complex, closely interlinked sub-units, and in order to bring about any change it is imperative that the entire organization is taken into consideration.

Among the frameworks developed on this principle, a popular one that is relevant to the Indian context is the one formulated by Sue Davidoff and Sandy Lazarus. Their framework identifies 'culture' as the key aspect of school as an organization that influences its core. For any change to be sustainable, it has to be a change in the 'culture of an organization'. Davidoff and Lazarus, in their book, 'The Learning School' (Landsdown 2003), present their organization development approach to school transformation.

The idea of a school complex makes the interlinking a more intricate web wherein one change affects different parts of the organization differently.

Among the various elements of school as an organization that Davidoff and Lazarus highlight, 'identity,' 'strategy' - which includes curriculum as well as organizational development -, 'structures and procedures,' 'technical support,' 'human resources and leadership' and 'management and governance'. They ensure the comprehensiveness of the framework by focusing on global (international dynamics), macro (national policies, resources and systemic dynamics) and micro (community support and local dynamics) influences on an organization like the school.

This framework provides a handy tool to understand schoosl as organizations and thereby adopt a Whole School Transformation process using an organization development approach. This ensures that any problem in an institution like a school is not seen in isolation, as is the case in a conventional approach. For instance, if there are issues with the teachers, the conventional approach would attempt to understand the problem by locating it completely within the teachers' roles and responsibilities and at best to a few other connects that may have emerged during the initial investigations.

From a systemic point of view, the approach of the Whole School Transformation is taken to the next level in the NEP. It is in this context the idea of school complexes is introduced.

However, in a whole school approach, and if we use the framework mentioned above, many other elements would need to be studied in order to understand this issue of teachers in a comprehensive manner. For instance, we cannot understand any teacher related issue in isolation. We also need to look into aspects and elements related to leadership, management and governance, curricular aspects, the structures and systems in place, the technical support available, and the human resources beyond the teaching colleagues etc.

The Whole School Transformation approach, using the organization development framework, would consider any issue in the manner as described with the teacher example. Similarly, there are other frameworks that could bring in other insights or emphasize slightly different elements within a school. However, all of them would

ensure that the lens used to study a problem and look for solutions is one that focusses on the issue in a holistic manner.

Such solutions ensure that the changes brought through adopting an integrated approach last longer and have a far greater chance of being institutionalized in order to ensure continuity and effectiveness of an intervention. However, the challenge in adopting this approach is the enormity and the complexity of the task.

The whole school approach, under any framework, demands that interventions will have to happen at multiple points and simultaneously, or at least within a short period. For instance, if an intervention to work on teacher motivation is being undertaken, either even before that intervention begins or along with it, there will have to be an intervention for the members of the leadership and the management teams. This has to take place in order to ensure that their professional behavior is aligned to motivating the teachers.

Along with this, the support system for teachers will have to be studied. If that has to be enhanced, efforts to improve it will also have to commence simultaneously. Further, the infrastructure that teachers need, also has to be in place. It would make no sense to work on teacher motivation, and disrespect the teachers with lack of basic facilities like clean, hygienic toilets and poor quality teaching learning infrastructure. Therefore, when a Whole School Transformation approach is undertaken, the complexity of the organization has to be appreciated. Despite being a very challenging task, this is a pre-requisite.

The National Education Policy 2020 adopts the Whole School Transformation principles in many respects. The policy speaks of every aspect that is connected to the functioning of a school. These range from the requirement of 'child and teacher friendly teaching-

learning infrastructure' to the kind of teacher education that has to be put in place. This shows that it is indeed viewing schools as complex organizations where many educational aspects are intertwined. These linkages are not just at the school education level but across the schools and with higher education as well.

The whole school approach, under any framework, demands that interventions will have to happen at multiple points and simultaneously, or at least within.

The NEP, therefore, views education across various levels as a continuum with a certain broad aim of education. Because of this deep connection, 'interlinkages between school and higher education' (NCERT, 2022) is one of the position papers being written as part of the National Curriculum Framework 2022. This connection across various levels and a common broad aim of education applicable to all levels is well recognized. The NEP also emphasizes different levels of education having their own sets of objectives. The early years, for instance, have very specific objectives and so would the middle or the secondary levels, thereby demanding very specific curricular and pedagogic approaches.

From a systemic point of view, the approach of the Whole School Transformation is taken to the next level in the NEP. It is in this context that the idea of school complexes is introduced. The Education Commission of 1966-68 proposed a version of this idea. This never got implemented till the 1990s, and the early part of this millennium, when some States tried clustering schools together in order to enable small public schools get resources which they otherwise may not have

had access to. The idea was that a larger school could provide some of the resources it has, to students in smaller schools. This was meant to encourage teachers at the smaller schools to take their students to the larger school, either to use their playground or labs or libraries or any other facilities.

A simple understanding of our ground reality would tell us that this design would not work. The reasons for it not working are many. The primary one is the lack of leadership and authority at either of the schools to establish this. A small school is usually a single teacher school. However, with the Right to Education Act prohibiting single teacher schools, most of the small schools today have two teachers, at least on paper. The socio-political reality is that a leader of a two-teacher school is far below in the 'hierarchy of teachers' to be able to demand or even request resources from the Head of the biggest school in the cluster.

Given these dynamics, the original idea of a school complex remained only on paper in most places. In some places where the Head of the large school was more open and friendly, the idea did materialize. However, various other issues came in the way of getting children from schools in the cluster to enjoy the facilities in the large school. Even where it worked, the initial enthusiasm soon waned and the logistics of transporting students from the school they were enrolled in to the large school was a huge challenge. It came at a cost, which no one (either the schools or the bureaucracy) was willing to bear.

Given these insights, the NEP presents the school complex model by turning the previous version right on its head. Rather than getting students to go from their school to the large school, the NEP focuses on the key requirements for students in order to meet their educational goals. Using this key principle, the NEP presents an idea of school complexes (Chapter VII; Efficient Resourcing and Effective Governance through School

Complexes / Clusters) where a large school in the network is the hub school with more than adequate resources and practically 'owns' and 'manages' the smaller schools. The onus of ensuring that the smaller schools have access to resources is on the larger ones and the leadership there.

It is important to note here the aspects that make what has been proposed in NEP 2020 different from what has been tried earlier. First, in this model, the accountability rests with the hub school. Therefore, the onus of ensuring that the smaller schools get the required resources rests with the leadership or the Head of the hub school.

Second, the pre-requisites are stated upfront. There is no ambiguity about what kind of resources are required in the hub school for this to succeed. Along with a leadership to not just manage a large school but also mentor and govern a cluster of schools, other human resources, technical support and infrastructure are all mentioned as pre-requisites for this model to succeed.

The whole school approach, under any framework, demands that interventions will have to happen at multiple points and simultaneously, or at least within a short period.

Third, the human resource does not include only general teachers but teachers with specific subject expertise that include arts, theatre, sports, music, languages, mathematics, sciences and so on. Counsellors and special educators are also part of this strong human resource that the hub school is to have.

Fourth, the infrastructure that includes different kinds of labs including one for languages other than the science and computer ones, libraries, playgrounds and auditoriums that can cater to not just a few hundred, but a few thousands is part of the plan.

Finally, the process through which these resources are going to be used efficiently, is by ensuring that many of these resources reach the smaller schools rather than have the students and teachers of the smaller schools come to them, as was the case in the previous models. Hence, in this model, it is the responsibility of the leadership of the school complex to ensure that the different human resources reach the smaller schools regularly.

For instance, if a small school has upper primary classes but no specialist math teacher, then the complex leadership has to ensure that at least a few days in the week a math teacher visits this school. Similarly, it is expected that small, lower primary schools will not have a music teacher, who will be sent from the hub school at least once a week as part of the time table itself.

In situations wherein a facility such as the library or the playground is to be used, the students would be brought to the school complex using the school bus from the complex and so on. This flexibility also allows the leadership at the school complex a certain autonomy to ensure that they are able to address the needs of all the schools in the complex.

The NEP proposes this model of school complexes to ensure efficient resourcing of all schools, so that every single child gets more learning opportunities compared to the present, without consolidating the schools by closing them. This is, therefore, a middle path that the policy has adopted as it is otherwise difficult to provide adequate resources to the smaller schools.

The policy recognizes that nearly a third of our schools (NEP, 7.1) have less than 30 children. It would not be economically

feasible to staff them adequately with all the required resources. In this context, it is important for NGOs working in education, to evolve a comprehensive plan to support this idea in order to not only bring about whole school improvement of the hub schools but also a systemic transformation of entire clusters of schools.

We have to envisage the process of transformation of the hub school itself holistically, beginning with leadership aspects to ensuring efficient timetabling and resourcing. This has to be done for large numbers that hitherto public schools have rarely seen. This in turn requires a visioning exercise that most schools or school leadership have not traditionally engaged in. To add to the challenge, we are dealing with an organization which, by its nature, is complex. The idea of a school complex makes the interlinking a more intricate web wherein one change affects different parts of the organization differently.

In this scenario, NGOs will have to collaborate with each other to be able to efficiently use their expertise for the purpose of school improvement. The leadership at the school complex would be in the best position to ensure that the various initiatives by the different NGOs are considered as part of the comprehensive planning.

