Not so

Random thoughts from India's youth

USING SCHOOLS AS A CONVERSATION STARTER



ecocivilisation

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF HUMANITY

8one Eight Goals One Foundation

Not so Random thoughts from India's youth

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First published in India by 8one Books 2026
An initiative of Eight Goals One Foundation
New Delhi, India
www.8one.org

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ISBN: 978-93-6699-000-2

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We especially thank Anusmita Chatterjee for the wonderful comic strips that she prepared during The F.A.I.R. Project 2026. All rights for these comics remain with her.

We extend our gratitude to all the contributors and supporters of Eight Goals One Foundation for their dedication and commitment to making knowledge freely accessible and adaptable for educational and non-commercial purposes.

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Our Friends

Violeta Bulc



Violeta Bulc, former European Commissioner and Curator of Ecocivilisation.

The F.A.I.R. Project is the kind of opportunity I wish I had experienced in my own youth. When I first heard about the Project seven years ago, I immediately recognised its potential to create something rare: a safe and nurturing space where young people could explore unfamiliar ideas, challenge themselves, make mistakes, and grow together without fear.

A friend of mine, Alexander Laszlo, often reminds us that humanity is still learning what it truly means to be human. I see the F.A.I.R. Project as a living example of this idea, an ecosystem where learning is never one-directional. While participants embark on their own journeys of discovery, they also shape the perspectives of the facilitators, mentors, and elders who accompany them. It is this continual exchange that draws me back year after year, expanding my own understanding and renewing my sense of possibility.

I encourage this cohort to see yourselves as part of something much larger than a single programme. Over the years, the F.A.I.R. Project has grown into an expanding community of alumni whose experiences, relationships, and shared learning continue to strengthen the network across generations. Each cohort adds its own story, contributing to a living legacy that extends far beyond the time spent together.

Looking back, I can see how the Project became the foundation for the creation of the International Centre of Humanity and Ecocivilisation. Collaborations that emerged

through this programme made possible connections and initiatives that might never otherwise have existed. I think of those who have been part of the Project since its inception, Isha, Karthika and Aparna, who have since grown into confident co-creators of new pathways. As I look towards this cohort, I carry the same hope and expectation: that you, too, will one day shape new frontiers and contribute to humanity's ongoing journey of discovering what it truly means to be human.

Juan Pablo Ramírez-Miranda



Juan Pablo Ramírez-Miranda, Deputy Chief of the Executive Office at UNESCO.

I return to the F.A.I.R. Project each year with a sense of gratitude and optimism because, for me, it has always been about the transformative power of diversity: a space where young people from different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives come together to learn not only from the programme, but from one another.

I want to thank both the organising team for creating and sustaining this platform, and all of you, the Changemakers, for choosing to invest your time, curiosity, and energy in something larger than yourselves.

Being part of the F.A.I.R. Project is both a privilege and a responsibility. The opportunity to learn, reflect, and engage with others is not something to be taken for granted; it is something to carry back into your own communities. The Project is not an end in itself. Its true value lies in how you translate your experiences into action, strengthening the communities you belong to and extending the impact far beyond the programme.

As I reflect on the rapidly changing world around us, I believe today's generation faces an unprecedented pace of transformation. From technological disruption to shifting social realities, the future demands creativity, adaptability, and the ability to work across

differences rather than certainty alone. I see the F.A.I.R. Project as a space that nurtures precisely these capacities, preparing young people not simply to respond to change, but to shape it with collaboration and imagination.

As you begin this journey, I want to welcome you into a growing community of Changemakers that has been built over the past seven years. More than joining a programme, you are becoming part of a network committed to learning together and working towards a more just, peaceful, and compassionate world.

Ramit Singh Chimni



Ramit Singh Chimni, Director of Eight Goals One Foundation.

People often ask why the F.A.I.R. Project continues to return every year. For me, the answer has never been that it provides definitive answers. It continues because it creates a rare kind of space, one where people can celebrate one another while engaging honestly with the difficult realities of the world.

