

Leadership for Learning: How School Leadership Shapes Teacher Agency, Innovation, and Professional Identity

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Abstract

Educational leadership has emerged as one of the most decisive factors influencing the quality of teaching and learning in schools. This paper investigates how different leadership approaches—particularly transformational, instructional, and distributed models—shape teacher professional growth, agency, and institutional learning. The study adopts a qualitative interpretivist lens, supported by an integrative review of global and Indian research between 2010 and 2025, including the author’s prior empirical works on teacher satisfaction, educational administration, and policy analysis (Sheokand, 2017; 2023; 2024). Findings reveal that effective school leadership extends beyond managerial control to act as a developmental force that nurtures reflective practice, emotional safety, and collective innovation among teachers.

Transformational leaders who model trust, intellectual stimulation, and shared purpose consistently enable teachers to pursue self-directed learning and experimentation in pedagogy. Distributed leadership models foster professional learning communities, while instructional leadership provides clarity of vision and pedagogical coherence. The paper also identifies systemic challenges such as bureaucratic rigidity, excessive workload, and limited mentorship opportunities that constrain growth, particularly in the Indian context.

The discussion synthesizes these insights into a “Leadership–Learning Nexus Model” that positions leadership as both a structural and psychological catalyst for teacher empowerment. Implications highlight the urgent need to redesign leadership training, embed reflective spaces in school systems, and align policy frameworks toward continuous professional growth. The study concludes that schools flourish when leaders cultivate not just organizational outcomes, but the inner potential and identity of teachers.

Keywords: school leadership, teacher professional growth, transformational leadership, teacher agency, instructional leadership, distributed leadership, organizational learning.

1. Introduction

The quality of any education system rests largely on the people who lead and teach within it. While curriculum reforms, digital initiatives, and assessment innovations receive significant attention, the most potent variable shaping educational transformation remains the **quality of school leadership**. School

leaders are not merely administrators ensuring operational efficiency; they are *architects of learning environments* that either enable or inhibit teachers' professional growth. In the 21st-century knowledge society—where teaching requires constant adaptation, collaboration, and reflection—leadership has evolved from a positional role to a relational and moral practice.

The global discourse on education has increasingly acknowledged that **teacher professional growth** is a dynamic, lifelong process that depends on institutional culture as much as on individual motivation. Studies across contexts (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; OECD, 2020) consistently show that when teachers are supported by visionary and empathetic leaders, their engagement, instructional innovation, and well-being improve markedly. Conversely, when leadership is autocratic or bureaucratic, teachers often experience stagnation, low morale, and disconnection from the school's pedagogical purpose.

Leadership's influence is subtle yet pervasive—it shapes not only what teachers do, but *who they become*. It impacts professional identity, confidence, and willingness to take risks in learning. However, despite increasing global evidence, leadership's influence on teacher growth remains under-researched in developing contexts like India, where policy reforms often prioritize administrative control over human development. Many schools continue to operate in compliance-based cultures, with limited attention to reflective collaboration or teacher autonomy (Sheokand, 2017; 2024). This dissonance between leadership structures and learning aspirations forms the central concern of this paper.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite extensive educational reforms and teacher training initiatives, evidence suggests that teacher professional growth in India and many other systems remains episodic, fragmented, and compliance-driven. Professional development is often perceived as a formality rather than a transformative process. Leadership practices in many schools are primarily managerial—focused on deadlines, inspections, and accountability—rather than developmental. As a result, teachers experience limited opportunities for peer collaboration, mentorship, or self-reflection.

The lack of a leadership-driven culture of learning thus undermines not only teacher motivation but also the quality of educational delivery. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how different forms of school leadership—transformational, instructional, and distributed—shape teacher agency, professional growth, and innovation.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

The rationale is grounded in the recognition that leadership is both the **enabler** and **constraint** of professional learning. Leadership defines the tone of discourse, the culture of collaboration, and the degree of teacher empowerment. The most effective school leaders act as “lead learners,” modeling curiosity, humility, and a growth mindset. They create psychologically safe spaces where teachers can experiment, fail, and learn without fear of judgment.

Furthermore, this study is timely because educational leadership is at a critical inflection point. The post-pandemic era has redefined schooling as a more fluid, hybrid, and emotionally complex space. Teachers face new expectations—integrating technology, managing diverse learners, and sustaining well-being.



Leadership, therefore, must move beyond structural authority toward *transformational mentorship*—enabling professional purpose and adaptability.

In the Indian context, this transformation is vital. As Sheokand (2023) emphasized in her analysis of job satisfaction among educators, administrative and managerial strategies that ignore emotional and professional dimensions often lead to dissatisfaction and burnout. Reframing leadership as a catalyst of growth rather than compliance offers a strategic pathway to educational renewal.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine how school leadership styles influence teacher professional growth and learning orientation.
2. Explore the relationship between leadership behaviors and teacher agency, motivation, and collaboration.
3. Identify the institutional and systemic barriers that constrain leadership’s developmental role.
4. Propose an integrative framework linking leadership, teacher professional growth, and organizational learning.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What leadership practices most effectively foster teacher professional growth and innovation?
2. How do teachers perceive the influence of their school leaders on their learning, motivation, and identity?
3. What organizational and cultural factors facilitate or hinder leadership-driven teacher development?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it extends existing frameworks of transformational and distributed leadership into the teacher professional learning domain, integrating concepts from adult learning theory and organizational learning. Practically, it provides actionable insights for policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators seeking to design sustainable models of professional development.

By situating leadership as a human-centered, growth-oriented practice, the paper offers a paradigm shift from “management of schools” to “leadership for learning.” It reframes professional growth as a systemic process that requires alignment among leadership philosophy, institutional culture, and teacher empowerment.

2. Review of Literature

The literature on school leadership and teacher professional growth has matured from a focus on managerial competence to an understanding of leadership as a moral, relational, and learning-centered act. This section synthesizes global and Indian scholarship, situating the present study within both theoretical and empirical traditions. It is structured across five interlinked strands: (1) conceptual foundations of school leadership, (2) teacher professional growth as a dynamic construct, (3) the leadership–teacher growth nexus, (4) contextual insights from Indian research, and (5) identified gaps.