Three decades ago, there was a global call to collaborate when it was said, "Because basic learning needs are complex and diverse, meeting them require multi-sectoral strategies and actions which are integral to overall development efforts. Many partners must join with the education authorities, teachers, and other educational personnel in developing basic education if it is to be seen, once again, as the responsibility of the entire society" (WCEFA, 1990a:4). This was a call at the global conference on Education For All (EFA). It is time that all of us heed to it and together as key stakeholders in school education, move in the direction that the NEP has laid down. This would help to ensure that we transform our education system by working in a collaborative manner.

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Two Interventions in School Improvement

Anita Dagar

Kotak Education Foundation (KEF) works to support youth and children from underprivileged families to rise above the poverty line and lead a life of dignity. With the youth, we work by providing scholarships to complete higher education and livelihood training to dropouts. For supporting students, KEF works with government-aided and privately managed vernacular (Hindi, Marathi and Urdu) medium schools in the slums of Mumbai.

KEF works with these schools on school leadership development, teachers training, parents intervention, spoken English program for students, and health and infrastructure provisioning. As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization ran a program 'Digital Learning Solutions' for teachers and students as well.

What Does it Take to Improve Schools?

School improvement is as much a science as an art. Only intuition and direct ground experience, while useful, are not enough. We also need to explore the available body of knowledge on school improvement.

It is important to know and understand that external and internal contexts of schools are unique and that these matter. The interpersonal dynamics in a school, the collective efficacy of teachers and the quality of school leadership are important considerations as well.

Each school requires a context-specific set of interventions, strategies, skillsets, and human, intellectual and material resources. Bringing all stakeholders to work together produces faster and sustainable results.

There are studies that state that infrastructure does not have much correlation with student learning outcomes. However, in a resource poor context such as that of our country, working on infrastructure, mid-day meals and health is very critical for any intervention to succeed.

While working with government schools, it is important to loop in DIET officers and Kendra Pramukh, and trustees in case of privately managed schools. The journey is not linear. To be able to move upward constantly, you have to keep space in your design and monitor the spiralling process.

KEF's School Improvement Journey

KEF has been running a School Leadership Development Intervention for six years post first two years of pilot design. Eleven schools have graduated a 5-year intervention life cycle, whereas 100 others are still a part of this journey.

It has also been piloting an intervention called 'Whole School Turn Around Project' in three schools for the last two years. Each school may have a different combination of interventions depending upon shared needs of the school and KEF's parameters.

Kotak Education Foundation

The understanding with which these interventions work is that the school as an organization/institution improves when school processes and systems change for the better. Student learning outcomes are enhanced because of this process. The focus in this article is upon school improvement, as KEF has attempted it through School Leadership Development Intervention and Whole School Turnaround Pilot (WSTAP).

The location of the schools that KEF works with, in 60-70% cases, is in the heart of the community. The implications of the same for school improvement are that the Head

From 'How can I do it?' to 'I can do it'.

"I used to be involved in organizational responsibilities in my school and used to call myself 'the highest paid clerk of the school.' However, through the LEAD (School Leadership Development Intervention) program, I realized my multiple roles as a school head and its impact on students, teachers, parents and the society as a whole. The LEAD program changed my mind-set and I have emerged as a school leader by action rather than a school leader by position. It has been a journey for me from 'How can I do it?' to 'I can do it'."

- School Principal, Mr Mohammad Fazzlur Rehman Khan, Noorul Islam High School, Participant of Leadership Development program cohort 2014-19.

Teacher and other teachers in these schools need to fight many invisible and unrecognized hurdles on a daily basis. These schools often lack the infrastructural identity of a school.

In fact, in most cases, these schools are essentially some rooms rented together, loosely scattered in close distance in the community, not necessarily within one boundary. Most schools run on a double shift

and do not have a staff room for teachers. As a result, having staff meetings or holding processes for teachers in school when there is a free period is a challenge. Playgrounds, functional toilets, proper ventilation and enough light in the classrooms are luxuries.

When we started working with these schools, any suggestion for change was met with, "What can we do?". Overall, there was a sense of helplessness, fatigue and burnout. In the very first year we realized that any improvement in the way these schools function needs the force of individual agency to be strengthened first. This discovery is applicable universally, but it is far more emphatically true in the context of the schools we work with and their social milieu.

The Four Pillars of KEF's School Improvement Initiatives

The designed logical outcomes chain for School Leadership Development Intervention begins with the strengthening of individual leadership of school leaders and ends at the school having set up a culture of continuous improvement in systems and processes by the end of the 4th year. Team leadership and instructional leadership are the other two pillars of the intervention that the program tries to strengthen. The intervention is designed as a 3-5 years long intervention depending upon where the school begins. The interventions are broken down into small specific, measurable practices, and are delivered in schools through three key activities. Once a year, an exposure visit to an international or national level education conference in an outside state for 3-5 days is one of these. These visits expose them to what is going on in the rest of the country and the world. It often proves to be a belief-breaking event for them. It creates a sense of positive restlessness, fuelling the momentum to initiate change in the school.

Annually, four group workshops for the cohort, typically 30-40 school leaders

Noorul Islam School, Govandi, Mumbai, LEAD Cohort 2014

KEF collaborated with Noorul Islam School in 2014, just a year after Mohammad Fazzlur Rehman Khan had joined the school as the principal. He was then fighting all kinds of internal and external battles. His school has more than 2000 students. Since he was an outsider joining as Principal, school staff was not willing to support him.

The school had four court cases by internal staff, 3-4 RTIs filed every month and 2-3 parents barging into the principal's room for some or the other complaint, on a daily basis. Mr Khan would land up spending majority of his time in responding to RTIs and attending court cases. The school lacked enough infrastructure, had no boundary walls and no culture of teachers/staff/parents meetings.

It took Mr Khan two years to have his first full staff meeting and discuss teaching learning processes in the school. After that, there has been no looking back. He used the first two years after his appointment as the principal of the school to strengthen his individual leadership to stabilize a volatile situation and bring the individual teachers together as a team.

In the next two years, he worked on developing a vision for the school, improving teaching learning practices, and in getting everyone to focus on student learning outcomes.

Testimony of Mohammad Fazzlur Rehman Khan, Principal of the School

I used to be reactive. Now, I ensure that I am responsive and better organized. I have a growth mind-set. As a result, neighbouring school heads have high regards for me and reach out for guidance. My management has developed trust in me, despite me being the junior most in my school. LEAD helped me build my capacity in understanding school leadership, conflict management, team building processes, and developing a vision for the school.

With LEAD, we developed a vision for my school - a shared vision - five years back. My journey is on to translate our shared vision into reality with the help of all the stakeholders. We make the School Development Plan year on year, in alignment with the school vision. Teachers, who worked based on their individual interests, work as a team these days. I have second and third line of leadership in my school now and that makes for high school effectiveness.

Teaching learning processes in the school now try to ensure learning outcomes rather than gearing towards completing the content/syllabus, especially up to class 8th. Teachers of languages and math have freedom to develop their own syllabus, especially up to class 8th, to ensure that students develop the relevant literacy and numeracy skills in order to translate the school vision into practice.

The school has developed a teachers' logbook based on learning outcomes, teaching plans, and the improvement records of teachers and students. Teachers have been trained for 21st century, skill-based lesson planning and teaching. It is a habit change process for teachers; they are guided occasionally on it. The school tries to ensure that the students can learn in an environment that is safe physically, mentally and spiritually.

Parents' attitude towards the school is very positive now. They believe that their children are in safe hands. The school conducts students-led parents' meetings twice a year, to ensure that the participation of parents in the institution's processes is high.

For the year 2022-23, we have developed our own bridge course in math for classes 5 to 10 as a response to academic loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The school has special programs for literacy and numeracy development of academically weak students as well. Dropouts from the school (from 8th to 10th grades) have reduced by 12% in 3 years.

Shri Venkatesh Vidya Niketan, Vikroli, Mumbai, WSTAP Cohort 2019

The school had 726 students then along with eight secondary section teachers and four primary section teachers. The HM of the school had a major rift with the schoolteachers. She was not able to engage with them. She, in most of her sharing, pointed out things like:

"I am not confident about myself."
"I do not know how to lead and change my school."
"I cannot do it or I do not think, we as a school can achieve it."
"Kaisay hoga, sir?"
"We will have to work extra hard if we don't want to do it."

Students did not have much sense about what to do after graduating from school. The school did not provide any information, knowledge or support on the issue. These things, along with the teachers having ego clashes, ensured that not much collaboration, creative designing and communication with each other was happening.

Testimony of Vishal Bandgarh, a Trustee of School

The largest part of change that is visible to me is the confidence and working of the HM in the school. Previously she used to call me for everything and ask me about it. Today she first looks at the situation and analyses it, creates her own action plan, and then shares it with me. She is able to engage with parents and students on her own. She knows the details of each child. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, she conducted online classes, home visits, and engaged in detail. All this helped us improve student attendance.

The creation of the SDP, and then doing a monthly plan, and reviewing it, have helped us get all our teachers together. This has helped us bring changes in infrastructure, engagement patterns, SLO, TLM and other such practices. We follow up the monthly planning and review meetings conducted in the school with relevant action. Due to our engagement and learning from WSTAP, the processes of engaging with parents and other stakeholders for school improvement has become easier.

