

When Culture Overrides Design: School Culture as a Mediating Variable in Educational Change in Indian K-12 Schools

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Research Overview

This study examines school culture as a mediating variable in educational change in Indian K-12 schools. Drawing on a mixed-methods study conducted across students, teachers, leaders, and parents, alongside a pilot SEL intervention measuring relational trust and teacher wellbeing, it argues that cultural conditions determine whether educational innovation takes root regardless of design quality.

Purpose of Study

Educational reform efforts consistently underperform their design intent. New curricula are adopted and quietly abandoned. Professional development programs launch with enthusiasm and lose momentum within months. Intervention programs designed with care fail to persist beyond initial implementation. The standard explanation focuses on design quality: inadequate materials, insufficient training, poor programme structure. This paper proposes a different explanation.

The problem is not primarily the design. It is the cultural conditions into which the design is introduced. School culture, defined here as the values, relational structures, reward systems, and unspoken norms that govern how an institution actually operates, is the missing variable in educational change research and practice. This paper examines that argument empirically, drawing on mixed-methods research conducted across stakeholder groups in an Indian K-12 school context, and asks what it means for how researchers and practitioners approach educational change.

The study is situated within a broader concern in Indian education: the persistent gap between schools' stated commitments to holistic, experiential, and relational learning and the exam-oriented, compliance-driven cultures that consistently override those commitments in practice. This gap is not unique to India, but India's schooling context makes it visible with particular clarity, providing a case study whose patterns extend well beyond its geographic boundaries.

Research Methods

The study employs a mixed-methods design comprising two linked components. The first is a needs assessment conducted across four stakeholder groups (students, teachers,

school leaders, and parents) at a high-income private school in India. Data collection instruments included quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, analysed through descriptive statistics and thematic coding respectively. The needs assessment examined stakeholder perceptions of school culture, academic priorities, teacher wellbeing, and the tension between achievement-oriented and holistic learning goals.

The second component is a pilot SEL intervention with ten teachers from the same school, designed to address relational trust and social-emotional competency as cultural entry points for change. The intervention comprised eight two-hour weekly workshops. Outcome measures included three validated instruments: the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983), the Teacher Occupational Stress Factor Questionnaire (TOSFQ; Clark, 1980), and the Panorama Social Emotional Learning Teacher Subscale. A pre-test and post-test design was used alongside qualitative data collection through exit tickets, reflective journals, facilitator reports, and researcher observation notes. Data triangulation across quantitative and qualitative sources strengthened internal validity.

Results and Discussion

Needs assessment findings revealed a systemic tension present across all four stakeholder groups: a genuine desire for open, experiential, and relational learning coexisting with institutional conditions (exam pressure, compliance-oriented leadership, risk-averse reward structures) that consistently override it. Significantly, this tension was not experienced by participants as contradiction. It was experienced as simply how things are, a naturalisation of misalignment between stated values and actual culture that represents, this paper argues, the central mechanism by which educational change fails to take root.

The SEL intervention produced meaningful gains across outcome measures. Post-intervention data showed improvements in empathy, stress management, and relational trust among participating teachers. The program achieved a 4.64 out of 5 satisfaction rating, 100% attendance across all eight sessions, and universal recommendation among participants. Qualitative findings revealed six themes: enhanced self-awareness and reflection; implementation of SEL in classroom and personal life; challenges and areas for improvement; effective strategies and tools; positive impact of the workshops; and desire for more resources and continued learning.

However, facilitator data and researcher observation notes revealed a persistent structural counter-force. Administrative interruptions, leadership inconsistency, and scheduling conflicts consistently treated the program as peripheral to institutional priorities. These findings suggest that relational trust can be meaningfully shifted through targeted intervention, but that such shifts remain fragile without sustained leadership commitment and structural support. Cultural change is possible, though it is also structurally vulnerable in ways that programme design alone cannot address.

Together, these findings support the paper's central argument: school culture is not a background condition for educational change but the primary variable determining whether

change takes hold. For researchers, this demands greater attention to cultural readiness as a pre-condition for intervention design. For practitioners and school leaders, it demands upstream investment in the relational and structural conditions that make change sustainable, before a new programme is introduced rather than after it has already failed.