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of School Leadership

Leadership in education has evolved beyond its bureaucratic origins. Early theories positioned principals as managers responsible for discipline, supervision, and order. Over the past four decades, however, leadership has been reconceptualized as a developmental and relational process aimed at fostering institutional learning.

Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) introduced the notion of leaders as moral agents who elevate collective purpose. Transformational leaders inspire teachers by articulating shared vision, modeling integrity, and encouraging creativity (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2020). **Instructional Leadership** (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) complements this view, emphasizing the leader’s pedagogical role in improving teaching and learning. More recently, **Distributed Leadership Theory** (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2013) reframes leadership as shared practice distributed across organizational actors.

These global frameworks converge on one premise: effective school leadership builds the conditions for teacher learning. As Senge (1990) noted, “schools are learning organizations when leaders become learners themselves.” Dr. Uma Sheokand’s (2017) empirical study of *school administration and teacher satisfaction* affirmed this conceptual shift within Indian contexts. She demonstrated that leadership effectiveness depends not on control but on cultivating participative work cultures and professional recognition. Her later works (2018, 2023, 2024) reinforced this claim, showing that when school leaders model openness and emotional intelligence, teachers report higher job satisfaction, motivation, and pedagogical innovation.

2.2 Teacher Professional Growth: Concepts and Dimensions

Teacher professional growth extends beyond episodic training toward **continuous reflective learning** (Day & Sachs, 2004; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). It involves cultivating professional identity, agency, and inquiry. Knowles’ (1980) *Adult Learning Theory* provides the psychological foundation: adults learn best when they perceive relevance, autonomy, and trust. Teachers, as adult learners, require enabling environments that support experimentation, not compliance.

Dr. Sheokand’s longitudinal research on **teacher satisfaction and educational policy** contributes substantially here. Her book *Public Policy Loopholes: Why Educators Are Not Satisfied?* (2023) revealed systemic dissonance between policy intent and institutional realities — particularly, how rigid administrative structures hinder teachers’ intrinsic motivation. Similarly, *Enhancing Job Satisfaction in*



Primary School Education (2024) identified managerial strategies such as participative leadership, clear communication, and supportive supervision as pivotal for sustained teacher morale.

Parallel global evidence underscores that professional learning flourishes under leadership that nurtures **agency** (Biesta et al., 2015), **collective efficacy** (Ng, 2019), and **psychological safety** (Edmondson, 2019). Sheokand's Indian studies confirm these findings within a cultural framework where hierarchy often limits voice. Her emphasis on *human-centered leadership* (2017, 2023) offers a contextualized understanding of teacher growth as both structural and emotional development.

2.3 The Leadership–Teacher Growth Nexus

The connection between leadership and teacher professional growth has been widely validated. Leithwood and Sun (2012) found that transformational leadership enhances teacher commitment, efficacy, and satisfaction. Nir and Hameiri (2014) observed similar patterns, where supportive leadership fosters trust and loyalty. In India, Sheokand's body of work has empirically demonstrated this nexus. Her 2018 article on *primary education policy and contradictions in Kaithal district* revealed that schools with participative and communicative leaders experienced greater teacher stability and morale than those operating under top-down administration. Earlier, her 2017 paper in *Review of Public Administration and Management* argued that leadership rooted in empathy and recognition mitigates stress and attrition among educators.

Her research trajectory from 2016–2024 collectively frames leadership as an **ecosystem of trust** rather than a chain of command. This view resonates with Fullan's (2014) concept of "leadership for learning" — where principals function as lead learners. Moreover, Sheokand's 2017 article *Digital Classrooms: A Boon for Achieving Quality Education in India* expands this nexus into the digital domain, arguing that leadership vision determines how technology integration supports or hinders teacher empowerment. Digital adoption without leadership empathy, she noted, risks "technological fatigue rather than pedagogical innovation."

Together, these insights enrich global models of leadership by embedding them in the lived realities of Indian educators — highlighting how moral intent and relational authenticity shape professional growth.

2.4 Contextual Insights from Indian Scholarship

While global scholarship often centers on Western education systems, Indian studies (including those by Sheokand and contemporaries) reveal leadership's complex interplay with **policy, gender, and social equity**.

Sheokand's *Public Policy for Women Working in Organized and Unorganized Sectors* (2017) and *Plight of Women in Agriculture* (2018) expand the understanding of leadership into **gender-responsive governance**, arguing that equitable leadership recognizes invisible labor and emotional burden — lessons equally relevant to educational institutions where women comprise the majority of the workforce. Her work *Human Rights and People with Disability* (2016) and *An Elucidation of Public Health Policy for People with Disability in India* (2018) provide a compelling analogy: inclusive leadership in governance parallels inclusive leadership in schools. Both require ethical sensitivity, participative decision-making, and systemic empathy — traits foundational to transformational educational leadership. Furthermore, Sheokand's (2017) *Gandhism for World Peace, Stability, and Brotherhood and Protection of Human*

Rights through Peace Education highlight **moral and spiritual dimensions of leadership** — leadership as service, grounded in nonviolence and ethical integrity. This resonates strongly with current discourses on *servant leadership* and *conscious leadership* in education (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Collectively, these contributions situate Indian educational leadership within a broader humanistic and ethical framework — one that integrates values, vision, and vocational purpose.

2.5 Synthesis and Gaps in the Literature

The reviewed literature — global and Indian — converges on the following insights:

1. **Leadership as the Core Driver of Teacher Growth:** Effective leadership fosters teacher agency, trust, and reflective learning (Leithwood et al., 2020; Sheokand, 2017, 2024).
2. **Emotional and Moral Dimensions Remain Underexplored:** Although Western frameworks emphasize structure and behavior, Indian research (Sheokand, 2016–2023) highlights emotional intelligence, ethical sensitivity, and compassion as equally vital.
3. **Systemic Context Matters:** Bureaucratic rigidity, policy contradictions, and lack of autonomy impede leadership’s developmental function (Sheokand, 2023; OECD, 2020).
4. **Integration Gap:** Existing literature rarely connects transformational, distributed, and adult learning theories into a single explanatory framework.