Teachers who earlier pulled each other down are now working as a strong team, learning from each other and solving problems on their own. They take the case of each child who is having challenges and share their best practices and actions with each other.

Daily debriefing and individual coaching with teachers has helped the school achieve this big change. The WSTAP facilitator helped the head teacher set up classroom observation processes. This has led to a mind-set shift of both the teachers and the head teacher about themselves and their roles.

Today, in our classrooms, we see that teachers give individual care and focus to each child knowing that each child's learning is different from the other. This has helped the children develop their potential. This has a direct relationship with the increase in students' confidence levels. This has resulted in agumenting teachers' confidence as well. This in turn helps in enhancing the confidence of the head teacher.

Parents now want to contribute to the lives of their children. This started happening when they saw us conducting career guidance workshops and training for their wards. They started thinking that, "If the school is so much concerned about what my child does after completing school, then I being a parent must be more focussed."

Parents, thus, have become more aware about their children's future possibilities. They are committed to support their children in higher education and do the required financial savings. They are better engaged with the children now. The students have become more aware about their skills and future prospects as well.

together going through the change, are organized. These strengthen community-building processes. These also work as a scaffolding as one goes through the change process and create sustainability effects after KEF exits. The network these schools build with each other continues to be available to them. The third activity involves facilitative sessions in the school, twice a week, with school leaders. These try to break down theoretical concepts and frameworks to bring in action and practice in particular school contexts, and solving problems and challenges using these frameworks and concepts.

Organizational Development for School Improvement

The second model we experimented with (having run LEAD for two years in schools) is the Whole School Turn Around Pilot (WSTAP). The guiding approach is that of organizational development. In this intervention, we create a core group consisting of school trustees, the head teacher, select teachers (30%) and two student and parent representatives from each class from grades 4 to 10.

This core group assesses the school in their respective groups (students, parents, teachers and school Management) on seven parameters as defined in the tool Shaala Siddhi. We contextualized the tool as per the objectives of WSTAP.

Each group rates the relevant domains on the bases of defined evidence. Then a collective inquiring and questioning happens amongst these stakeholder groups about ratings. KEF facilitators try to facilitate courageous and authentic dialogues in the school ratings.

This core group then draws up a School Development Plan (SDP) for three years. It also reviews this plan every month and makes all the necessary changes. SDP achievements reflect in school assessment, which happens at the beginning of first year and at end of the first, second and third years.

Measurement Matters

Having an assessment framework helps chalk out the journey and set realistic goals. Even if no framework is close to your context, you can tweak it in a relevant manner. A framework gives the required directional sense.

Shala Siddhi is a tool developed by National Institute of Education Planning and Administration (NIEPA, Delhi) used for self-evaluation by Indian schools. This tool is very effective, when used meaningfully, as has been the experience of school leaders we have worked with.

https://shaalasiddhi.niepa.ac.in/pdf-doc/Framwork_English.pdf

McKinsey has studied 20 country systems and they have used a four-scale metrics, which is quite comprehensive. You may also contextualize it for your specific needs. The study also shares a specific set of interventions to move from one stage to another stage.

https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-the-worlds-most-improved-school-systems-keep-getting-better

Right from the beginning of the intervention, all stakeholders of the school are supposed to work together simultaneously on school improvement. In this model, there is no single hero to carry the burden. These processes lead the school to the next level when followed systematically and consistently by the entire core group. This is a model of school improvement through collective agency at play. We have run this pilot for two and a half academic years now in three schools.

WSTAP's outcomes chain design has the first outcome as a culture of high expectations in the school. In our ground experience,

Matoshree Vidyalya, Mankhurd, Mumbai LEAD COHORT 2013

Mr Desai has the reputation of being a disciplined school leader. He has a good rapport with his teachers and trustees. The grade 10 results have been above 90% almost every year under his tenure. His school had infrastructure challenges, on the surface of it.

Mr Manohar Babaji Desai, Secondary Head Master

I used to do planning before as well. However, LEAD helped me structure and prioritize better. We have made our school vision and we are working on that through a systematic School Development Plan. I was able to have more time for teaching and learning.

I observed my schoolteachers earlier. With LEAD, I learnt how to make observation a reflective process for teachers. I started delegating, and giving choices to my teachers when I gave feedback. My staff meetings and parents meetings have become better organized.

I have set up individual development plans for all teachers based on observations. I send them for training programs to upgrade them. Our schoolteachers have received training in 21st century lesson plans and they follow it through.

The Education Department has appointed me as a trainer for 21st century skills, along with another LEAD school headmaster.

We have started pastoral care in our school to provide emotional and intellectual support to all our students. Their parents are not always in the best condition to listen to them and to support them in finding solutions. Pastoral care in our school has become popular with students and well known in other schools. I even presented a research paper on it. State Education Department awarded me for this innovation.

Our school conducts professional learning communities. Many times teachers from other schools come and participate. Our school has become a centre for other schools to observe our meetings, PLCs etc. I support and guide other headmasters; if they have any problems, they come to me now.

The biggest learning and benefit has been the skills of networking and collaboration I learned through the program. I have been able to generate the required infrastructure support for my school. We now have science labs, IT labs and classrooms. When the roof was in bad condition, I was able to get a grant for 30 lakhs from another organization to get new rooms constructed.

outcomes of all stakeholders in schools are low, as they do not have high expectations of themselves and each other. The school team coming together and raising questions, offering support, co-building a vision for the school and owning it together, are some other simultaneous outcomes to be worked on.

One facilitator works with the school all through. The role of the facilitator is to inspire and utilize group wisdom and resources available in the school and to bring in minimal resources from the outside. This strategy tries to ensure that whatever a school does, it is sustainable as there are no substantial additional resources required, be it space or learning material.

Conclusion

As shared earlier, different kind of schools will have different interventions/approaches working for them. LEAD has been a very popular program with School Leaders. A majority of them have experienced changes in self, team, instructional leadership and student learning outcomes. With 310 hours of annual input, it is considered an intensive program. But KEF has had more than 70% School leaders showing 100% target attendance in 2020-21, despite it being a

COVID year. Their close-line achievements have been very competitive as well.

WSTAP can be very intensive and not all schools may have the stamina to go through the kind of intensity it requires. While KEF is yet to conduct a hypothesis validation study for WSTAP, there is already some evidence that LEAD improves individual school leadership and positively impacts team dynamics, quality of instruction and student learning outcomes. But it takes longer to impact school wide change. WSTAP brings changes in the entire school much faster. One important reason behind this being that facilitators are in the school through the day, five days a week. In LEAD, the facilitator is in the school only for two hours, twice a week. That makes a lot of difference. Even more importantly, change targets are decided by the school team together and all stakeholders are working on it simultaneously. School improvement, thus, becomes the entire school's agenda.

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Connect On:

Zero to Five - Reflections from Facilitating School Transformation Programs

Moinak Roy

In May of 2016, SEF launched its first whole-school transformation program in the small neighbourhood of Gupkar in Srinagar, Kashmir. We started our journey with 20 teachers teaching in 20 classrooms across 10 schools in Sumbal and Srinagar. As of April 2022, we are working with more than 50 classrooms spread across 11 schools in Delhi and Tehri Garhwal.

Our work in Kashmir was wrapped up in 2018, when we completed our project with the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Our program today has evolved to tackle the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the foundational literacy and numeracy mission in India and the social emotional needs of our children.

Everything we do today is guided by the need of the hour and our deep belief that to be able to live in harmony in an ever changing world children need to reflect, think critically and learn continuously. The last six years have taught us several things, strengthened some of our initial hypotheses and showed us how wrong we were with some of our initial bets.

Building a Learning Continuum Between Home and School with All Stakeholders

Our program has evolved over the last few years to deeply include all the three stakeholders in the life of a child, the teacher, the principal and the parent. We have spent countless hours ensuring that each of these

stakeholders are able to come together and work as a team to ensure student learning. The impact of this choice was deeply felt during the COVID-19 pandemic. Where several schools and organizations struggled to connect with their children and parents, our teachers were able to connect and stay in touch with more than 80% children on a regular basis. While we could not engage all of them inside online learning spaces, we were still aware of their whereabouts.

Our parents continuously engage in learning activities with their children and this gives them a deeper understanding of what their children are doing and learning. This often encourages parents to mimic certain activities at home as well. Our teachers are also able to support students better because the parents are invested in the learning of their children. The principal plays a huge role in facilitating this relationship between parents and teachers in the service of children. We have learned that a great learning environment is built when teachers, principals and parents come together.

Addressing Social Emotional Needs

The last two years have strengthened our faith in educators and parents. They have navigated diverse challenges and setbacks, and continued to support our children. While their physical and emotional resilience during this time was commendable, we have also learned that they are struggling. Our educators and parents do not have the

tools to support themselves and be their best selves inside the classroom or at home, every single day, especially in the midst of a pandemic. We learned that they need tools to support themselves.

In 2020, we launched Wellbeing Circles across all our schools to create safe spaces for sharing and healing. These circles used art, literature, media and writing to share and heal as a community. It also brought our teachers closer. A sense of community gave them strength during these times.

