



A Systemic Approach to Promoting Democratic Education in Schools

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The National Education Policy of India made a powerful assertion that “[e]ducation is fundamental for achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development ... and our ability to provide high-quality educational opportunities to them [students] will determine the future of our country” (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, p. 3). However, curriculum and pedagogy experienced in Indian classrooms have not supported this vision adequately (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2014, 2018, 2020; Probe Team, 1999; Singh & Sarkar, 2012). Schooling systems have remained largely unchanged for a century, even today grooming students to be obedient and efficient assembly line workers of an industrial economy or clerks for our long-gone British colonists. Such schooling cannot prepare children for the complex social and economic reality of our world today—a concern shared internationally (Deming, 2017; Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015; Winthrop et al., 2017; World Economic Forum, 2016). At the Acres Foundation (AF), we are

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attempting to address this problem by consciously designing key elements of our schooling model—at a *systems* level—to reflect the values of democratic education such as liberty, equity, the empowerment of individuals and community to participate in decision-making and problem-solving, and the promotion of collaboration across stakeholders.

AF SCHOOLS: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

AF operates two K–10 schools in Mumbai, India, as of 2022. The schools are *private-unaided* institutions that are managed and funded privately without help from the government. Almost 50% of school-going children in India study at private institutions and this number is steadily increasing because of favorable parent perception toward the quality of private schooling in comparison to public schooling (Centre for Civil Society, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2019). Several examples of private networks of schools exist in India, with some operating only two or more schools (like AF at present) and some even growing up to more than 50,000 students spread across 20 campuses like at the largest school in the world—City Montessori School (City Montessori School, n.d.). The first AF school was established in 2012. It is known as The Green Acres Academy (TGAA-C) and is located in Chembur, a neighborhood in central Mumbai. The school serves 2892 students from grades Nursery (or pre-kindergarten for three-year-old children) up to Grade 10, as of May 2022. The second school was established in 2015. It too is known as The Green Acres Academy (TGAA-M) and is located in Mulund, a northeastern suburb of Mumbai. The school serves 1022 students from grades Nursery up to Grade 6, as of May 2022. Both schools are affiliated with the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education Examination (ICSE)—a well-established and popular education board in India with more than 2300 school partners. The medium of instruction at both schools is English. Indian schools adhere to a three-language formula, where Hindi and English (the two official languages of India) are taught (Joshi et al., 2017; Saini, 2000) along with a third language that is usually the state language (Sharma & Ramachandran, 2009). It is quite common for private schools to use English as a medium for instruction (Meganathan, 2011), since it is perceived as a necessity for socio-economic success in India. The student fees are on average between Rs. 108,000 and Rs. 124,000 or US \$1400

and US \$1600, placing the student families predominantly in the *middle class*.¹

A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Our mission at AF is to empower students to become *changemakers*—individuals that actively support social equity and environmental sustainability through the use of entrepreneurial strategies that leverage innovative solutions to bring about positive change.² This end cannot be achieved by addressing the curriculum alone, or teacher professional development alone, or any other element of the schooling process alone. Instead a systems approach to change is needed (Senge, 1990, 2006; Senge et al., 2000). Decades of research has shown that there are a few key elements that significantly influence student learning—the curriculum, teacher capacity, leadership, school climate, parent engagement, and structures for data-driven decision-making for continuous improvement (Bryk, 2010; Murphy, 2013; Preston et al., 2017; Sammons, 1995; Sebring et al., 2006). At AF, we have intentionally designed these six elements of our schooling system to reflect the findings of current research and the values of democratic education.

Curriculum

Democratic education must leverage a curriculum that promotes equitable opportunities for learning. Research shows that the most effective and equitable approach to learning is one that acknowledges the fact that learners progress through a phased mastery process that begins with developing foundational knowledge before being able to meaningfully turn it into skills and competencies with the help of authentic opportunities for application (Alexander, 2003; Ashman et al., 2020; Bransford et al., 2000; Ericsson & Pool, 2016; Hattie, 2008; Kirschner et al., 2006; Mayer, 2004;

¹ Estimating that the average Indian household will spend about 10% of its income toward schooling (Centre for Civil Society, 2017), we can hypothesize that our students' families earn an average of Rs. 12 lakh per year, which would position them somewhere in the *middle class* that constitutes around 13% of households in India (Jasuja & Khan, 2017).