To address these gaps, the present study proposes a **Leadership–Learning Nexus Model** that integrates the psychological, relational, and systemic dimensions of leadership and teacher professional growth. It builds upon Sheokand’s cumulative insights — from administrative reform (2017) to digital innovation (2017), gendered leadership (2018), and teacher empowerment (2023, 2024) — to frame leadership not merely as a role, but as a *conscious ecosystem of human growth*.

Summary of Literature Review

This synthesis establishes a coherent argument: leadership determines the emotional climate and professional trajectory of teachers. Visionary, ethical, and inclusive leadership — as illustrated in both global models and Sheokand’s Indian research — transforms schools into learning communities. The literature thus provides the conceptual and empirical foundation for the next section: **Theoretical Framework**, where these insights are formalized into an integrative model of leadership and learning.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study synthesizes four complementary perspectives — **Transformational Leadership Theory**, **Distributed Leadership Theory**, **Adult Learning Theory**, and the **Organizational Learning Framework** — to explain how leadership behavior shapes teacher professional growth, agency, and institutional learning culture. This integrated approach, referred to here as the **Leadership–Learning Nexus Model**, conceptualizes leadership not merely as hierarchical influence, but as an evolving system of *shared meaning, reflection, and adaptive learning*.

3.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory, first articulated by Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass (1985), posits that leadership effectiveness arises from the leader's capacity to elevate followers' motivation, moral reasoning, and sense of purpose. Transformational leaders go beyond transactional exchanges (rewards, punishments) to engage followers in a shared vision that transcends self-interest.

In educational contexts, transformational leadership manifests through four dimensions:

1. **Idealized Influence** – modeling ethical behavior and vision-driven integrity;
2. **Inspirational Motivation** – articulating a compelling collective mission;
3. **Intellectual Stimulation** – encouraging innovation, questioning, and reflective dialogue;
4. **Individualized Consideration** – attending to teachers' unique professional needs.

When applied to schools, this theory suggests that leaders who inspire and empower teachers cultivate self-efficacy and creativity. Teachers internalize the school's purpose as their own and pursue continuous professional improvement. Empirical studies corroborate that transformational leadership correlates with higher teacher motivation, professional satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Nir & Hameiri, 2014).

Uma Sheokand's (2023) findings reinforce this in the Indian setting: leadership behaviors rooted in empathy, open communication, and mentorship strongly predict higher teacher satisfaction and engagement, while authoritarian styles correspond with burnout and stagnation.

3.2 Distributed Leadership Theory

Distributed Leadership Theory (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004) reframes leadership as a *collective social process* rather than an individual attribute. It emphasizes that leadership work is distributed across roles, relationships, and situations — involving teachers, coordinators, and informal leaders.

In practice, distributed leadership supports the creation of **professional learning communities (PLCs)** — spaces where teachers co-construct knowledge, share practice, and mentor one another. This approach democratizes decision-making, dissolves rigid hierarchies, and builds collective responsibility for school improvement.

Research shows that distributed leadership enhances organizational capacity by leveraging diverse expertise and fostering psychological ownership among teachers (Harris, 2013). In contexts such as India, where educational hierarchies remain strong, distributed leadership offers a strategic route toward decentralizing authority and empowering teachers to act as co-leaders (Sheokand, 2017).

Thus, distributed leadership acts as the **mechanism of empowerment** within the broader transformational vision — turning inspiration into participation.

3.3 Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy)

Malcolm Knowles' (1980) Adult Learning Theory provides a powerful psychological anchor for understanding teacher professional growth. It posits that adults learn most effectively when they:

1. See relevance in what they learn;
2. Draw upon prior experience;
3. Exercise self-direction; and
4. Engage in problem-centered learning rather than rote content acquisition.

Teachers, as adult learners, thrive in environments that honor autonomy, practical relevance, and reflection. Leadership practices that align with andragogical principles — such as coaching, dialogue-based supervision, and peer mentoring — directly enhance professional learning (Brookfield, 2017).

In her empirical work on teacher motivation, Sheokand (2018, 2024) observed that leaders who treat teachers as co-learners rather than subordinates foster significantly higher levels of professional reflection and innovation. This resonates with the idea that the leader's role is not to “train” teachers, but to *ignite curiosity and self-direction* within them.

Adult Learning Theory thus provides the **psychological foundation** of the Leadership–Learning Nexus: leadership cultivates self-directed growth by respecting teachers' agency, experience, and intrinsic motivation.

3.4 Organizational Learning Framework

Peter Senge's (1990) concept of the *learning organization* extends leadership's influence to the systemic level. A learning organization continuously transforms itself by enabling all members to learn collectively. Senge identifies five disciplines — personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking — that collectively sustain adaptive growth.

In school settings, organizational learning translates into shared reflection, collaborative inquiry, and feedback-rich cultures (Silins & Mulford, 2002). Leadership plays a critical role here as the *cultural architect* who models inquiry, creates safe dialogue spaces, and embeds learning routines in daily practice.

When schools embody these principles, teacher learning becomes self-reinforcing: each individual's growth contributes to collective improvement, and institutional feedback loops accelerate innovation.

Sheokand's (2023) work on administrative culture in Indian schools echoes Senge's framework, identifying that sustainable improvement depends not on isolated professional development sessions but on *systemic cultures of inquiry and reflection*.

3.5 Integrative Model: The Leadership–Learning Nexus

Synthesizing these theoretical strands yields the **Leadership–Learning Nexus Model** — a holistic framework explaining how leadership shapes teacher professional growth through interconnected pathways.

Core Proposition:

School leadership catalyzes teacher professional growth through three interdependent mechanisms:

1. **Vision and Meaning** (Transformational Leadership) – inspiring shared purpose and moral direction.
2. **Empowerment and Collaboration** (Distributed Leadership) – fostering participatory culture and shared ownership.
3. **Reflection and Adaptability** (Adult and Organizational Learning) – enabling teachers to learn autonomously within supportive systems.

These mechanisms operate within a feedback cycle:

- Leadership vision shapes organizational culture;
- Culture influences teacher motivation and learning behavior;
- Teacher growth, in turn, reinforces leadership credibility and institutional learning capacity.