Educators Need Tools to Build 21st Century Classrooms

In 2016, we started our journey of equipping our teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to build, facilitate and review learning tools and practices. We believed that teachers need to be skilled at planning and facilitating high quality lessons inside the classroom. However, through the years of working we realized that this was an unrealistic expectation, especially from teachers who teach for more than four hours every day to plan and execute high quality lessons everyday. We also saw more than 65% of our teachers pick up tools and consistently use them in their classrooms when they were provided with these tools and the training to use them.

Over the last couple of years we have moved to providing learning plans to our teachers, which have helped them facilitate stronger learning inside their classrooms while giving them the flexibility to adapt things to their style. We have learned that high-quality tools with appropriate training and support to use them lead to high-performing educators and high-performing classrooms.

Integration is The Only Way Forward

With the government focusing on bringing in several complementary curriculums in school education, we noticed that our teachers and students were overwhelmed and struggling to learn anything wholly. Our team piloted a

unit of learning where we used pedagogical practices from social emotional learning programs to facilitate academic content.

The principal plays a huge role in facilitating this relationship between parents and teachers in the service of children. We have learned that a great learning environment is built when teachers, principals and parents come together.

Our children became proficient in 60% of the content taught and also strengthened their proficiency in several dispositions to the same degree. This prompted us to build four complete units of integrated instruction for our primary school children and educators.

These integrated units of learning focus on all aspects of academic learning and deeply integrate practices of social emotional learning in them as well. We feel that this is the only way to enable our children to truly understand and practice social emotional skills and dispositions while also becoming proficient in academic skills and knowledge.

Designing for Collaboration and Nurturing Deep Relationships

At SEF, we believe in bridging the key enablers in children's lives. This translates into our investment in creating collaborative environments wherein there exists:

Evidence-based practices and practice-rooted evidences of the work carried out;

Innovative, integrated teaching and learning processes that secure the bets towards strong foundational skills and social emotional competencies in all children;

A human centred approach that values each individual's context and needs which

empower enablers to adopt practices meaningfully and sustainably.

Foster a culture that values dignity and worth of every person, thereby recognizing that each individual contributes in making our schools centres of excellence.

Our focus on these principles have enabled us to witness shifts in our educators and parents which have in turn strengthened our resolve to keep doing what we do.

Mainak is an engineer by training and a teacher by choice. In 2014, he co-founded Simple Education Foundation (SEF) with Rahul Bhanot with a vision to make excellent education accessible for all children; at SEF he leads Strategy, Fundraising and Communications.

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Connect On:

Bringing Children Back to Government Schools

School Improvement Stories from Bengaluru

A Conversation with Varun Nallur

Varun Nallur works with Azim Premji Foundation, Bengaluru.

Samuhik Pahal: What is the genesis and history of the school improvement journey of your organization? What are the approaches and thinking that have informed this process?

Varun Nallur: At Azim Premji Foundation, our work focuses on the professional development of teachers, head teachers and government functionaries. In addition, we also work at the state level to create enabling conditions for change. We attempt to do this through building capacities of senior administrative and academic leaders, curriculum development, support for in-service teacher education processes and policy-related work.

We are currently present in 50 districts across six states and one union territory. These are amongst some of the most vulnerable districts in the country. Our field institutes offer on the ground support in different aspects of school education in the districts we are present. Most of our work is centred around the elementary education system in rural government schools.

In Bengaluru, just like in other districts, we focus on the capacity building of teachers and other stakeholders in the government schooling system as the core of our work. Here I will try to provide some context on the public schooling system in Bengaluru. Bengaluru is divided into Bengaluru Urban-North, Bengaluru Urban-South and Bengaluru Rural districts, for ease of educational administration. These districts are further divided into blocks and each of these blocks may have anywhere between 80 to 250 government schools, depending upon its size.

Over the years, Bengaluru has seen a mass exodus of students from government to private schools. This is in line with what is happening in other urban areas in India. In rural areas, where we mostly work, 50-80% of the children still go to government schools.

In Bengaluru, the situation is completely different. Only about 15% of the children remain in government schools. These are children whose parents cannot afford any kind of private schooling.

A few years ago, we undertook a study with schools and communities to understand why parents were moving away from the government schooling system. What we found out was that there were aspirational aspects, other systemic issues and in some cases, there were misguided perceptions of the government schooling system. I will

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try to mention a few of these here. Some of the parents mentioned that the government schools were in the Kannada medium, whereas the parents' aspiration was for their children to study in an English medium school.

The infrastructure of the schools was perceived to be bad. Safety of girl children was also felt to be an issue by a large number of parents. In Karnataka, grades 1-3 are clubbed together to facilitate multi-grade, multi-level teaching and activity-based learning processes. Parents often saw this as an arrangement to deal with the lack of teachers and not as a pedagogic innovation.

We found that some of these areas could be resolved fairly easily. The most difficult part was how the government schools could bridge the parents' aspiration of having English as the medium of instruction. However, around the same time, the Government of Karnataka started the Karnataka Public Schools (KPS) along the lines of Kendriya Vidyalayas.

A KPS is supposed to offer classes from pre-primary to class 12th in a single school with both Kannada and English as mediums of instruction, with higher annual grants for these schools for learning resources and infrastructure. The support for infrastructure and learning environments in government schools has historically been inadequate due to the scale of investments required.

Our approach has been guided by the principle of working closely with the schools and their various stakeholders to bring about change, along with creating opportunities for advocacy, so that the government takes up and improves the schools at scale. Wipro Foundation agreed to collaborate with us in this effort. They provided support to improve the overall school environment and we worked on the academic and community engagement aspects. We identified two schools for intervention. Both these schools

were different. One was a Grade 1-7 school, located in the Peri-Urban part of Bengaluru, and served mostly migrants from North Karnataka, Bengal and Bihar. The other was a K-12 school which was located in the centre of the city and served some of the most densely populated slums.

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In both these schools, the children came from the most marginalized backgrounds, and we wanted to ensure that these children get access to some of the best possible resources along with good teaching and care. We should understand that the starting points of children from these backgrounds and those from middle-class homes are very different. These children need a disproportionate amount of resources, attention and care to do well – the best possible schools, teachers and other institutions of care to make up for the lack of resources and care at home. Government schools are the best places for this to take place, unlike a private school that stratifies the education system based on the children's parents' ability to pay.

We were trying to enable these two schools to have the best possible resources for the

students. We thereby wanted to send a message to the communities saying that here is a good school, which will cater to your children's needs. It must be said here that some of the government schools now already parallel many of the private schools in terms of resources.

We started working very closely with the teachers in these two schools by providing onsite support. We also have had continuous dialogues around different areas such as corporal punishment and better engagement with the community, etc.

Let me give you an example, which will provide you with a glimpse of the work. We found children from grades 3 and 4, for example, lacking in very basic competencies in language and math. Our approach with the teachers was that we discussed the problem and how they could address it by using different pedagogies using the resources we already had (e.g., using libraries to improve language acquisition). This is just a very basic example of some of the collaborative efforts we have undertaken in different areas. It took us a lot of time to get to this level. Slowly over some time, they have started paying attention to students' learning, which in turn guides the way they teach.

We also began working on areas such as school assemblies. This intervention was important because it provides a space for children to speak up and for teachers to understand students. Many other areas such as school maintenance are discussed in the assembly. Along with the school leaders we have been working on different areas.

To illustrate an example, how do we work on effective timetabling to ensure adequate learning? If some of the students are falling behind in reading, can we include more library periods to encourage and inculcate both guided and independent reading? In one of the schools, there were significant behavioural issues amongst the children.

We looked at using physical education (PE) as a way of addressing this. It meant that PE needed to become a part of the timetable and we worked it out with the headteacher.

In rural areas, what you have is a village and a school and these are co-existent. The school is right there in the community and people know each other. It is very different in Bengaluru, where many micro-communities coexist in a place where the school might be located. Children come to the school from different settlements. Structures such as School Development Management Committees (SDMCs) are pretty much non-existent. From the very beginning, our attempt has been around getting parents to come into the school more often.

For any school to work, it needs to develop good relationships with the community. With this in mind, we did learning melas that get the parents to visit the schools and become involved in their children's education. We tried to involve them in the process of development of school infrastructure. In the SDMC meetings, the requirements of the school were discussed and decided upon. This was then shared as a brief with the architect. Some parents worked in the schools when the construction was going on. The support of the community was critical in getting the work going during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The challenge in our context was reaching out to parents in the community, so that they bring the children back to school. We did a lot of community outreach. When you reach out to parents in their homes and their

communities, they become a lot more open to what you have to say and offer.

Our learning is that parents' involvement in the school is directly proportionate to the visits to the community that the teachers undertook with interactions which are centred around their children. It has helped us address problems of attendance and continuity of education. When parents see the folks from school involved in their children's lives, they also start becoming involved in the school's affairs.

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Despite our best efforts, some children do drop out. What we need for such children, who come from extremely challenging backgrounds, is effective after-school support. We are now planning for a community resource centre in one of the settlements. Initially, that was not a part of our program design.

While working with the schools, we were also talking to the functionaries from the education department at the cluster, block, district and state levels in parallel. We also made it a point of going to the schools at least twice a week to work with the teachers. It was an intensive effort and some of our best people have worked in these schools.

School improvement does not happen with one visit or one workshop in a month. Improvement means that you need to work with the staff, build relationships with them and the community, and they need to start seeing the value in school improvement processes. Only when they do that, then they start participating.