² AF's student outcome statement is inspired by a body of literature related to democratic and transformative citizenship education, presented in publications like Alden Rivers et al. (2015), Bandinelli and Arvidsson (2013), Banks (2015), Drayton (2006), Nagaoka et al. (2015), and UNESCO (2015), among others.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Ohlsson, 2011; Rosenshine, 2009; Sawyer, 2006; Stockard et al., 2018; Sweller et al., 1998; Willingham, 2021). We must first build fluency in reading, writing, and math, along with core knowledge in the humanities, arts, and science, *before* engaging students in higher-order application work through projects and such experiential learning engagements. This might not align with the ideology of some purist *constructivists* that insist student learning must begin and end with student-directed experiential activities. But it ensures that *all* students are given the opportunity to build the same core knowledge base in school—a prerequisite for being able to engage in higher-order thinking, instead of leaving it up to the influence of their personal circumstances like parental education, parental involvement and beliefs about schooling, household income level, family climate, and other such factors. Learners without foundational knowledge—often low-income or special education needs—will not have the same *opportunities to learn* as more privileged learners simply because they do not possess the requisite prior knowledge needed to connect with and build on new ideas being introduced (Gee, 2008). This will lead to learning gaps within the student population, which is a serious issue because all the higher-order competencies that we prize in the twenty-first century and earlier are built on the foundation of essential knowledge and skills (Nagaoka et al., 2015). Building foundational skills and knowledge requires deliberate practice with just-right challenges that are followed up with precise and immediate feedback through the learning process. In order to accommodate these expectations within the constraints of rather large classrooms typical in the Indian schooling context, AF has turned to digital adaptive technology for math and literacy that (a) engages students in personalized learning pathways and (b) provides teachers with real-time student data that supports differentiated instruction in ways that would otherwise be impossible. We have also introduced one-on-one devices in the classroom across all subjects to avail of these benefits.

In addition to promoting equity in learning opportunities, the curriculum in a democratic school must also explicitly engage students with content related to citizenship and personal leadership. AF has designed two in-house programs to address this need. Further, we extended the school day to create space in the student time table to accommodate these programs. Our Transformative Citizenship Program engages students in the study of key aspects of the Indian Constitution (Ministry of Law and Justice Legislative Department, 2020) and the UN Declaration of Human

Rights (United Nations, n.d.-a), before critically examining the current state of problems related to the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.-b) and mobilizing learners into social action projects that aim at addressing the studied issues. At the same time, students are also engaged in a *homeroom class* at the start of each day where AF's Socio-Emotional Learning and Personal Leadership program is implemented. This program is built on the theoretical foundation of CASEL—a research-based framework for supporting students to develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Payton et al., 2000).

Teacher Capacity

Democratic education entails collaboration and the building of individual and community capacity to participate in decision-making and problem-solving processes. These characteristics are reflected in AF's job-embedded professional development (PD) model. Indian schools typically provide one-size-fits-all workshops conducted by external experts, where teacher voice is completely absent in the PD process and they are only expected to be passive recipients of knowledge (Das et al., 2013; Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2018; Sinha et al., 2016). Such engagements have very little influence on classroom instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Knight, 2002). Instead, a large body of research shows that effective PD is characterized by active engagement in the learning process through reflection and collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Hattie, 2008, 2015; Little, 2003; Rust, 1999; Smylie et al., 2001). At AF, we have created a PD model that consists of multiple complementary lines of action that reflect these characteristics.

One such approach is establishing learning communities at the school and network level. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are focused on improving teacher practice and student learning by having teachers engage in repeating cycles of inquiry and reflection together (Dogan et al., 2016; Vescio et al., 2008). Practitioners teaching the same grade, or same subject, meet together on a weekly basis with a structured agenda that is focused on using classroom data to collaboratively solve problems and design innovations related to teaching and learning. Similar spaces for collaborative learning are organized at the network level (NLCs) with department leaders across both TGAA-C and TGAA-M school campuses participating. PLCs are a powerful means of providing voice and agency to

teachers—two ideals that Indian policy has constantly been promoting but that have been persistently missing in schools (Sarangapani et al., 2018; Batra, 2005, 2009).