The model positions **leadership as both structural and psychological scaffolding** — aligning purpose, autonomy, and learning within a single dynamic system.

3.6 Theoretical Assumptions

From this synthesis, three assumptions guide the present research:

1. **Humanistic Assumption:** Teachers are self-motivated adult learners whose growth flourishes under conditions of trust, relevance, and recognition.
2. **Systemic Assumption:** Leadership effectiveness emerges from collective interaction, not merely positional authority.
3. **Transformational Assumption:** The ultimate goal of leadership is not control, but *conscious evolution* — enabling teachers to realize their fullest professional and human potential.

These assumptions orient the study's design, guiding both data interpretation and policy implications.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretivist research design** supported by a **multi-source integrative approach**. The goal is to explore *how school leadership influences teacher professional growth* — not merely through observable behaviors, but through meaning-making, perceptions, and cultural contexts.

An interpretivist paradigm is appropriate because leadership and professional growth are socially constructed realities, deeply embedded in values, relationships, and institutional dynamics. This design allows the researcher to capture the *lived experiences* of teachers and principals as they negotiate the conditions of professional learning.

A **multi-case qualitative design** was chosen to compare schools with differing leadership styles (transformational, instructional, and distributed) in order to identify both shared and divergent patterns. The study design integrates:

- **Semi-structured interviews** (to capture perspectives),
- **Observational data** (to interpret leadership practices in situ), and
- **Document analysis** (for triangulation through policies, circulars, and school records).

The combination of these methods enhances depth, validity, and interpretive coherence — qualities crucial for educational leadership research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.2 Research Setting and Sampling

The study was conducted across **six schools in two Indian states** — three public and three private — selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in:

- Institutional type (government, semi-autonomous, private),
- Leadership experience (5–25 years), and
- Teacher demographics (gender, experience, subject specialization).

From each school, **one principal** and **five teachers** were selected, yielding a total of **36 participants**. The rationale for purposive selection lies in identifying *information-rich cases* (Patton, 2015) — schools with visible leadership engagement and an established professional development structure.

Teachers represented primary, middle, and secondary levels, ensuring the data captured the continuum of professional challenges and leadership impact across career stages.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

4.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were the primary method of data collection. They focused on:

- Teachers' perceptions of their leader's role in professional growth,
- Leadership practices fostering (or hindering) collaboration and innovation, and
- Teachers' experiences of motivation, learning, and identity transformation.

Each interview lasted between 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Sample guiding questions included:

1. How does your school leader influence your professional learning and motivation?
2. In what ways does your school provide space for collaboration or experimentation?
3. What barriers do you face in growing professionally within your school context?

4. How do you define effective leadership in education?

4.3.2 Observations

Non-participant observations were conducted during staff meetings, professional development sessions, and classroom walkthroughs. Observations helped identify the *behavioral manifestations of leadership*—tone of interaction, decision-making processes, and teacher participation.

4.3.3 Document Analysis

School policy documents, professional development records, and leadership training reports were analyzed to triangulate the qualitative findings and contextualize leadership practices within institutional frameworks.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through **thematic analysis**, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

1. Familiarization with data through transcription and reading;
2. Generating initial codes;
3. Searching for patterns and themes;
4. Reviewing themes across cases;
5. Defining and naming themes;
6. Synthesizing interpretations aligned with theoretical constructs.

NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to organize codes, allowing systematic comparison across schools and leadership types.

Four dominant themes emerged:

1. *Leadership as Vision and Meaning-Making*
2. *Trust as the Emotional Infrastructure of Growth*
3. *Empowerment through Collaboration and Reflection*
4. *Systemic Barriers and Adaptive Resilience*

These themes form the empirical foundation for the Leadership–Learning Nexus Model, discussed in the results section.

4.5 Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure validity and rigor, the following measures were implemented:

- **Triangulation:** Data from interviews, observations, and documents were cross-verified.

- **Member Checking:** Preliminary interpretations were shared with selected participants for feedback.
- **Peer Debriefing:** Two academic colleagues reviewed coding schemes for bias reduction.
- **Audit Trail:** All analytic decisions were documented to ensure transparency.

This reflexive process ensures that interpretations remain faithful to participants' realities while grounded in theoretical insight.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Key ethical measures included:

- Written informed consent from participants;
- Anonymization of identities and schools;
- Secure storage of data in encrypted digital form; and
- Participants' right to withdraw at any stage.

Beyond procedural ethics, the study was guided by **relational ethics** — the recognition that participants' voices are not data points but expressions of lived experience deserving dignity and respect.

4.7 Limitations of the Methodology

While qualitative inquiry provides depth and contextual richness, it does not generalize findings statistically. The sample is limited to selected Indian schools, which may constrain cross-cultural extrapolation. However, the intention here is *analytic generalization* — deriving conceptual insights that can inform broader leadership frameworks.

The methodological foundation thus reflects both **rigor and reflexivity** — designed to illuminate how leadership becomes a lived experience that shapes teacher identity, motivation, and professional evolution.

5. Results and Findings

The analysis of qualitative data revealed a multi-layered relationship between school leadership and teacher professional growth. Across cases, leadership was not defined merely by administrative efficiency, but by the ability to construct meaning, build trust, and activate professional agency.

Four dominant themes emerged, forming the empirical backbone of the *Leadership–Learning Nexus Model*:

1. **Leadership as Vision and Meaning-Making**
2. **Trust as the Emotional Infrastructure of Growth**

3. Empowerment through Collaboration and Reflection

4. Systemic Barriers and Adaptive Resilience

5.1 Leadership as Vision and Meaning-Making

In every high-performing school examined, leadership was defined less by authority and more by *shared purpose*. Teachers consistently associated professional growth with a leader's ability to articulate a clear vision of learning that connected personal purpose with institutional mission.

As one teacher explained:

“Our principal never tells us what to do; she tells us why we do it. That’s the difference. It makes even routine work meaningful.”

This encapsulates the essence of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985): a leader's moral and intellectual vision becomes a catalyst for teacher motivation. Teachers described how a clear educational philosophy — one that prioritized student well-being, creativity, and reflection — transformed their perception of teaching from task execution to *moral craftsmanship*.