Fairness is not something we achieve once and carry with us forever. It is not an identity or a label. It is a practice. It asks us to question ourselves as much as we question the systems around us. It asks us to remain open to perspectives beyond our own and to accept that none of us will ever possess the complete picture. That humility is not a weakness. It is the beginning of genuine learning.

One of the most important commitments we can make is to keep communication alive, especially when disagreement feels uncomfortable. The purpose of dialogue is not to persuade everyone to think the same way. It is to build the willingness to keep listening, speaking honestly, and learning from one another. Curiosity will always take us further than certainty.

The F.A.I.R. Project also reminds us that thinking and doing cannot be separated. Action does not conclude when a workshop ends or an immersion is complete. If anything, action deepens our responsibility to continue reflecting. Every decision we make is shaped by the facts, experiences, emotions, and understanding available to us at that moment. As those change, we should also have the courage to reconsider our conclusions. Growth is not inconsistency. It is integrity.

The pages that follow do not present a single answer to the questions explored throughout this journey. Instead, they document the process of asking better questions, listening more carefully, testing assumptions, and allowing experience to reshape understanding. That, perhaps, is the most meaningful practice of fairness.

I hope this book is read in the same spirit in which the programme was experienced: with openness, curiosity, and the willingness to discover that the most valuable learning often begins where certainty ends.

Setting the Stage

The theme of this year's F.A.I.R. Project is 'Coming Together for Better Schools'. Before this year's Changemakers could ask what makes a better school, they were first invited into the F.A.I.R. space and its story.

The opening phase unfolded across two sessions. The Open Session explored why the F.A.I.R. Project exists and what kind of space it hopes to create. The Introduction to the Theme then turned to this year's subject, education. Although they were distinct conversations, they were connected by a common thread: meaningful learning begins long before solutions are proposed.

The conversation opened not with introductions, but with a question. Why does the F.A.I.R. Project exist?

No single answer was offered. Instead, Changemakers were invited to recognise that the answer would inevitably differ depending on who was asking and where they stood in life. What remained constant was the purpose of the space itself: to create a community where difficult questions could be explored honestly without requiring people to perform certainty or defend a fixed identity.

That distinction shaped everything that followed. Throughout the discussion, Changemakers repeatedly returned to the idea that much of modern life rewards performance. We often inherit opinions, identities, and ambitions before we have had the opportunity to examine them. The invitation of the F.A.I.R. Project was therefore not to arrive with polished answers, but with the willingness to interrogate one's own assumptions.

In a voice note before the formal opening, Aparna set a further boundary. The cohort was not entering schools to "fix" them or perform a saviour's role. She asked them to replace "How can I fix this?" with "What is it that I'm failing to see?" and "Who is it that I'm failing to listen to?" The shift turned openness from a mood into a method.

The facilitators reflected on what they had witnessed across successive cohorts. Transformation, they suggested, is never produced by a programme alone. Life itself, including our relationships, failures, successes and unexpected experiences, shapes who we become. Yet the conditions in which those experiences are shared matter. A community that welcomes authenticity, curiosity, and honest disagreement can make personal growth visible in ways that are otherwise difficult to recognise.

For Karthika Sajeev Changam, who first joined the inaugural cohort in 2020 before returning as a facilitator, the journey had reinforced one lesson above all others: there is always something new to learn. Learning within the F.A.I.R. Project is never one-directional. Changemakers learn from one another, facilitators learn from Changemakers, and even the programme itself continues to evolve because every cohort brings new experiences and perspectives into the room. She also challenged a burden that many young people quietly carry: the belief that they alone must solve the world's problems. Meaningful change, she reminded the group, is never an individual pursuit. It emerges through communities of people willing to think and act together. Her invitation to the cohort captured that spirit simply:

> "Be shamelessly yourself."
> *Karthika Sajeev Changam*

The conversation soon became personal.

Manya Srivastava reflected on the pressure to believe that choosing a profession also meant choosing a permanent identity. Was changing direction a sign of uncertainty, or simply part of living? Her question opened a broader conversation about non-linear lives.