Otherwise, it is a very superficial way of looking at school improvement. We can develop many models; we can come up with acronyms and these would look good on a presentation. Nevertheless, it does not work that way on the ground where the key is to have an on-ground presence and work very deeply with the various stakeholders.

Both the schools we work in - one of them is the Govt Higher Primary School, MR Nagar, which is a grade 1 to 7 school and the other is the Karnataka Public School, VV Puram which is a K-12 school - serve children from vulnerable communities that have their own sets of issues. They are also very different from each other.

The MR Nagar School has always been doing relatively better. When we did a study of student learning when we started work, its children were at around 65 to 70% of their grade-level competencies. Therefore, the focus in this school has been to make sure that all the children are at the grade level of learning in all the subjects. This lowers the risks of children dropping out substantially.

However, at the VV Puram School, we found that students had only around 30% of the grade-level competencies. One of the reasons behind this may be that the children here are from Tamil speaking backgrounds. Hence, it becomes very difficult for them to learn in a Kannada medium school.

Moreover, the shortage of teachers also has had its effect. In addition, the children were not very regular at school. Unless the students are regular, no matter what you do, it does not work. You could have wonderful lesson plans and make wonderful resources available. However, if the students do not come to school regularly, then it is extremely difficult to ensure effective learning. Therefore, at the VV Puram School, we have been focusing on making sure that the children come regularly.

The VV Puram School, in its heyday, was very good and had close to around a thousand students studying there. Due to various reasons, the enrolments began to deteriorate. When our interventions started in this school, the enrolment was less than 400. It had 370 students from pre-primary to 12th grade. We did many enrolment drives to ensure that community members are aware of the school. We realized that not many people knew about this school, even though it was in a very prominent location. The enrolments now, with all the improvements and outreach, is close to 700 students.

The enrolments have gone up because people could see clear, tangible change along with the visits from the teachers. The primary school where we work had some 74 children when we started. Today, it has about 220 children enrolled with increasing demand every day.

We have seen children from low-cost private schools coming back to both these schools. Because all that was there is available here in the government schools as well. The kind of resources we have in these two schools are much better. You walk into our library, you would be surprised by the kind of books that we have there. We have books in Kannada along with English books from different publications and books by authors such as Dr Suess, Eric Carle, Julia Donaldson, and Margaret Wise Brown among many others.

We have been doing consistent outreach in the community, making parents aware of the changes happening in the schools. This has led to an increase in enrolments. It is very encouraging to see that it is possible to get children back to government schools. We feel that by making sure that the basic facilities are in place, with parents realizing that the teachers do care for their children and there is an effort at the school to improve their child's learning, the enrolments in government schools will go up.

We were also working with the state simultaneously. We often invited state and district level functionaries of the education department to the various functions in the schools. This started multiple conversations. In one of our monthly meetings, they came back to us saying that they want to widen the ambit of the program and extend it to more schools.

They said, "We will give the infrastructure support. Would you help us with the academic part of it?" We agreed. We mapped out the schools in Bengaluru. We took some of the most vulnerable populations - one of the examples is DJ Halli, which is the largest slum in Bengaluru. Similarly, we mapped out 50 odd settlements. Amongst these, we prioritized the twenty most vulnerable ones. In these communities, we tried to identify schools that go from pre-primary/grade 1 to grade 12 or at least till the 10th. The Government of Karnataka (GoK) have now chosen 20 such schools.

Now the GoK have allocated a budget of 89 crores that they will invest in these 20 schools. We would not claim that this has happened only because of our intervention. From an advocacy point of view, it is the outcome we have wanted all along. We want higher expenditure, and higher investments, in public education. It becomes very superficial when you advocate bigger spending without really showing an example

or demonstrating a model. Therefore, our focus through this process has been on how we advocate for large-scale public expenditure in education.

Samuhik Pahal: How do you think organizations working on school improvement can bring in concerns surrounding equity, inclusion and diversity into the centre of their operations?

Varun Nallur: Some contextual information might be relevant here. Karnataka spends 17-22,000 rupees per child on their education per year. If you have the Kendriya Vidyalayas as a benchmark, they spend close to 40-50,000 rupees. Therefore, that is half of the state government's per child spend. This means that massive additional investments are required to improve public education.

Karnataka has one of the lowest per capita public expenditures on school education. Of every 100 rupees it spends on education, 80% goes towards teachers' salaries. In addition, about ₹5 goes to midday meals and the rest go towards other entitlements and incentives. This means that very little amount is available for improving the overall environment of the schools and focusing on improving the quality of teacher professional development.

It is a big issue. It is not just a Karnataka specific problem, but a pan-India one. Everywhere we have seen a drastic decline in public expenditure on school education. Studies have shown that the amount state governments spend per student, as well as how they spend it, have a positive correlation with student achievement, especially for children from vulnerable backgrounds. What we see is by design, the education system is nowhere close to being equitable, diverse or inclusive. So, the question then becomes, how do we start paying attention to these issues?

Issues of equity are often tied to underlying causes and that is why we need to think

closely about diversity and inclusion. Issues around equity can be difficult to address because of historical and structural systems of inequality we have in our society. These are very complex issues. However, let me try to address it from the perspective of our work with the two schools.

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Equity entails each of the children receiving what they need to develop their full academic and social potential. No matter what the child's present socio-economic and family background is, they must get the support and resources they need to achieve their full potential. Here are some of the areas we are working on with the teachers, headteachers and the community. For example, the teachers have become more aware of issues such as poverty, family background and other issues that the children face and how these affect the students' learning.

By understanding this, they can identify underlying issues behind students' low performance and create better opportunities for students in their classrooms. They can

thus better engage the parents on the support that their children will need at home. They are also in a position to provide more effective in-school and after-school support to the students that will help them perform better.

We are now looking at setting up community resource centres to ensure that good after-school support is available to the children of these schools. We realize that the school alone may not be able to solve the issues the children face. These are unsupervised, young children who are easily susceptible to the influences that surround them.

Therefore, can we get them to engage a lot more productively when they go back home from school? Can we have a good library where many activities take place? Can we have a centre where arts and crafts are happening?

We have not executed these ideas yet. That is the next thing we want to do here. We want to make sure that these children at least complete their basic school education so that they can make good, informed choices about what they want to do in their lives. The idea is that you set them up for a good life.

What we see is that those who remain in the government schools are some of the most marginalized, i.e., those from the lowest socio-economic strata of our society. Unless we can bring children from different backgrounds into government schools, it is never going to address the idea of having a diverse school. That is why we have tried to create a school with the best possible resources and teaching-learning practices which enable children from diverse backgrounds to study in the same class.

What does being included mean for children from marginalized and minoritized groups in terms of effective participation in learning processes? Here are a few examples of some inclusive practices that teachers could follow in their classrooms: Not using any form of corporal punishment, fear or intimidation in the classroom with children; Not labelling or passing judgements on learners (regarding their capacity to learn or to be successful) based on their socio-economic status, gender, appearance, physical and learning needs etc.; Displaying patience and skill in addressing diverse learner needs to support their learning, e.g., identifying learners lagging and giving them attention, using differentiated instructions for different learners, knowing learner needs, etc.; Displaying commitment to learners and their learning; Accepting all children, observing and engaging with all children, believing that all children can learn; Not discriminating against learners based on caste, gender, religion, or any other biases, and showing equity and fairness among all learners; Demonstrating social sensitivity – being empathetic towards the challenging socio-cultural context of the learners.

Most of our work is focused on working with the teachers and other stakeholders to help them reflect on their existing knowledge, beliefs and attitudes so that they are able to change their practices.

Samuhik Pahal: You have given us a good sense of what has been the impact of this school improvement intervention. However, if we were to measure impact, not necessarily quantitatively, what are the ways in which we can conceptualize impact while thinking about and working on school improvement?

Varun Nallur: There are certain things that are visible. Enrolment is the first indicator that things are working. Retention of the students in the school is another measure. The second aspect of impact that we can discuss here is on student learning. We try to understand with the teachers how the students are doing in math, languages and other subjects. Along with the traditional pen and paper tests, we try to give students opportunities to express themselves, to figure out their learning level.

It has been important for us to have a continuous sense of where these children are

in terms of their learning. It is clear to us that these assessments are not only meant to find out what the students know, but also to guide the teachers about changing their pedagogic and classroom practices. Improvement of teachers' practices in subjects they teach is also an area where we are seeing visible changes.

Most of our work is focused on working with the teachers and other stakeholders to help them reflect on their existing knowledge, beliefs and attitudes so that they are able to change their practices.

However, there are certain things about which you will not be able to measure impact in quantifiable ways, e.g., the teachers' involvement in the community and students' lives. We now see that the teachers are regularly engaging with the community. They make sure that PTMs happen regularly. They visit the community with us. They take a lot more interest in how the students are doing.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when we decided that we would provide rations to the community, the teachers volunteered to come with us to distribute. The interest of the teachers in ensuring that the school is well maintained is high. Now they have started to come in early in the morning, and along with the students take part in maintenance of the school premises.

So how will you measure this, someone taking ownership of these spaces which was never the case before? We have engaged very closely with the community and the children during the pandemic. The teachers used to go into the communities as part of Vidyagama community classes. While it was allowed, we

did that. It was very encouraging, because not all schools were doing it.