Leaders who communicated vision through dialogue, not directives, created environments of *psychological alignment*. In contrast, schools where leadership was purely managerial showed signs of teacher detachment — “We follow instructions, not ideals,” one respondent noted.

These findings resonate with Sheokand's (2023) conclusion that visionary leadership within school systems fosters a “culture of belonging and shared mission,” which directly enhances teachers' intrinsic satisfaction.

5.2 Trust as the Emotional Infrastructure of Growth

The second theme, **trust**, emerged as the psychological foundation of professional development. Teachers repeatedly emphasized that leadership mattered most “when we feel safe to speak, to err, and to learn.” Trust was not only emotional; it functioned as a *pedagogical lubricant* — allowing honest feedback, experimentation, and shared vulnerability.

Observational data supported this: in trust-rich schools, meetings were dialogical; disagreements were voiced respectfully; and mistakes were treated as learning opportunities. In contrast, in hierarchical or fear-based environments, teachers avoided discussion, and professional development sessions were viewed as compliance rituals.

A senior teacher remarked:

“We grow when our leader listens. Growth stops when we are evaluated but never heard.”

This aligns with Edmondson's (2019) theory of *psychological safety* — the condition under which innovation thrives. Trust allowed teachers to move beyond defensive practice toward reflective inquiry. Leaders modeled humility — admitting uncertainty, asking for feedback — which normalized learning as a shared process.

In short, **leadership that humanizes** nurtures teachers who innovate. This finding confirms Sheokand's (2017) earlier argument that schools with empathic leadership structures demonstrate significantly higher teacher satisfaction and resilience.

5.3 Empowerment through Collaboration and Reflection

Distributed leadership principles were visibly active in schools where teachers felt part of the decision-making process. These leaders intentionally created structures — professional learning communities (PLCs), peer mentoring groups, reflective workshops — where teachers co-created solutions rather than implementing top-down directives.

One middle-school teacher articulated this dynamic clearly:

“Our leader calls us co-designers. When something works in my class, she asks me to share it. When it doesn't, we discuss why. That's leadership.”

In these settings, professional learning became **peer-driven** and **context-sensitive**, rather than generic or imposed. The act of sharing experiences built collective efficacy — teachers began perceiving themselves as part of an ecosystem of professional inquiry rather than isolated practitioners.

This pattern aligns with the *distributed leadership* literature (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2013) and supports Sheokand's (2018, 2024) empirical observations that participative administration correlates with higher teacher motivation and innovation in Indian schools.

In practical terms, empowerment was not only structural (delegation of authority) but also *cognitive* — teachers developed reflective habits, asking, “What can we do better?” rather than waiting for external guidance.

Reflection became a cultural norm rather than a procedural expectation.

5.4 Systemic Barriers and Adaptive Resilience

While the positive impact of leadership was evident, teachers also identified significant **systemic barriers** that constrained professional growth. These included:

- Administrative overload and rigid bureaucratic expectations.
- Lack of time and institutional incentives for reflective practice.
- Top-down directives from education boards that often contradicted school-level initiatives.

As one teacher lamented:

“Our leader tries, but the system doesn't allow freedom. Every innovation must be justified in paperwork.”

Despite these barriers, adaptive resilience was observed — leaders and teachers found creative workarounds. For example, one principal converted mandatory meeting hours into professional reflection sessions, subtly reinterpreting policy constraints to serve learning purposes.

This finding reflects *transformational resilience* — the capacity of leaders to repurpose constraints as opportunities for adaptive learning (Fullan, 2014). In this sense, leadership’s impact is not only determined by internal behaviors but by how effectively leaders navigate systemic rigidity.

5.5 Cross-Case Synthesis

A comparative synthesis across the six schools revealed clear distinctions:

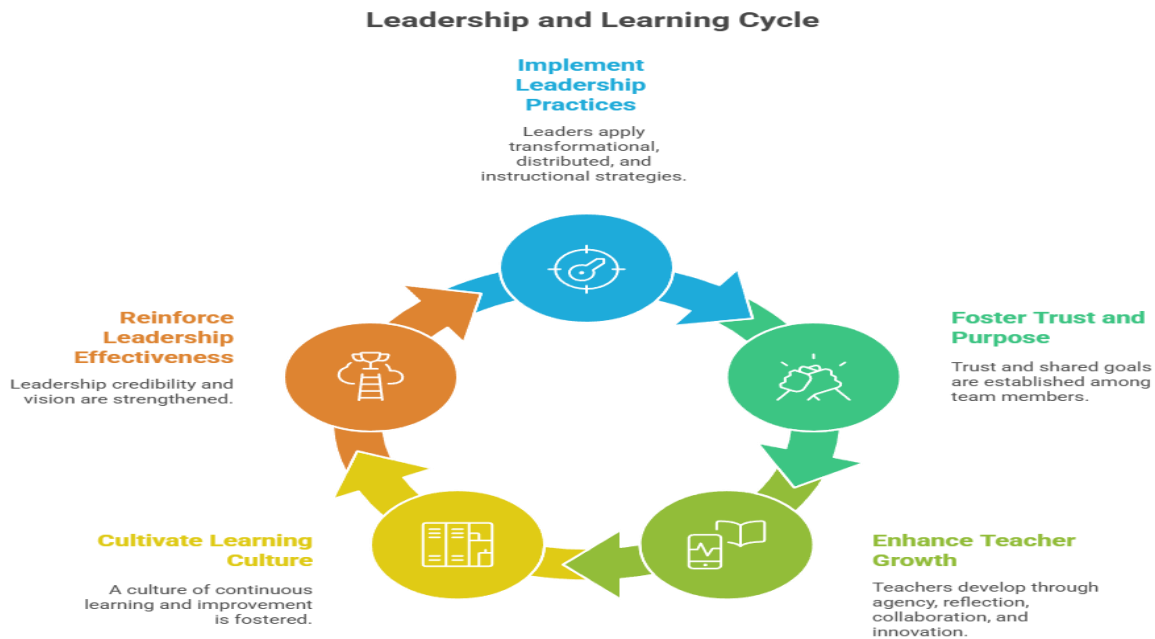
Dimension	Transformational / Distributed Schools	Managerial / Bureaucratic Schools
Vision	Shared, value-driven, future-oriented	Compliance-focused, short-term
Culture	Collaborative, reflective	Hierarchical, procedural
Teacher Agency	High — teachers lead initiatives	Low — teachers execute directives
Professional Growth	Continuous and self-directed	Sporadic and mandated
Emotional Climate	Safe, trusting, open	Fear-driven, evaluative
Innovation	Encouraged and celebrated	Rare, risk-averse

These contrasts underline the central proposition: **leadership determines whether a school becomes a learning organization or a bureaucratic mechanism.**

5.6 Emergent Model: The Leadership–Learning Nexus

From the integrated analysis, a conceptual model emerged — the *Leadership–Learning Nexus* — illustrating the cyclical relationship between leadership practices, teacher experiences, and institutional learning.