Drawing from her own journey across sport, engineering, technology, entrepreneurship, public service, and international leadership, Violeta Bulc observed that no one can fully plan the life they will eventually live. Opportunities emerge unexpectedly. What matters is cultivating the courage to recognise them when they appear. Juan Pablo Ramírez-Miranda extended the idea by suggesting that hybrid careers are becoming increasingly valuable, while Ramit Singh Chimni noted that each person's unique contribution comes not from mastering a single discipline but from the particular combination of experiences that only they possess.

Other reflections continued to expand the conversation. Lakshmi Yazhini spoke about the importance of remaining open to learning across generations, resisting the tendency to dismiss voices simply because they are older or younger than our own. Naisha Nagpal challenged the assumption that emotions are opposed to reason, suggesting instead that the things that repeatedly draw our attention often reveal something worth exploring. Daksh Shoora introduced a relational way of thinking, arguing that people, institutions, and even nations are continually shaped through their relationships with others. Building on this, Juan Pablo encouraged the cohort to ask not only how relationships influence us, but also how power determines whose voices are heard, whose experiences are represented, and who is expected merely to listen.

Only after exploring these questions did the conversation turn explicitly towards education.

Rather than treating education as synonymous with schooling, Changemakers examined the assumptions that underpin educational systems themselves. What is education for? What kind of human being should it help cultivate? Which values have shaped today's schools, and which of those values deserve to be reconsidered?

The discussion moved well beyond classrooms. Changemakers questioned systems built around competition, standardisation, and narrow definitions of success. They reflected on fear-based learning, the declining social status of teachers, the relationship between curiosity and education, the place of indigenous knowledge, the disconnect between schools and lived realities, and the tendency to measure achievement while overlooking human flourishing. Throughout the conversation, education was understood not simply as a system for transmitting knowledge, but as a way of shaping how people understand themselves, one another, and the societies they hope to build.

No consensus emerged by the end of the session, nor was one expected. The opening had achieved something more valuable. It had transformed a room of strangers into a community willing to think together, disagree respectfully, and remain curious in the face of complexity.

Before asking how to design a better school, the Changemakers had begun by asking a more demanding question: **What does a better school demand of us?**

Prologue

How the story began

The F.A.I.R. Project began from an acknowledgement of the state of contemporary public discourse. Important questions were often reduced to camps. People arrived with positions, collected evidence that protected those positions, and spoke past one another. Nuance was treated as weakness. Changing one's mind looked like defeat.

Eight Goals One Foundation (8one) created the programme to make another kind of conversation possible. The premise was not that disagreement could be removed, but that it could become more useful. Young people could be brought together around a public issue and given a structure for examining it: first by understanding the ground, then by engaging positions unlike their own, then by noticing the forces shaping their judgement, and finally by reasoning towards choices they could explain.

The structure was never meant to make the facilitators invisible. Ramit brought the insistence that emotions are part of the factual world rather than an embarrassment to reason. Isha Kakkad Lakhani brought years of watching cohorts change in ways no programme could claim to cause by itself. Karthika brought the memory of having once sat on the other side of the screen as a participant. Vidhi helped turn abstract ideas about bias and social identity into questions the group could ask of its own behaviour. Violeta and Juan Pablo returned as friends of the project whose relationship to F.A.I.R. had outlasted any single annual theme.

Their task was not to steer thirty-one people towards a preferred answer. It was to make the quality of the inquiry harder to evade.

The four letters gave the process its rhythm.

F: Fact-finding and Familiarising asks Changemakers to build a shared base of knowledge and become acquainted with the system, the language, and the lives implicated in the theme.

A: Advocating for the Alternate Viewpoint asks them to inhabit an argument they might not instinctively choose, testing what becomes visible from another position.

I: Introspection and Interrogation asks them to examine the identities, loyalties, experiences, and shortcuts that influence how they interpret what they know.

R: Reason and Rationalise asks them to make and defend choices: to weigh competing needs, recognise trade-offs, and move towards action without disguising uncertainty.

The sequence matters. Facts without perspective can be selected to protect an existing conclusion. Perspective-taking without introspection can become performance. Introspection without decision can turn into endless qualification. Action without the preceding work can reproduce the very assumptions it hopes to challenge.