Samuhik Pahal: What are the key learnings from your school improvement journey that might be of use to other organizations as aids in thinking and practice?

Varun Nallur: One key takeaway is that anything you do must be rooted in students' learning. You can have as many programs as you want, but if you want to make a change, it has to be tied to the students' learning. Secondly, you have to work with all the stakeholders including the teachers, the headteachers, the community, the students and the educational functionaries. If you are looking at systemic improvement, you must take into account all these stakeholders.

We have also been trying to get teachers from around the schools we work in to come and observe some of the good practices the teachers in the intervention schools have undertaken in their classrooms. For example, many schools have received funding for libraries in Karnataka. Now we bring in teachers from the neighbouring schools and try to highlight the role of the children in the maintenance and functioning of the library along with the teachers.

We also bring them into the Nali Kali classroom to observe how math is being taught well with low-cost materials that the teachers have created, observing the role of children in maintaining the kitchen garden, and so on.

There are many such things that we try to do to make sure that this work expands. Therefore, when you are doing something, you will need to work with all the stakeholders and ensure that there are opportunities for interactions with other schools and teachers. Creating these professional communities of learning will ensure that better practices are adopted and in turn lead to improvements in other schools.

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On Not Mistaking the Classrooms for the School
The School Improvement Journey of Kanavu

A Conversation with Gowtham Reddy

A teacher at heart, Gowtham has been on a quest, for more than 12 years now, to uncover the idea of a 'good education' and 'how it's best realized'. An ardent believer in the power of human potential, Gowtham currently is enamored and intrigued by what 'early childhood care and education' space can offer to the idea of 'good education'. He is one of the co-founders of Kanavu (www.kanavu.in).

Samuhik Pahal: What is the genesis and history of the school improvement journey of your organization?

Gowtham Reddy: So, both my wife Nisha and I, who are the co-founders of Kanavu, started our journey in education with the Teach For India Fellowship. We did the fellowship back in 2010 for two years in Mumbai. Then for five years after that, we worked very closely with the program team of Teach For India Chennai. The model of Teach for India involves placing a fellow as a full-time teacher in mostly government schools, and sometimes in affordable private schools.

The locus of control for the fellow mostly happens to be the particular classroom that he/she has the responsibility for. The other classrooms have non Teach For India teachers. These other teachers have been there before. They are full-time teachers, and

they will be teaching there for a long time. A fellow who is teaching in the school is only there for a couple of years.

Through the seven years that we worked closely with Teach for India we observed that a classroom did not seem like the perfect unit of change, especially in terms of sustainability of impact. We started thinking that maybe a school is a better unit of change, in terms of both efficiency of inputs given and sustainability of impact. Therefore, we wanted to explore that aspect of working with a school system as against one particular classroom in a school.

Our hypothesis was that inputs given at the level of a school system are more natural, and the intended impacts persist for a longer time. When we got an opportunity to work with a set of rural schools in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu, we took up the opportunity and moved here.

We actually stay in one of the school campuses and we work with a set of four schools here. Among other aspects, we work towards school improvement with a particular focus on building a community of support between each of these four schools, so that they learn and grow by providing and seeking support from each other.

Samuhik Pahal: There is not one model of school improvement. There are multiple models available depending upon the perspective that people use and work with. So, what is the kind of framework or approach towards school improvement that appeals to you personally and as an organization?

Gowtham Reddy: There is of course no one definition of school improvement. All the four of the co-founders of Kanavu have been with Teach For India. All four of us have taught in classrooms. Moreover, all four of us strongly believe in the role of teachers as key agents of change and impact, when it comes to student learning processes.

Kanavu

Our initial approach has been to work with schools to improve the instructional quality of the teachers. When we started working closely with schools, we soon realized that a school is a very operationally heavy entity. There is way too much time that school leaders and teachers spend in the operations of running a school, rather than in actual teaching and learning processes.

Of course, this does not mean that operations are not important. They are and have the scope to play a significant role in designing and facilitating learning experiences for students. Hence, apart from working with teachers to improve their instructional abilities, we also work with the school leaders to improve their operational abilities needed to provide leadership to the schools as learning institutions.

Samuhik Pahal: If we want to make the functioning of schools less 'operations heavy' as you put it, and free up energies for learning and development, then how do we go about doing this?

Gowtham Reddy: An approach we tried is to call it out that a school leader might not be both program head as well as the operational head. By program head, I mean the one who is directly responsible for supporting the teachers in doing their jobs by providing pedagogical and content inputs. At the same time, an operational head is one who ensures that there are structures and systems in place in the school so that it runs smoothly as an institution.

We have realized that it is too big a role for school leaders. Hence, we work by looking at the school leader as the operational head. We have, for the time being, filled in this role of a program head and support teachers to be confident and better in their classrooms. We envision someone in the existing system rising to take up this role in the near future.

Kanavu

Another aspect in making schools less 'operations heavy' would be to put in systems and structures in place that make processes smoother. The final aspect is to look at 'operations' as the collective responsibility of all the stakeholders in the school, including teachers. This tries to ensure that operations are done smoothly, and teachers and other stakeholders take ownership of certain processes from their side. This then adds up to the operations of the school becoming smarter, leaner and more efficient.

Samuhik Pahal: You have been working on school improvement for the last five years. How has your organization's thinking shaped up over this period of time? What are the landmarks in terms of your learning experiences that you might want to share?

Gowtham Reddy: We have consciously shifted the focus away from the 'classroom' to the 'whole school'. You might ask why. For example, take a classroom where there are 25 children, and there is a teacher in charge. When you look at it in terms of a teacher being solely responsible for the learning of these 25 children, it really becomes constraining for the teacher. Moreover, it becomes quite unsustainable. What if the teacher has to leave the school for some reason?

Let us flip the coin and see all the 20-odd staff in the school - right from the principal to the watchman - as being responsible for each and every child and their growth, in very real and concrete ways. If they can internalize that they have a very unique and critical role to play in the growth of each and every child in the school, then it just turns it around. Everyone is responsible then for all the children in that school and it brings in so much autonomy and purpose into the school system.

Having observed classrooms and teachers for some time and having seen how they are caught up in the classroom-centered approach that has been naturalized, we have tried to focus on collaboratively building and operationalizing this school-centered approach. This has helped us in productively looking at the school as a unit of change and hence in creating processes and systems that facilitate students' learning in a more holistic and natural manner.

Another important aspect we have worked on is to make key stakeholders (school leaders and teachers) an integral part of decision-making processes for schools. In the initial days, we used to hear a lot of, "You tell us sir/madam what to do, we will do." We were very clear from the beginning that we do not have all the answers, that answers to most of the questions lie within us as a school entity and that we will figure this out together. We worked consciously on these stakeholders

putting forth their opinions, giving inputs on our opinions and insights, and taking important decisions for the school.

Samuhik Pahal: All of this is happening to ensure that children learn and grow. How do we then conceptualize or think about school improvement with respect to the impact that we envisage? How do we know that the schools are improving?

Gowtham Reddy: For any organization, it is important to be very clear and make sense of 'what' exactly is the 'theory of change' and 'why' we need 'impact measures'. Let us talk first about why we need 'impact measures'. I feel it should be not because "donors/funders want to see some numbers" or because "what gets measured gets done." It is as you said, "How do I know my schools are improving and my solution is actually working?"

Secondly, since each organization has a belief and hence a proposed solution to school improvement, the impact measures align to this proposed solution. Let us say, if an organization believes better toilets and infrastructural facilities lead to school improvement, their impact measures will have these infrastructural parameters. Hence, it boils down to what your 'theory of change' is and hence what aligned inputs are you giving.

Even here, it is important to measure your impact in two distinct terms. One is in terms of your immediate inputs (and hence immediate outputs) that you are giving. We also need to measure how these inputs in the shorter term affect outputs in the medium/long term. Therefore, you need to measure both your immediate outputs and medium/long-term outputs so that you can align your inputs and check if they are working towards meeting your intended impact.

Samuhik Pahal: How can organizations and schools use school improvement processes as tools to address questions surrounding equity, inclusion and diversity?

Gowtham Reddy: Organizations working on school improvement are uniquely placed to drive a particular type of culture in the institutions/schools that they are working with. They have the scope to convey a particular message through multiple modes, systems and structures. Let us say if we want to communicate about the concept of inclusion as a focus. Then we can do it through my interventions in the classrooms. We can do it through the ways in which we hire employees and teachers. We can do it through the conversations that the school has with the parents in parent teacher meetings. We can also do it through the various structures and systems that we institute.

When a particular idea is being driven through various different means, obviously the impact that it has is much deeper and longer lasting than when looking at it from a single narrative or perspective. Those of us who work on school culture are uniquely placed to drive culture at the school level, and it is a great opportunity to be able to do so.

Samuhik Pahal: Given your long experience of working on this, could you please share one or two stories, maybe be some specific examples, related to how the journey of school improvement has actually engendered cultural change by making the schools more inclusive and equitable.

Gowtham Reddy: When we started working with the schools, the compensation system was not equitable. The male staff used to be paid more and the female staff were paid lesser for the same amount of work or the same role, even if they had the same/similar qualifications. This is one issue that we have consciously focused and worked on.