Another approach for PD is ongoing classroom observations and feedback by peers. Such engagements support and encourage collaboration among team members, create a culture of sharing and learning among peers, and promote the distribution of evidently good practice in the unique context of the school (Bruce & Ross, 2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hamilton, 2014; Millis, 1992). Teachers are supported by leaders to make time in their monthly schedules to accommodate peer observations at AF. Also, protocols to ensure the expression of positive and constructive feedback post-observations have been set in place. Opening one's classrooms to peers is not at all typical in Indian schools, and hence this required tremendous culture building efforts on the part of the leadership in order to implement successfully.

Finally, yet another approach for PD implemented at AF is formal teacher evaluation termed as “RevDev” (review and development)—a 360-degree mid-year exercise that provides each teacher with a comprehensive report on their performance based on data collected from instructional leaders, peers, students, and self-evaluations. Classroom observation data, student learning data, teacher performance data on workshop assessments, and perception data related to their general professionalism and participation in the community, all come together in a report to provide a holistic view of the teacher's performance. They are then taken through a workshop to help them analyze the data in their own reports and conclude with SMART³ goals for self-improvement that they record in their Self Development Plan. Teacher agency, reflection, and collaboration are prominent in this capacity-building process. RevDev report scores are also used by the administration to determine annual performance-linked incentives in a fair and reliable data-backed manner, instead of the typical practice of having school leaders solely use their discretion and determine increments as they please. RevDev has been one of the more complex interventions applied in our schools—teachers reflexively rejected it at first, out of fear of being judged by stakeholders. But, over time, as a culture of trust and belonging was built in the school community, they came to see that the process actually created an incentive system that is much more fair and democratic.

³Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound.

School Climate

The foundation of a positive socio-emotional climate is set by AF's values that aim at promoting transparency and honesty, trust, and collaboration, among other ideals reflective of a democratic education. These ideals were not established as directives by the school management. They were determined through an extensive group thinking exercise, which included the entire teacher body and school leaders across both schools along with the AF management team, in order to promote stakeholder voice. Built on the foundation of these values is the ideal of *inclusion* that AF has wholeheartedly committed itself to, inspired by the principles of multicultural education (Banks, 2015). AF's admissions protocols and schools administrative policies are intentionally aimed at promoting solidarity and equity across race, gender, caste, and ability. Further, the schools have adopted a research-based (Burns et al., 2005; Poon-McBrayer, 2018; Vaughn et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2010) multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) approach to effectively serve students with special educational needs—whether these needs arise from disabilities or poor academic foundations. This is a proactive rather than reactive approach to supporting children identified as being academically at-risk, with a range of interventions being provided systematically to help *all* students succeed, through the use of evidence-based pedagogy beginning with general education and increasing in intensity depending on students' response to specific interventions (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2015; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Kauffman & Badar, 2020; Sugai & Horner, 2009). An important goal is to help students with exceptional needs to receive these services while allowing them to be placed in the *least restrictive environment* (the general classroom) as much as possible. This is in stark contrast to prevalent practice of diagnosing and labeling students, pulling them out of the classroom and away from their peers, and sending them to the school's "resource center" for academic remediation during the school day.

Parent Engagement

Democratic education entails the capacity-building and involvement of key stakeholders such as parents in decision-making processes. In addition to creating and conducting digital and live parent workshops and parent meetings throughout the year to update them on the why, what, and how of classroom instruction, we also collect parent feedback through

anonymous surveys on all the key aspects of the school's functioning. This feedback is collected throughout the year and more comprehensively as part of the school's mid-year 360-degree review. The feedback is then analyzed by the school leadership team and strategic improvement plans are developed based on the data. These plans are shared with all stakeholders. The idea is to give parents a voice and leverage their unique perspective for the purpose of improving the school's services. Such practices are in stark contrast to the tradition of maintaining an arm's distance between the school and parents.