F.A.I.R. is therefore less a formula than a practice. It does not promise neutrality, recognising that no participant enters a conversation free from the influence of their experiences and personal history. It asks instead for intellectual honesty: What do I know? Whose position have I not understood? What is shaping my judgement? What follows from the reasons I am prepared to defend?

The story so far

Across its editions, the Project has used various social issues as conversation starters, and the cohorts have been treated not as participants but as co-creators. Changemakers investigate, argue, reflect, visit, make, revise and carry the work into their own communities. The published book is part record and part invitation. It preserves the substance of the exchange while opening the questions to people who were not in the room.

For the seventh edition, the subject was education, expressed through an immediate collective ambition: ***coming together for better schools***.

Education is familiar enough to invite opinion and complex enough to resist it. Nearly everyone has a school story. Many people work with an image of the ideal teacher, the disciplined student, the useful subject, the fair examination, or the successful graduate. Policy debates add another vocabulary: access, outcomes, infrastructure, foundational learning, inclusion, autonomy, accountability, technology, employability. Each term can describe something important. None, on its own, explains what a school is for.

The 2026 cohort entered this contested space over six weeks of online dialogue and offline immersion. Sessions moved from personal memories to questions about educational systems; from asking what schools are for to how they should be designed; from advocating for change to examining participants' own assumptions; from a wide range of concerns to eight shared priorities; and from abstract discussion to encounters with institutions and communities. Along the way, practitioners and alumni brought accounts from classrooms, mental health work, early-childhood settings, nature- and

place-based education, conflict-sensitive education, mentorship, and design thinking, amongst others.

The calendar suggested a progression. The actual learning was less tidy. Questions introduced in the first week returned during fieldwork. A disagreement about standardisation resurfaced in a conversation about disability support. A debate about technology became concrete when a government platform stalled. The purpose of education reappeared in a game, a school meal, a teacher's workload, a student presentation, and a child's drawing.

The speakers also remained present long after their sessions ended. Kiran Bir Sethi's distinction between being different and making a difference resurfaced when the cohort tried to choose the size of an intervention. Swetha Guhan's account of belonging returned in questions about who felt entitled to speak. Lopa Shah's insistence on context-responsive practice became relevant when a plan met a school day unlike the one its designer had imagined. Purva Parwani's warning not to fall in love with the first solution could be heard whenever a group revised its scope. The programme did not treat these practitioners as a procession of expert answers. Their stories became material the cohort argued with, tested, and carried into the field.

This recurrence is one reason the book is organised as a journey rather than a transcript. The source material is rich, but it was created in many forms: session notes, collaborative boards, school designs, reflection documents, photographs, workshop plans, research drafts, comics, voice notes, and a scrapbook. A chronological dump would preserve order while losing meaning. The chapters that follow retain the movement of the programme and gather overlapping material where it can speak most clearly.

Why schools

Schools are expected to hold several public promises at once.

They are asked to make opportunity less dependent on birth. They are asked to transmit knowledge, build social capacities, prepare young people for work, sustain democracy, support wellbeing, and help children become themselves. They are expected to be common institutions while responding to uncommon needs. They must offer continuity and prepare for change. They must protect childhood and anticipate adulthood.

These expectations can reinforce one another. They can also collide.

A common curriculum may protect an entitlement to knowledge, yet leave too little room for local context. A flexible curriculum may respond to the learner, yet depend heavily on

unequal institutional capacity. Standardised assessment may make comparison possible, yet narrow what schools value. Technology may expand access, yet deepen exclusion when devices, connectivity, language, or support are uneven. Teacher autonomy may enable professional judgement, yet require strong preparation and institutional trust. Accountability may expose neglect, yet become administrative labour that takes time from teaching.

Coming together for better schools began not with agreement on solutions, but with making the underlying choices and trade-offs visible.

During Advocating for the Alternate Viewpoint, the cohort was divided into four fictional schools with distinct value systems. Each school offered a coherent answer to the same broad question. The F.A.I.R. School emphasised a stable common foundation and predictable progression. Sapiens School began with the individual child and local context. The Global Abode Public School treated schooling as a public institution preparing young people for mobility and shared social expectations. Back to the Future prioritised adaptability in a rapidly changing, interconnected world. None was designed as a villain. Each made some values easier to realise and others harder.