We tried to develop this understanding that this is not being equitable, that it is unfair when people are unequally compensated for the same work. We have tried to do this

through conversations, through trainings that we have done, by sharing stories of what has been happening around the world. Through these different means, we have been able to work with the schools to ensure a compensation system that is based on gender parity.

This is something that we are quite proud of. That is because it has larger implications, and not just the immediate ones related to the money that the teacher has on hand. It has larger ramifications for a teacher who is looking at this as a way of life and conveying that to the students in the classroom when she operates in a classroom.

We believe we have also been able to encourage women to continue working even after their weddings. For a good number of our teachers, 'wedding' used to be a 'full stop' to their role as teachers. We have again consciously worked on changing this perception. We were able to convince teachers to postpone their weddings by a few months, continue working even after their wedding and to join us after they have had a child.

Samuhik Pahal: So how long did it take Kanavu to achieve these changes?

Gowtham Reddy: It took some time. Mindsets take longer to change. In some cases, affecting a change through a top down approach might be easy. However, that would not necessarily change mindsets. Moreover, when we consciously made a decision to engage deeply and address these aspects in various ways, it took us close to three years for all of these processes to happen. It is not as if everyone's mindsets have changed totally. However, we have made the transition in a natural way, not suddenly, so that it makes sense and stays for a longer time. Any abrupt change might leave more scope for us to go back to where we were before.

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Kanavu

Towards School Improvement

Enhancing Quality to Ensure Equity in Educational Outcomes

Aastha Maggu

School improvement is a complex process wherein, through altering classroom methods and incorporating transformed management practices, schools are capacitated to deliver enhanced learning experiences and outcomes for their students.

It requires close partnerships between all stakeholders including the government, teachers, parents and nonprofits. In this piece, we speak with non-profits from across the country to understand their approaches and interventions in the field of school improvement.

Caring with Color

Caring with Colour (CWC) is a nonprofit organization that works towards improving the quality of education in government schools in the country by helping teachers adopt experiential learning methods in classrooms. Foundational educational policy documents in India, such as National Curriculum Framework 2005 and National Education Policy 2020, emphasize the fact that adopting experiential teaching methods not only helps students learn better in a fun and engaging environment, but also supports build 21st century skills.

However, even now teachers across the country mostly rely on traditional chalk and talk based learning methods. CWC plans to bridge this gap between policy and implementation by providing experiential teacher training programs, experiential teaching content and building a strong teacher support system to implement experiential methodologies. They see this as central to their goal of school improvement by improving the quality of education. They work with government primary schools because these cater to eighty percent of the children of the country. A mere twenty percent of our children go to private/semi-private schools.

The CWC team initially tried to understand the medium of engagement in classrooms, the challenges teachers were facing, learning levels of children, etc. Syed Atheequlla, Program Manager with Caring with Color shares, "The traditional chalk and talk way of teaching is still prevalent across schools due to several reasons. When we introduced the ideas around experiential teaching methods, teachers were keen on adopting them. They initially had the misconception that to teach experientially they would require sophisticated labs and equipment. CWC also found that enhancing their subject knowledge expertise goes a long way in teachers easily adopting experiential teaching techniques. So, we created a program design through which we try to remove these misconceptions in teachers' minds and impart the required skills and motivation to teachers to try out experiential methods. Our experiential teaching content includes experiential lesson plans coupled with explainer videos, worksheets and simulations and Project Based Learning modules. These are key components of our program design that give teachers ideas about how concepts in the textbooks can be taught using no-cost / low-cost methods that utilize material easily available in their environment."

Caring with Color

With the National Education Policy 2020 emphasizing the importance of turning classrooms into experiential learning spaces, CWC believes that it is imperative to revisit teacher training frameworks to bridge the gap and deliver on the promise of improved learning outcomes for students.

The team spoke with stakeholders across the Education Department – at the levels of districts, blocks, clusters and schools - to integrate experiential learning. They first determined the specific subjects that primary schoolteachers are either teaching or are interested in teaching.

Then they identified the difficulties teachers face in three critical subjects - Mathematics, Science and English. The team prepared 20 experiential training modules in these three subjects for teachers. Then they reached out to more than six thousand teachers in Tumakuru and Ramanagara districts.

CWC designed a new method of teacher training that is aimed at equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills and perspectives they require to transform their classrooms into experiential learning spaces. In the face of the pandemic, the team used technology platforms that helped primary school teachers in these districts to remotely engage with training programs.

The training was held in close collaboration with the District Institute for Education and Training (DIET) in both the districts. Resource persons and trainers in the DIETs were identified and trained to deliver live online training sessions in collaboration with CWC teacher trainers.

The online teacher training modules were supplemented with pre and post-training assessments, reading materials, assignments, and projects, through which teachers could further deepen their understanding. CWC also developed an android app called 'Teachopia,' through which the training programs, as well as experiential teaching content, can be delivered to teachers across these districts.

The team also tries to ensure that all the government functionaries across the board come together for the transformation of the entire district in a sustainable way. Rajeev Annaluru, Chief Operating Officer of CWC shares that, "It was important to integrate ourselves with the rest of the Education Department, because a government schoolteacher does not operate in isolation.

When a Block or Cluster Resource Person (BRP/CRP) comes into the classroom and asks a question to the teacher that is tangential or opposite to the experiential methods taught in the training, the teacher will be discouraged from following that approach. So, we work with the cluster and block level functionaries in a way that they are our close partners in implementation. When they visit the schools for observations, they ask questions that reinforce the importance of using experiential teaching methods to the teachers."

The CWC team believes that for children to have joyful and exploratory learning experiences in classrooms, all the stakeholders across the education department must work in tandem with each other and support teachers in adopting the experiential methods as envisaged by the NEP. This can help them in meaningfully engaging with school improvement processes.

Vidhya Vidhai Foundation

Vidhya Vidhai is a non-profit working towards enabling schools to deliver quality education. They collaborate with education leaders to strategically plan and execute the best systemic leadership practices in the school education system. Currently, they work with state-run government schools and low-income private schools in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. Through their programs, they equip the leaders with school leadership knowledge, skills and attitudes to deliver quality education.

The Vidhya Vidhai team believes that school transformation cannot be limited to specific aspects such as teacher-training, student assessments, curriculum support, technology in education, etc. With all these aspects being interrelated to each other, it is only when all the relevant stakeholders of a school collaborate and align on purpose that the intended impact can be ensured.

Regila Marinus, co-founder of Vidhya Vidhai, shed light on the role of headteachers in the school system. She shared that the headteachers, who are appointed to lead the schools, are teachers who have had two to three decades of experience. Each teacher is used to managing a classroom of thirty to forty children. However, as headteachers, the responsibility of managing the affairs of the school is thrust upon them. Teachers who are promoted to become headteachers do not receive adequate training that prepares them to take up the elevated roles and responsibilities.

The Vidhya Vidhai team focuses on enhancing the understanding of the headteachers on varied aspects of quality education – innovative teaching-learning practices inside the classroom, effective school-community partnerships, and student-centered resources in the school - to promote learning and a culture of trust, respect and collaboration among leaders, teachers, and students.

The team imparts the required knowledge and skills to headteachers, so that they can effectively carry out their roles and responsibilities. A step-by-step task list to improve a particular aspect or domain of their school is suggested to the headteacher. For instance, to improve reading levels of students, the headteacher is given a task list that could entail forming a committee to lead this initiative, ensuring every committee member goes through the module to know strategies to improve reading competencies in the school, committee members orienting other teachers on improving reading, committee members using classroom observation tools to map trends and improvements and communicating feedback to teachers, etc.

The team has developed a 'School Leaders' Tool Kit' that aids headteachers to make observations about the school and the classrooms to gather evidence for making

decisions. The toolkit helps school leaders to gain insights into the quality of teaching and learning practices, connect with the stakeholders of the school, appreciate the best practices and efforts toward their school's development, provide constructive feedback and interpret gaps and challenges in the implementation of certain plans.
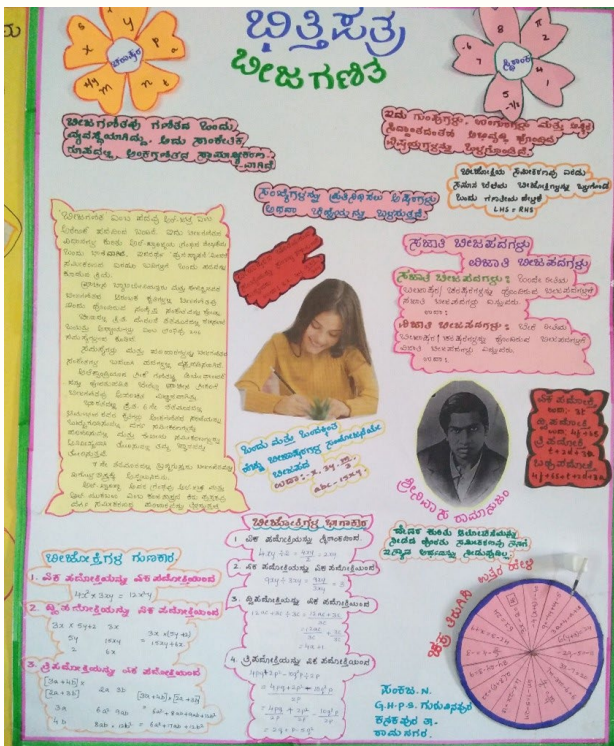
These tools ensure that, even if the headteachers might not have the required skills and the time in the outset, they are able to get the information, analyze the data and efficiently make decisions. The data points help in gathering information regarding the key domains mentioned in the

Vidhya Vidhai

[School Standards and Evaluation Framework](#) developed by the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA), under the aegis of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). These are used as references for evaluation and improvement.

