

Priya Iyer

School education in India is in the process of transformation. There are efforts to tackle the most glaring problems of our national system of education: by bringing in renewed approaches such as empowering teachers not only in teaching but also in administrative decision making, providing students with opportunities to engage in self directed and reflective activities; and by establishing connections between school and society.

Some private bodies across India have led the way in this transformation; and here is a case specific example - NIRMAN (a Varanasi based organization) whose ideas have arisen from analyzing existing realities with the tools of research in educational practice.

What does school leadership in such small, private innovative schools mean in the Indian context? What are the challenges and realities in such schools? This paper attempts to discuss these thoughts by focusing on four aspects of the school: its guardians, teachers, society and the changing contexts. While doing so, I hope to show that successful educational practice consists of flexible and imaginative movement between two poles: (i) the ideals of how children should learn, as exemplified in the best philosophies; and (ii) the reality of teachers' limits, guardians' response, and state-governed requirements.

The School And Its Guardians:

I start my observation with middle school children from an innovative school in a village in UP. The students were studying aspects of environmental challenges and reflecting on issues of their own village. They had been discussing about how their parents as farmers were unaware of the harm caused by the use of chemicals, how they would find polythene while tilling land, and how the sand around the river Ganga was sold illegally by some villagers posing threat of landslides and soil erosion. These were the voices of children who had lived with these situations and who were concerned that villagers ought to be aware of them.

While discussing solutions, they came up with an idea of highlighting these problems by painting pictures on walls and directly conveying the message in their neighborhoods.

The next day the enthusiastic children set off for their task and soon caught the attention of people around, some of

whom came forward for a few brush strokes, others of whom were happy that their home walls were chosen for the painting. This activity went on for about a week.



One bright sunny afternoon a group of women (school parents) remarked, "So, there is no study going on, what will these pictures yield? Will drawing, playing and having fun the whole day give them intellect? (buddhi aa jaye gi?)"

The parents were worried that their children should go to school regularly and engage in 'intellectual work'; they could not relate themselves with the school's academic philosophy.

“

While middle class parents, no doubt, opt for schools where there is a favorable child-friendly environment, they still have not lost their faith in an authoritarian educational culture. They opt for the newer, emerging models of schools for their children in the beginning, but do not want to take a 'risk' of continuing to keep their children in such schools in later years.

”

Learning from such incidents the school encouraged the parents to visit classrooms, watch children engage in different tasks and talk to teachers freely. It also organized fairs on topics such as 'imagination' where a wide range of approaches (arts, crafts, theatre, and music) were used to disseminate ideas on school practice in ways that all parents could relate to.

Such parental concern leads us to re-visit aspects of educational decisions in schools; to reflect on the voice, needs and aspirations of each parent and assure them that schooling will make their children grow up as competent

adults and with equal preference and attitude for different kinds of work.

How much to teach and what to teach has often been a great point of debate. The national curriculum framework has given direction to this issue; some state and central text books have also specified the range of curriculum. NIRMAN has demonstrated that academic programs that associate children's learning with the world around them are effective in maintaining a continuation of life and work, and thereby bring meaning to learning.

But for most parents, a formal teaching environment instead of an active engagement with everyday processes seems to be the only desirable choice. This poses a challenge to the school in respect to approaches. Of course, parents' level of identification with (and expectations from) schools varies across social and economic backgrounds. But by and large, the inflated achievement standards and the increased curriculum load today have made parents look at their child's future with apprehension.

While middle class parents, no doubt, opt for schools where there is a favorable child-friendly environment, they still have not lost their faith in an authoritarian educational culture. They opt for the newer, emerging models of schools for their children in the beginning, but do not want to take a 'risk' of continuing to keep their children in such schools in later years.