Real schools, of course, cannot remain inside a clean quadrant. They work with budgets, regulations, buildings, histories, staff, families, aspirations, absences, and ordinary days. The archetypes were valuable precisely because fieldwork later broke them open.

What is within these pages

This book begins with memory because systems are first encountered personally. It then follows the F.A.I.R. sequence: learning the terrain, arguing from alternate positions, interrogating judgement, and reasoning towards shared priorities. The second half moves into field encounters and attempts at action. The closing chapters return to the people who made the journey, using reflections and visual fragments to capture their experiences and perspectives.

The result is neither a complete account of Indian schooling nor a representative study. The country contains many school systems and many Indias within them. The field observations in these pages are situated. They come from particular visits, conversations, and initiatives undertaken in a limited period. They are included for the questions they sharpen, not as permission to generalise about an institution, a sector, a state, or a community.

In preparing this book, we have not named the children who engaged with the Project during the offline immersion. We have omitted sensitive personal details and unverified

allegations, and described projects at the design or early research stage as unfinished. All accounts and observations in this book are based on the personal and collective experiences of the Changemakers.

Acknowledgements

The F.A.I.R. Project 2026 was made possible by people who treated education as a shared concern rather than a specialist possession.

We thank the thirty-one Changemakers for bringing their experience, uncertainty, humour, labour, and willingness to revise an idea in public. We thank our previous Changemakers, educators, counsellors, researchers, organisers, public officials, school leaders, teachers, parents, and community practitioners who offered time and perspective.

We are grateful to the facilitators and long-standing friends who helped hold the conversation: Violeta Bulc and Juan Pablo Ramírez-Miranda. We thank Sandeep Rai, Dr Shailesh Shirali, Professor Sugata Mitra, Kiran Bir Sethi, Preethi Vickram, Rajesh Awasthi, Mainak Roy, Swetha Guhan, Treta Sharma, Charles Fadel, Ritika Singla, Manasvi Shah, Lopa Shah, Rajeshwari G, Saidevi Sanjeeviraja, Purva Parwani and Muskan Shaikh for placing practice, disagreement and unfinished questions before the cohort. We also thank Aparna for the Thinking Aloud voice notes that accompanied the cohort through the programme. We extend special thanks to previous Changemakers Aryaa Praseed, Suraj Bansal, Kirti Advani and Yatharth Garg for showing what it looks like when a programme conversation continues into work.

Most of all, we thank the schools, learning centres, Anganwadis, offices, organisations, and communities that allowed the cohort to encounter education as lived work. Hospitality does not imply endorsement of every interpretation in these pages; it made careful interpretation possible. The young people encountered during the programme are present here through the questions they provoked, the work they shared, and the assumptions they unsettled. Their dignity matters more than the completeness of any record.

Introduction: The 2026 Journey

A cohort of thirty-one

Thirty-one Changemakers brought different disciplines, languages, regions, and forms of practice into the same conversation. Education was a profession for some, a field of study for others, a site of volunteering or public service for many, and a formative personal experience for all.

That breadth changed the questions available to the group. A psychologist might notice the emotional conditions of participation. A lawyer might ask where discretion sat and how rights became practice. An architect might read movement, access, heat, light, and the social instructions embedded in space. A social worker might look at the relationships surrounding the child. An engineer might attend to systems and failure points. A teacher might know how quickly an elegant proposal collides with forty simultaneous needs.

No discipline received the final word. Each enlarged the field.

The opening discussion showed how quickly these descriptions would become inadequate. Priyasha Sharma placed curiosity at the beginning of education rather than at its ornamental edge. Falguni Parchanda asked what happens when schooling ignores the sociocultural realities children bring with them. Keya Ghosh wanted to know whether the adults inside a school knew students as individuals and whether a child could ask a "stupid" question without being treated as one. Daksh's relational frame suggested that none of these questions could be answered by isolating a child, teacher, family, or institution from the relationships producing the problem.

These were not expert pronouncements. They were sincere questions, and early signs of the routes people would take through the Project.