The Vidhya Vidhai team begins by understanding the schools' needs and getting a sense of the strengths and gaps in the beliefs and actions of the headteachers. The

team strategizes on creating an improvement journey for the schools in tandem with the schoolteachers' learning journeys. The team capacitates teachers through self-paced learning modules along with other tools to implement their learning in school. In the implementation phase, schoolteachers work on improvement projects focused on those aspects that contribute to quality education in their schools. The progress of these projects is collectively monitored and evaluated to track the growth of the leader and their school.

The Vidhya Vidhai team proposes incremental steps to deal with challenges. For instance, one of the headteachers found it difficult to maintain an interactive relationship with the children's parents. The team offered the headteacher a simple solution and there was no pressure to adopt any measure involving a lot of time and effort. In this case, they suggested the headteacher communicate with parents over WhatsApp and share updates about the school such as upcoming school management committee meetings, etc. Now parents drop by the office of the headteacher and check for things and inquire about events, etc., based on the messages they have received.

The vision document is another tool that the Vidhya Vidhai team uses to help the leaders identify and clearly portray their expected outcome and impact for cluster development. The leaders list down challenges that will be overcome by them in the upcoming academic year. It also lists activities that could contribute to the overall development of the cluster.

The Vidhya Vidhai team, based on the challenges communicated by the school headteachers and its own observations, suggests specific skill-building, self-based learning tools that capacitate them. Regila is optimistic that in this journey of school improvement, they will continue to innovate and develop tools that empower school

leaders to make well-informed and optimal decisions.

Kshamtalaya Foundation

Kshamtalaya is an NGO working in the tribal-rural blocks of Kotra and Gogunda in Udaipur district in Rajasthan, and in Delhi. According to the census of 2011, Kotra, a block of Udaipur district, with a majority tribal population, has a literacy rate of less than 25% and the female literacy rate was less than 12%. The Schedules Tribes of Rajasthan are the worst affected with respect to school dropouts. The transition rates from primary to upper primary and from secondary to higher secondary is worrisome. In this underserved area, Kshamtalaya supports schools and communities to build collective leadership and drives the agenda of learning together.

Kshamtalaya's core focus is to bring systemic transformation in the domains of learning, well-being and governance by working with schools as a unit of change. A core focus area remains on synergy. Vivek Kumar, co-founder and Chief Executive Officer, Kshamtalaya Foundation adds, "The trust deficit amongst teachers and parents is evident. For school improvement, our team steps in to create opportunities, platforms and spaces through facilitating parent-teacher meetings, school management committee meetings, learning festivals, monthly panchayat level meetings – shiksha samvaad - etc., where parents get exposed to understanding how children are learning and what it means for a child to learn well in school. Parents are also encouraged to engage with teachers in a meaningful way."

Schools in the area have reopened after a gap of two years. The Kshamtalaya team understands that for children to engage passionately with educational processes, they need to make learning contextual, bring children's lived experiences into the classroom and build connections. It believes that learning is a function of curiosity, motivation and attention. Storytelling and arts-integrated pedagogy used by the organization aim to build curiosity and motivation among the students.

Integration of social, emotional and ethical learning for character development and building important skills such as resilience, self-expression, ethical discernment, compassion and empathy is attempted in the classrooms by integrating concepts. For instance, in a class on water, the teacher nudges students to explore their emotions around water, its availability, and the challenges in their villages around water. Each class starts with revisiting class agreement and practices of mindfulness to allow children to settle in and cultivate the habit of bringing their attention back to the moment.

In the two East Delhi Municipal Corporation schools the Foundation works in, they have explored the possibilities of building specific expertise of the teachers in the domains of child-centered pedagogy, well-being and governance. As the teachers observe increased engagement of children through innovative pedagogical practices, they become motivated to try out new things with their classes.

Vivek shared that schools in Kotra and Gogunda struggle with issues such as irregular mid-day meals, overburdened teachers, defunct SMCs, etc. In the communities, parents are interested in improving the learning outcomes of their children and in ensuring the efficient running of schools through frequent SMC meetings and parent-teacher meetings (PTMs). They also value good quality education for their children. However, they are reluctant to send their wards to school, as they believe that the education imparted in the local government schools is not of good quality.

The team is aware that in the wake of the pandemic, parents were also adversely affected as they lost their livelihoods. It

became imperative to create spaces of nurturance and dialogue so that parents could share their concerns and inputs and understand learning processes. Vivek added that the Kshamtalaya team believes that empathy is a two-way street and parents will wholeheartedly support the learning of their children if they are listened to with deep attention.

Vivek added, "In Udaipur, building awareness in the community around education, and getting trust and support from them to ensure quality education for their children, has been an enriching journey."

Through monthly dialogues, SMC meetings, Learning Festivals and home visits facilitated by the Kshamatalaya team, updates and issues regarding the schools are discussed. The team believes that through frequent meetings, where parents and community members are apprised of updates, they will be able to demand accountability.

The Kshamatalaya team conducts a Learning Festival - a quarterly experiential workshop conducted over six days in schools or local community spaces - to revive the spirit of learning. Here children explore various mediums of learning, by experiencing a predetermined set of creative activities. On the last day of the workshop, the Kshamtalaya team builds a shared sense of ownership amongst the community as children and facilitators together invite local community members, including parents and local governance leaders, to come inside the school premises where the children's work is being displayed. Each group of children comes forward about their learnings, and presents what they have created, be it a play, music, etc., in front of their parents and other members of the community.

Vivek adds, "The trust deficit among parents and teachers is addressed through the Learning Festival. The festival allows teachers and parents to engage with each

Kshamtalaya Foundation

other. In SMC meetings, information is mostly relayed, and it does not give a platform for both parties to engage. Since this festival allows parents to get a sense and some understanding of the children's learning at school, they can invest in the learning of their children. This immersive communication among parents and teachers has helped create a conducive environment for the children's education and has improved learning outcomes."

The team believes that education policies are prescriptive in nature and there is inadequate focus on demonstrating processual aspects of how to make things work. If the relevance and process of good quality education are demonstrated, then community members will be eager to collaborate.

Centre for Community Initiative

Centre for Community Initiative (CCI) was set up in 2002 with an aim to create a better society through community initiatives and participation for the welfare of persons with disabilities (PwDs). In 2016, with the support of three international non-profits, Regional Action for Inclusive Education in Northeast (RAISE-NE), a project to promote inclusive education in the region, was launched. This project focused on five states - Manipur, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Nagaland, and fifteen NGOs were identified in these states. Through this project, CCI started its journey on school improvement with Manipur Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the District Administration of Churachandpur in five government schools.

The CCI team, in collaboration with the district administration, capacitated teachers from the five SSA schools on inclusive methodologies in their classrooms. Pauzagin Tonsing, Director of CCI shared, "After the teacher training, there was a resounding shift in the attitude of teachers, and they said that they were now encouraged to think about the well-being of all children."

Under the project, CCI also engaged with School Management Committees (SMCs). Earlier, SMCs were defunct and parents of children with disabilities did not take part in the meetings. The CCI team met with the parents of these children and encouraged them to take part in the meetings.

Teachers from these schools were trained by faculty who shared with them about various disability groups and how to approach teaching children with disabilities. These training programs helped them adopt new teaching-learning materials, ideas, skills and technologies in a real classroom setting consisting of a heterogeneous group of children. Teachers were trained to incorporate inclusive classroom management practices as well.

Pauzagin adds, "Attitudinal changes amongst the teachers towards diversity and variability in the classroom showcased the effectiveness of the training. They viewed themselves as people who are responsible for making their classrooms inclusive." For instance, earlier, a child with a physical disability having difficulty in writing would not be able to finish their exam in time. After encouraging the teachers to use inclusive classroom practices, the teacher became conscious and provided extra time for children to finish their exam. For the annual school sports event, teachers came up with activities that ensured participation by children with disabilities.

Churachandpur is a Christian majority district wherein the church is one of the most influential institutions. Through discussions with the clergy and other staff members at the churches, the organization enhanced the awareness and sensitization on disability inclusion among them. The biggest church in the district, Evangelical Baptist Convention (EBC) presently has a visually impaired staff.

The CCI team is working closely with the churches on inclusion as they run more than fifty schools in far-flung areas. It is aware that to ensure that the learning experiences for children with disabilities in schools improve, approaching a multiplicity of stakeholders such as the teachers, parents and the Church in an integrated manner is a step in the right direction.

A child's learning experience is governed by the participation of stakeholders both inside and outside the school. School improvement processes requires teachers, parents, community institutions and the government to collaborate, develop clarity in vision and launch coordinated efforts.

You may reach out to the organizations featured in the story at: contactus@caringwithcolour.org (Caring with Color), contact@vidhyavidhai.org (Vidhya Vidhai Foundation), mail_us@kshamtalaya.org (Kshamtalaya Foundation) and info@communityinitiative.in (Centre for Community Initiative).

Centre for Community Initiative

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