The demand of education from the community of parents both in the rural as well as urban backgrounds makes us

While new, innovative schools do have a thorough educational agenda, their leadership task is not limited to children alone but goes further into initiating a parallel program for the parents. The challenges range from raising awareness about emerging trends in teaching and learning, to sharing issues on food, health and gender.

realize that all that is desired is a formal system with written documentation of children's work. Perhaps this feeling stems from their faith in the utility and intrinsic value that they associate with conventional, authoritarian schooling, being the only model of schooling they know.

While new, innovative schools do have a thorough educational agenda, their leadership task is not limited to children alone but goes further into initiating a parallel program for the parents. The challenges range from raising awareness about emerging trends in teaching and learning, to sharing issues on food, health and gender. It also involves measures like planning certain school activities with parents and empowering them in playing an active role in their children's schooling.

The School And Its Teachers:

I now move towards teachers with one specific instance in an interview room. A prospective teacher introduces herself by saying, "I am a B.Ed. and have applied for the post of 'lady teacher'. I can teach all subjects in lower classes and up to class V, I can teach Math and Science. After that I can teach English, 'Social' and Hindi. I have done Sanskrit up to class V; I can teach this also if there is a vacancy. I don't know 'Computer' but I have experience of teaching GK and Moral Science".

At one level such an answer delights a school leader as having met a multi-talented trained professional. But subsequent communication shows a huge gap between the stated list and its application in teaching-learning process. This situation reflects the social ethos that determines the 'choice' of teaching as a career option. It shows the constraints of schools in selection of candidates and the responsibility for continuous in-service programs.

Do schools give in-service training? This was a question that has been asked of me, time and again.

Schools have a huge responsibility of bridging the links between theory and practice. Realizing this need NIRMAN initiates in-service program for its teachers that involves learning to reflect, to plan spaces for varied experiences, to understand children's literature and curricular content, and, last but not the least to build perspectives on social issues.

Leadership in such schools adopts a humane approach towards newly-appointed teachers. It believes in building on

teachers' strengths and utilization of their knowledge of native categories into teaching and learning. It provides teachers the opportunity to construct and de-institutionalize the curriculum so as to match it with children's experiences.

No doubt, this approach will empower teachers in the long run, but schools have a huge challenge of ensuring that this journey of transformation of teachers does not have ethical repercussions on children. Children need competent adults who can work with them for their immediate needs. They need teachers who are not themselves learning the basics of each subject along with them, but who can challenge them in various ways.

This in no way means reinforcing the traditional image of a teacher as the know-all and never a learner; herself. Instead, this emphasizes the need to work on the real challenge of countering this stereotype with a teacher who must have a good grounding of fundamentals, but be ever open to learning. But, even in a supportive professional environment, teachers find it hard to de-construct their own learning and disposition and therefore tend to look for careers that do not involve thinking and self-gear tasks.

Despite all these circumstances such schools do not shrink from their responsibility towards parents and teachers. On the contrary, they add on their commitment to other dimensions.

The School And Its Larger Society:

After a sports day program a parent of a middle class background remarked, "Children of poor families were remarkable in the races. Even with uniforms you can make it out...just see the smiles on their faces when they receive a prize". She said further, "But don't you think there are now more poor children in the school?"

Another parent followed, "Earlier my child did not even know the word 'paagal' but now he is using all the 'gaali' that he has learnt in the bus. I think there should be a teacher in the vehicle to ensure that innocent children do not get influenced by others".

Such situations led NIRMAN to initiate 'neighborhood meetings' where people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds shared their worries and also reflected on their responsibilities in dealing with such matters. These also facilitated personal acquaintance and social bonds among

people.

Schools that adhere to our constitutional mandate should provide equal opportunities to all children regardless of their social economic background. But there are numerous challenges in integrating 'fee-paying' and 'non fee paying' students in a contemporary India that is still struggling between a modern and a traditional identity.