Data-Driven Decision-Making for Continuous Improvement

Involving stakeholders in decision-making implies that first the institution must have the capacity to make relevant data available in a timely manner to facilitate such decision-making processes. Research has shown that data-driven decision-making systems in schools promote student learning and optimal use of resources, by engaging team members in continuous cycles of action, reflection on action and its outcomes, and strategic improvement planning in order to achieve the team's goals and vision (Fullan, 2005; Hawley & Sykes, 2007; Copeland, 2003; Flumerfelt & Green, 2013; Park et al., 2013; Wilka & Cohen, 2013). One of the most complex aspects of AF's school model is its system for collecting data, visualizing it in dynamic ways to promote meaning-making and reflection, analyzing it collaboratively, and developing strategic improvement plans at the network, school, and department level. Data collected includes (a) student learning data from universal screening tests, formative assessments, and summative tests; (b) teacher and leader performance data related to RevDev; and (c) perception data about school climate, parent engagement, and all the other key elements of the AF school system. This data is then processed and presented to stakeholders at different levels including grade level or subject level PLCs, NLCs, head of departments, apex-level school leaders, and AF's board of directors. Decision-making and strategic improvement planning that result from the analysis process are decentralized to include those most knowledgeable of ground realities. Using data to make decisions minimizes bias and empowers stakeholders across the organization to have more voice and choice in directing the future of their organization.

Leadership

Collaboration and participatory decision-making processes are the hallmark of democratic education. These ideals can only be realized if the school's leadership is structured in a supportive way. Culturally, Indian managerial practices tend to follow a rather *transactional* or *paternalistic* leader-follower relationship, where team members are willingly submissive to the directives of the leader (Mansur et al., 2017; Pauliené, 2012). Studies show that this kind of leadership may be unfavorably associated with task performance, citizenship behaviors, and team creativity (Aycan, 2006; Hiller et al., 2019). Traditionally, the principal is the apex leader of the school and is in charge of all academic and administrative oversight. Decision-making on all aspects is centralized and focused at this one singular point. However, this does not reflect the ideals of democratic education, and hence decision-making and power is decentralized at AF schools.

We follow a *distributed leadership* approach (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Harris, 2004; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Spillane, 2005; June; Spillane et al., 2001), where decision-making is shared across the organization in a way that ensures the person or team of people who have the most expertise and ground-level perspective related to a specific function are the ones who make decisions related to it. For example, teaching and curriculum decisions are made by the relevant grade-level or subject-level PLCs and supported by subject-level head of departments. Similarly administrative issues and operational or management issues are dealt with by teams and individuals who are experts in those fields. There is complementarity and collaboration, but no overlap of functions. Even at the apex level of leadership, separate individuals are appointed to drive distinct but complementary functions of teaching and curriculum, schools operations and management, and administration. The “Principal” in one school might be a teaching and curriculum expert, while in another school might be an operations and management expert. But the Principal is never the apex leader for *all* functions as typically experienced in traditional schools. Further, AF schools are directed at the apex level by Governing Councils that constitute representatives from all the different departments of the schools—teaching and curriculum, IT, HR, administration, and others. This ensures that power is not held by any single individual, but rather a multidisciplinary and collaborative body.

SUMMARY

AF has taken a systems-level approach to establishing democratic education in its schools. Addressing one key input or process in isolation from others will not allow for effective and enduring change. For example, addressing the curriculum alone will not suffice—we need to simultaneously build teacher capacity to implement it effectively, parent support to reinforce what is studied at school, a trusting and positive school climate that encourages open dialogue in the classroom, student data that allows teachers to adjust the course of the curriculum as it unfolds, and leadership support to ensure that all the required resources of time, instructional materials, data, and teacher autonomy are available. Similarly, addressing teacher capacity alone or leadership alone would not suffice without the simultaneous alignment of all other key inputs and processes. As one might imagine, this is no easy task. Challenges have been faced by AF from all sides. We experienced resistance from parents and teachers for almost every positive change initiative we attempted. We had to make very difficult decisions related to resource prioritization—whether it was related to time allocation for different subjects in the student time table, or staffing structures, or curricular investments, among many other matters. Trade-offs must be made—one cannot have it all. Involving stakeholders in decision-making processes does improve buy-in; however, it also makes the process more complex and time-consuming to facilitate. There is risk attached as well, especially when an organization’s culture is still developing and not everyone imbibes its values and espouses its vision wholeheartedly. However, time, patience, a very high benchmark for quality, and great resilience under pressure continue to see AF through its ambitious mission.

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