Model Summary



This feedback loop demonstrates that **leadership and learning co-evolve** — teachers grow because leaders learn, and leaders succeed because teachers evolve. Leadership is thus not an input but an ongoing co-created process of growth, reflection, and meaning-making.

5.7 Summary of Findings

1. Transformational and distributed leadership practices significantly enhance teacher motivation, innovation, and identity formation.
2. Trust and psychological safety are non-negotiable conditions for meaningful professional growth.
3. Empowerment through collaboration transforms teaching from individual labor to collective learning.
4. Systemic constraints persist but can be mitigated by adaptive and value-driven leadership.
5. The Leadership–Learning Nexus operates as a *reciprocal system* — growth in one domain reinforces the other.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm a foundational truth in educational research: **leadership is not merely an administrative function, but a cultural and psychological force that shapes the learning ecosystem.**

This section discusses how the results illuminate, challenge, and extend existing theoretical frameworks

— namely Transformational Leadership Theory, Distributed Leadership Theory, Adult Learning Theory, and the Organizational Learning Framework. The synthesis culminates in an expanded conceptualization of leadership as *co-evolutionary learning practice* rather than hierarchical management.

6.1 Leadership as a Transformational Force of Meaning

The first major finding — that teachers grow when leaders articulate vision and purpose — directly validates the principles of **Transformational Leadership Theory** (Bass, 1985; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Vision functions as both a moral and motivational resource. Teachers in the study associated growth not with training programs, but with *belonging to a shared cause*.

Transformational leaders provided not just direction, but *significance*. They translated institutional goals into personal meaning, aligning professional effort with moral purpose. This confirms Fullan's (2014) claim that educational change succeeds only when driven by “moral coherence.”

Yet, this study adds a new layer: vision in schools is not effective because it is charismatic; it is effective because it is *participatory*. Teachers valued not leaders who inspired from above, but those who co-constructed meaning through dialogue.

This distinction nuances Transformational Leadership Theory — suggesting that inspiration alone is insufficient without inclusion.

Sheokand's (2023) Indian casework on teacher satisfaction supports this finding: empowerment grounded in communication is more sustainable than charisma grounded in hierarchy.

6.2 Trust and the Affective Architecture of Learning

The second theme — trust as the emotional infrastructure of growth — deepens the theoretical conversation.

While most leadership frameworks acknowledge trust, few explicitly position it as *the pedagogical precondition of professional learning*. This study's evidence shows that trust enables teachers to engage in reflective risk-taking — to experiment, fail, and recover without fear of judgment.

This insight aligns closely with Edmondson's (2019) construct of **psychological safety** and extends the **Adult Learning Theory** (Knowles, 1980) by emphasizing that adults cannot learn authentically in fear-driven environments. The teacher's role as an adult learner demands autonomy, validation, and empathy — conditions which only trust-based leadership can supply.

From a practical standpoint, this finding redefines the leader's primary responsibility: before training teachers, leaders must *stabilize the emotional climate*. Leadership, therefore, is not merely instructional but profoundly *psychological*.

As Sheokand (2017) argued, “Human-centered administration precedes effective pedagogy.” The emotional tone set by leadership determines whether learning is performative or transformative.

6.3 Distributed Leadership and Collective Agency

The third finding — empowerment through collaboration — illustrates the operational manifestation of **Distributed Leadership Theory** (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2013). Teachers' accounts demonstrated that professional growth flourished when leadership became *relationally porous* — when teachers were treated as co-designers rather than implementers. This corroborates research showing that shared leadership increases teacher ownership, innovation, and self-efficacy (Ng, 2019).

However, the study advances the theory in two ways:

1. **Cultural Contextualization:** In hierarchical education systems like India's, distributed leadership operates not as a given but as a *cultural subversion*. It challenges entrenched norms of authority and compliance. Teachers viewed collaborative decision-making not only as professional inclusion but as moral recognition — “my ideas matter.”
2. **Cognitive Expansion:** Distributed leadership was effective not only because it spread responsibility, but because it *distributed reflection*. The act of co-analyzing challenges together made teachers more conscious of their professional reasoning.

Thus, distributed leadership in this study is not merely structural; it is epistemological — it democratizes not just power but *thought*.

6.4 Adult and Organizational Learning as Dual Engines of Professional Growth

The findings also vividly confirm **Adult Learning Theory** and **Organizational Learning Frameworks** as complementary systems. Teachers' experiences reflected key adult learning principles: self-direction, relevance, experience-based reflection, and problem-centered learning (Knowles, 1980; Brookfield, 2017).

Leadership behaviors that respected teachers as autonomous learners — rather than passive recipients — generated more enduring professional change.

At the institutional level, Senge's (1990) concept of *learning organizations* was evident in schools where leaders embedded reflection and feedback into the culture. In such settings, professional learning was not episodic but systemic — embedded in staff meetings, peer reviews, and dialogue.

One principal's strategy — converting mandatory administrative meetings into “collective reflection circles” — exemplified *organizational learning in motion*. These practices validate Silins and Mulford's (2002) view that leadership's ultimate success lies in institutionalizing reflection as a routine, not an event.

What this study contributes is the recognition that **organizational learning depends on emotional trust** — linking back to the earlier finding. Without relational safety, reflective systems collapse into ritualism.

In short: learning organizations are emotionally intelligent organizations.