It is not easy for parents and to some extent teachers to accept a school that is open to the marginalized. Laws alone have never been successful in changing the situation or the thought process. And, while schools need to focus on the commitment to improve quality, they cannot visualize a separation of the social from the cognitive or emotional from the physical. The question is thus one of the development of our children and the future of our society, regardless of the various challenges that come along the way.

Indeed, it is a larger question of connection with humanity.

The School And Its Changing Context:

I finally turn to the issue that a school faces at the systemic level.

Recent developments in educational policy show a trend towards opening up India's educational sector to foreign investment. The idea is to empower private bodies with self regulatory mechanisms to bring quality while sharing the responsibility of government in education. While this issue has been a welcome move in some quarters and much is still debated, we are more concerned about schools that want to bring about a transformation.

Investment and sustenance have been critical to schools that work to execute a vision. Inadequate funds prevent the best talent pool of our youth from staying in such challenging and creative jobs. These schools tend to become platforms of capacity building for budding professionals who opt for more viable options after their 'internship' with the school is over.

A single step by the government, quite similar to the liberalizing policy in higher education, can do a lot to support such schools. Precisely, if they are granted a 'board affiliation' this would enable parents and teachers to visualize a secured future of children and of their jobs, respectively, and above all would provide the schools strength to pursue their goals with more rigor. While this could well not prevent teachers

from switching to more lucrative jobs if the opportunity arises, it could certainly hold a lot of people who wish to seriously commit themselves to a life time in education.

Today, education has a huge business potential and an affiliation with a national board makes most schools flourish with large numbers of students. But ironically, affiliation does not come easily to institutions that work with a strong philosophy and vision. Such schools face a huge setback due to rigid bureaucratic norms. Deprived of accredited status, they cannot indulge in economies of scale and are labeled as 'islands of excellence'.

A question that emerges is - can such creative endeavors truly be scaled? Or can even the small get its due share of appreciation and support as does the big?

Conclusion:

What keeps such organizations going despite all the problems? Perhaps, with each challenge, come hopes for success and the desire to overcome hurdles that arise from people, resources, state policies and issues that have confronted our society for ages.

Children give immense confidence to such schools. Their enjoyment and participation in every process of learning gives glimpses of their later commitment to the society as adults.

The strength also comes from teachers who find pleasure in sharing a common space of learning with the school organization and the community; who realize the necessity of growing up as skilled professionals and paving the way - not only for their own continued growth but also for social

change of the wider community.

A second silver lining is the aspect of autonomy. These schools allow a unique kind of partnership between the management and the community where the boundaries between them are transparent. Visioning and execution in such schools is a shared enterprise and thus, leadership is pluralistic in nature. This shared belief and understanding evolves with an awareness of ongoing needs and the desire to initiate and address issues.

Leadership in such schools stems from a vision which does not come as 'awe' for people who keep connecting to it in various ways. It is reflected in each little thing that happens in and around the school such as an action of the bus driver who upon reading the morning newspaper of a possible 'bandh' in the city takes the initiative of telephoning a core group of parents and acting on quick decisions. It is also reflected in initiatives of civil society groups who collaborate with the school on crucial issues such as environmental pollution or inter- religious faith and understanding.

The realization of the vision also follows a natural course of action; it is not forced but is an integral part of its people, their personal initiatives, self direction and motivation. Autonomy provides such schools a choice not to replicate strategies of existing educational structures, but to develop a unique framework that blends with situation-specific demands, with continuous introspection and encompassing objectives as envisioned in our constitution.

Where there is such an underlying inner force, collaborative effort and continuous orientation towards change, there is transformation and there is... EDUCATION

Priya Iyer is a member of the Azim Premji Foundation Schools team, Bangalore. A teacher for over 17 years, prior to her current role, she worked at NIRMAN a not-for-profit organization in Varanasi where she was the Head of its innovative school 'Vidyashram'. Apart from running the school, Priya thoroughly enjoys teaching children, creating projects in arts and engaging in community programs. She may be contacted at priya@azimpremjifoundation.org.