Our Changemakers



The thirty-one Changemakers of The F.A.I.R. Project 2026.



Abu
Abraham Mathew

brought experience from teacher education, after-school learning, and work connecting climate with children's everyday worlds in Kerala.



Anjana
S Kumar

trained in social work and working close to schools, carried a sustained concern for teacher wellbeing, counselling, and the often-invisible labour surrounding the classroom.



Arya Mullanezhi

approached the programme through primary education and fellowship experience in Chennai, with close attention to differentiated learning so that students can better understand their strengths, interests, and learning styles.



Daksh Shoora

a political science student interested in public policy, was drawn to the institutional machinery of schooling: the rules, portals, offices, and administrative choices that shape a teacher's day.



Falguni Parchanda

connected education project management, community learning, policy, and classroom practice, bringing experience across India and the United Kingdom.



Iqra Fatima

working across geography and economics, asked how education is altered by conflict and how research can proceed without treating vulnerable communities as material.



Jaina M Haran

brought an emerging higher-education policy perspective from Karnataka and explored questions around educational games, sanitation, and institutional experience.



K. Sasidhar Reddy

an engineer and education volunteer from Visakhapatnam, looked for practical ways to make learning participatory, playful, and connected to life beyond the lesson.



Keya Ghosh

trained in applied psychology, was attentive to labelling, pressure, mental health, and the environments in which students are expected to succeed.



Kushala Simha

a lawyer from Hyderabad, brought questions of teacher policy, first-generation learners, and the relationship between formal entitlement and what a school community can actually use.



Lakshmi Yazhini

working in development and programme practice, contributed a systems view shaped by study at IIT Madras and close attention to how ideas are implemented.



Maitrei Bhardwaj

trained in applied psychology, explored social and emotional learning as a practical part of education rather than an ornamental addition to it.



Manan Arora

approached schools through civil society, curriculum reform, and public institutions in Haryana, following questions into the offices where educational decisions are processed.



Manya Srivastava

with a background in law, joined group field inquiry into schools and teacher education, reading institutional practice through questions of access and responsibility.



Muhamed Mahin

trained in geotechnical engineering and active in education volunteering in Bengaluru, brought a willingness to test his first interpretation against what children actually did.



Naisha Nagpal

studying economics and political science and experienced in online teaching, was especially interested in student confidence and the conditions that allow a learner's voice to emerge.



Nikhila Liz Aby

trained in medicine and crisis management across Tbilisi, Kerala, and the United Arab Emirates, widened the cohort's understanding of care, uncertainty, and institutional response.



Pakhi Daswani

an English literature student and theatre practitioner, brought attention to expression, narrative, and the cultural life of government schools.



Pavitra Mishra

working across education and social impact, drew attention to how educational environments can create division rather than community, and to their wider social consequences.



Prasannaa Andavan

an education fellow in Chennai, approached learning through the senses, paying attention to the small shifts that make a concept reachable.



Priyasha Sharma

trained in public health and disability inclusion, brought a rigorous concern for preparation, access, and the difference between asking about people and asking well.



Puspalata Nayak

an Anganwadi worker and social-work practitioner from Odisha, connected the cohort's questions to early childhood, community health, and the reflective work of changing one's own practice.



Rashika

with experience in education, English, and a teaching fellowship, brought the perspective of a first-generation learner and the practical tensions of becoming a teacher.



Ravya Jain

an economics student in Mumbai, was interested in conceptual learning and in the moments of joy that reveal whether a child feels safe enough to participate.



Reeya Detroja

an architect from Ahmedabad working across urban mobility, permaculture, and alternative education, read schools as environments that organise both movement and possibility



Saarika Ramesh

studying psychology, explored how games and motivation can change the emotional texture of a learning task.



Shreejita Chatterjee

studying political science and international relations, brought questions of representation: who is visible in educational knowledge and who gets to define a common story.



Shreya Pant

is an engineer from Uttarakhand who works closely with classrooms and community educators.



Sidharth Singh

trained in economics and research, contributed an analytical lens to teacher education and the problem of turning broad claims into questions that can be investigated.