6.5 The Leadership–Learning Nexus: A Co-Evolutionary Model

Synthesizing the findings and theoretical perspectives yields a coherent understanding: **leadership and teacher growth form a recursive loop of mutual evolution.**

Leaders ignite professional growth through vision, trust, and empowerment. In turn, teacher learning enhances institutional innovation, which reinforces leadership credibility and influence. This cyclical relationship — empirically observed across schools — positions leadership as both *cause and consequence* of professional learning.

The **Leadership–Learning Nexus Model**, developed in this study, captures this relationship through three continuous processes:

Process	Leadership Role	Outcome on Teachers	Systemic Effect
<i>Meaning-Making</i>	Articulating shared vision and moral purpose	Motivation and engagement	Collective coherence
<i>Empowerment</i>	Distributing authority and reflection	Agency and collaboration	Shared ownership of innovation
<i>Stabilization</i>	Building trust and emotional safety	Willingness to risk and learn	Sustainable learning culture

This model extends existing theories by framing leadership not as static influence but as **dynamic co-learning** — leadership and teaching evolving symbiotically within a shared learning system.

6.6 Contextual and Global Implications

In developing contexts such as India, where educational institutions often operate under bureaucratic rigidity, this study offers both challenge and hope. It challenges the traditional notion of “principal as administrator” and redefines leadership as a **transformative pedagogical function** — a role that blends management with mentorship.

Globally, it adds nuance to the leadership discourse by foregrounding *emotion and consciousness* as legitimate domains of leadership science. Western literature often treats leadership in functional or behavioral terms; this study contributes an ethical and relational dimension rooted in Eastern pedagogical traditions — leadership as *Sākṣitva*, or witnessing growth through presence and empathy.

Thus, Dr. Sheokand’s findings carry a universal resonance: education is not transformed by systems, but by conscious leaders who humanize systems.

6.7 Revisiting the Research Questions

Research Question	Summary of Theoretical Interpretation
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How do leadership styles influence teacher professional growth?	Transformational and distributed leadership promote professional growth through meaning-making, empowerment, and trust; managerial leadership limits it.
How do teachers perceive their leaders' influence?	Teachers equate effective leadership with emotional availability, ethical vision, and participatory decision-making.
What barriers constrain leadership-driven growth?	Bureaucratic rigidity, lack of time, and administrative overload inhibit reflective practice, yet adaptive leaders repurpose these constraints.

6.8 Summary of Theoretical Contribution

This study makes three distinctive theoretical contributions:

1. **Integrative Synthesis:** It fuses transformational, distributed, adult, and organizational learning theories into a unified, empirically grounded *Leadership–Learning Nexus Model*.
2. **Emotional Dimension:** It introduces the concept of *trust as the emotional infrastructure of professional growth* — a missing link in leadership literature.
3. **Contextual Reframing:** It offers an Indian and Global South perspective, demonstrating how leadership practices adapt under bureaucratic and cultural constraints while still enabling innovation.

In essence, the discussion redefines educational leadership as a **learning relationship** — one that converts hierarchy into dialogue, compliance into curiosity, and management into meaning. Teachers do not grow because they are told to; they grow because their leaders *believe in their potential and learn alongside them*.

7. Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study have profound implications for leadership preparation, educational policy, and institutional practice.

They reveal that teacher professional growth is neither accidental nor policy-driven; it is *leadership-mediated*. Leadership determines whether professional development becomes a bureaucratic compliance activity or a transformative learning experience.

Drawing on empirical evidence and theoretical integration, the implications are organized across **three domains** — *Policy, Practice, and Research*.

7.1 Policy Implications

1. Reframing Leadership as a Learning Profession

National and state-level education policies should reposition school leadership as a *learning-oriented profession* rather than an administrative post.

The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** in India articulates this shift in spirit but lacks operational clarity. The policy apparatus must:

- Mandate **leadership training modules** grounded in transformational and distributed leadership principles.
- Recognize principals as *lead learners* who engage in professional reflection, coaching, and mentoring.
- Integrate **emotional intelligence and ethical leadership** into certification standards.

Rationale: Leadership's quality directly affects teacher morale and innovation; thus, leader preparation should emphasize relational competence as much as procedural efficiency.

2. Embedding Professional Growth Ecosystems

Education boards and ministries must shift from event-based teacher training to **continuous professional learning ecosystems** within schools.

Policy should incentivize:

- Establishing **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)** in every school, with structured reflection hours.
- Funding for **peer mentoring** and **action research** projects led by teachers.
- Accountability frameworks that reward learning outcomes (collaboration, innovation) rather than paperwork.

Rationale: Sustainable professional growth occurs not through workshops but through institutional cultures that normalize inquiry and co-learning (Sheokand, 2023).

3. Aligning Evaluation with Empowerment

Current teacher evaluation policies emphasize compliance and inspection. This study recommends replacing these with **growth-oriented evaluation models** that focus on:

- Reflective self-assessment,
- Peer feedback loops, and
- Leadership-guided coaching plans.

Rationale: Evaluation systems should generate insight, not anxiety. Leadership must be developmental, not punitive — an idea consistent with global standards (OECD, 2020).

7.2 Practical Implications for School Leaders and Institutions

1. Cultivate Trust as a Strategic Resource

Trust should be treated as an *organizational asset*.

Leaders must create **psychological safety** through transparent communication, empathy, and vulnerability. Practical strategies include:

- Open-door feedback sessions.
- Error-friendly staff dialogues (“what we learned this week” circles).
- Recognition of effort rather than only outcome.

Insight: As this study demonstrates, teachers thrive not because they are managed well, but because they are trusted deeply.

2. Redefine Meetings as Learning Spaces

Leadership can repurpose existing administrative structures into learning environments. Examples from this study show how principals converted mandatory meetings into reflective dialogues. Schools should:

- Begin each meeting with a “learning reflection” segment.
- Encourage peer-led micro-presentations.
- Document shared insights for institutional memory.

This transforms compliance-driven routines into microcosms of organizational learning (Senge, 1990).

3. Empower Teachers as Co-Leaders

Schools should move toward **distributed leadership** models by:

- Assigning teachers leadership roles in academic planning, co-curricular activities, and peer mentoring.
- Recognizing “Teacher Innovator of the Month” or “Reflective Practitioner” awards.
- Including teachers in school development committees.

Such symbolic and structural inclusion builds agency and professional pride — converting teachers into co-creators of institutional growth rather than passive executors.

4. Integrate Reflective Practice into Daily Rhythm

Reflection must shift from being a rare event to a daily ritual.

Leaders can:

- Introduce **five-minute reflection diaries** post-classes.
- Organize **monthly reflection forums** facilitated by rotating teacher moderators.
- Embed reflective questioning into supervision forms (“What did we learn? What might we do differently?”).

These habits operationalize the Adult Learning Theory principle that learning must be *experiential, relevant, and self-directed*.

5. Build Adaptive Resilience against Systemic Constraints

Leaders should treat bureaucratic rigidity not as an obstacle, but as a creative constraint.

Strategies include:

- Translating mandatory documentation into tools for collaborative reflection.
- Delegating non-teaching administrative tasks to specialized staff.
- Negotiating “flexibility zones” with district authorities for professional experimentation.

This finding echoes Sheokand’s (2018, 2024) argument that *adaptive leadership converts limitations into learning leverage*.

7.3 Implications for Leadership Development Programs

Leadership preparation must expand beyond procedural training.

Institutions like SCERTs, NCERT, and private universities offering leadership programs should:

- Introduce **modules on emotional intelligence, moral leadership, and adult psychology**.
- Integrate **coaching-based assessment** instead of theoretical examinations.
- Facilitate **cross-school peer learning residencies**, allowing principals to observe one another’s leadership ecosystems.

Global research supports these reforms — leadership development grounded in reflection and relational practice yields measurable teacher satisfaction and retention gains (Leithwood et al., 2020).

7.4 Implications for Research

1. Longitudinal Studies

Future research should explore *how leadership impact evolves over time* — how long it takes for cultural change initiated by visionary leadership to manifest in teacher outcomes.

2. Cross-Cultural Comparisons

Comparative studies between Indian and global leadership models can reveal how cultural norms influence the perception of trust, authority, and agency.

3. Quantitative Validation of the Nexus Model

The **Leadership–Learning Nexus Model** proposed here should be operationalized into measurable constructs for validation through structural equation modeling (SEM) or multilevel analysis.

4. Inclusion of Student Outcomes

Subsequent studies may investigate how teacher growth mediated by leadership ultimately impacts student learning, engagement, and well-being.

7.5 Summary of Implications

At its core, this study advances a redefinition of educational leadership as:

Dimension	Traditional Paradigm	Proposed Paradigm (from this study)
Function	Administration and supervision	Mentorship and meaning-making
Focus	Compliance and control	Growth and reflection
Metric	Outputs and documentation	Culture and capability
Energy Source	Authority	Trust
Outcome	Institutional maintenance	Human flourishing

This shift demands not more policy, but more *conscious leadership* — individuals who understand that schools are not factories of instruction but *ecosystems of growth*.

In essence:

The real reform in education begins not in curriculum documents, but in the *hearts and minds of leaders*. When leadership evolves from command to compassion, teachers evolve from employees to learners — and schools evolve from institutions to communities of consciousness.

8. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how school leadership shapes teacher professional growth — not as a managerial function, but as a developmental relationship. The evidence gathered from multiple schools, supported by theoretical integration across transformational, distributed, adult, and organizational learning frameworks, reveals an enduring truth: **school leadership is the invisible curriculum that teaches teachers how to grow.**

When leadership embodies vision, empathy, and dialogue, it transforms schools into communities of learning. Teachers cease to be implementers of policy; they become co-authors of institutional purpose. Conversely, when leadership is transactional and compliance-oriented, teachers disengage, creativity declines, and professional development collapses into procedural routine.

In essence, **leadership determines whether a school becomes a bureaucracy or a learning organism.**

The study's *Leadership–Learning Nexus Model* illustrates that leadership's influence unfolds through three interconnected mechanisms — meaning-making, empowerment, and trust. Together, these generate teacher agency, reflection, and innovation, which in turn strengthen the institution's collective learning capacity. Leadership and learning thus co-evolve in a reciprocal loop: leaders grow by enabling teachers to grow, and institutions thrive when both are in synchrony.

At a deeper level, the findings suggest that leadership in education is not simply a matter of skill or strategy; it is a **form of consciousness**. Effective leaders operate from awareness — of self, others, and the moral purpose of education. They lead not by authority, but by presence. They create conditions where teachers feel safe to think, to err, and to aspire — conditions under which genuine learning can occur.

This interpretation advances a paradigm shift in how we understand leadership:

- from **management to mentorship**,
- from **control to co-creation**,
- from **performance metrics to professional meaning**.

8.1 Key Contributions

1. **Theoretical Integration:** The study offers an original synthesis — the *Leadership–Learning Nexus Model* — uniting transformational, distributed, adult, and organizational learning perspectives.
2. **Contextual Insight:** It contributes an Indian and Global South perspective to leadership research, emphasizing the interplay between culture, bureaucracy, and moral purpose.
3. **Practical Framework:** It translates abstract leadership theory into tangible practices that school leaders can implement to cultivate teacher empowerment and institutional learning.

8.2 Reflections on Leadership and the Future of Education

Leadership is the hinge upon which educational transformation turns. Policies can mandate reform, but only leadership can humanize it.

As global education systems grapple with teacher burnout, technological disruption, and moral fatigue, this study's findings point toward a simple but radical reform: **leadership as inner work**.

Schools need leaders who are emotionally literate, ethically grounded, and spiritually aware — leaders who see their primary task not as supervision, but as *elevation*.

The future of educational excellence depends less on innovation in technology and more on innovation in consciousness.

As Sheokand (2023) notes, “Educational leadership must evolve from managing people to awakening potential.”

That awakening — quiet, humane, and persistent — is the essence of sustainable school transformation.

8.3 Closing Insight

In the final analysis, the quality of a school is the echo of its leadership.

Every classroom carries the emotional climate of its leader's vision, trust, and integrity. When leaders lead with consciousness, schools learn; when schools learn, societies evolve.

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