Umar Shareef

a biotechnology graduate from Kashmir working across climate and educational technology, brought place, conflict, and the ethics of comparison into the fieldwork.



Urbi Bhandary

a sociology student from Jadavpur University, drew attention to rural Bengal, resource inequality, and the work students create when they are trusted with consequential questions

A map of the time

Before the formal programme began, the 2026 cohort met twice through the Open Houses. Thirty-one young people had been selected for the programme, but these first gatherings did not ask them to perform that role. They met simply as people who might become friends. They were moved repeatedly between small breakout rooms, sometimes in the middle of a sentence or before a story had reached its end. Conversations wandered from comfort food and childhood memories to films, politics, superpowers, pets and bioluminescence. The apparent disorder was part of the design. It gave everyone brief, unfinished glimpses into one another's lives and turned a screen full of strangers into a group already accumulating its own jokes, affections and unfinished conversations.

The formal journey opened on 11 June with the Open Session. Ramit began with a question rather than an explanation: Why does The F.A.I.R. Project exist? Isha, Karthika, Juan Pablo and Violeta approached the answer through their different relationships with the project, watching people grow, learning alongside one another, finding community amid uncertainty and creating what Violeta described as a safe and nurturing space. F.A.I.R. was introduced not as a course offering the correct position on difficult issues, but as a community in which people could examine what they believed without having to perform certainty.

The second part of the opening introduced Education as the theme for 2026. The question was not merely what was wrong with schools, but why education demanded attention at this moment. Violeta located modern schooling within a history of industrialisation, standardisation, competition and measurement. Changemakers then asked what education should make possible beyond qualifications and employment: curiosity, self-knowledge, agency, community and a fuller human life. On 12 June, the theme became personal. The cohort returned to its earliest memories of school, crying at the school gate, calling a teacher "mumma," encountering a grandparent's belief or learning how discrimination could enter a classroom. From those memories, they considered what they would seek in a school today. Education was no longer an abstract system waiting to be analysed; it was something everyone in the room had already lived.

From 15 to 18 June, four Fact-finding and Familiarising sessions established the ground for research. The first asked about the purpose of education and its relationship to the purpose of life. The second examined how schools actually function: the people, values, relationships and institutional choices that hold them together. The third explored age, identity, access, quality and belonging, asking who is able not only to enter education but to participate in it on dignified terms. The fourth brought the inquiry into the technological present through artificial intelligence, educational technology and the future of learning. Philosophers, school founders, educators and researchers did not provide a single model for reform. They gave the cohort a stronger vocabulary,

competing arguments and better questions with which to investigate the field.

The Advocating for the Alternate Viewpoint phase took shape over three gatherings. On 19 June, the cohort reflected on the four F sessions and began constructing four fictional schools: The F.A.I.R. School, Sapiens School, Global Abode Public School and Back to the Future. Each Changemaker was assigned to a school and one of eight committees: management, curriculum, academics, promotion, finance, assessment, technology or careers. Crucially, the position assigned to them might conflict with what they personally believed. On 22 and 23 June, they had to defend those positions through debates about equality and equity, common standards and personalisation, local rootedness and global opportunity, teacher autonomy, assessment, resource allocation and the place of AI in childhood. They then turned inward and tested the contradictions within their own school models. The exercise was not about arguing for its own sake. It required the Changemakers to build the strongest version of an unfamiliar position before deciding why they opposed it.

On 24 and 25 June, the focus shifted from the argument to the person making it. The two Introspection and Interrogation sessions began with Vidhi's question: "How do I arrive at what I think?" The cohort revisited the debates to notice the biases, assumptions, emotions and habits that had shaped its judgement. Changemakers considered why some voices appeared more credible, why confident speakers could carry a group, why people sometimes withheld disagreement, and how quickly an assigned school had begun to feel like an identity worth defending. The second day extended this reflection into social influence, group behaviour, diffusion of responsibility, polarisation and the difference between empathy and understanding. The Changemakers were learning to examine themselves not as isolated thinkers, but as people continually shaped by relationships, loyalties and the groups around them.

Reason and Rationalise followed on 26 June. Four breakout rooms first produced broad lists of challenges facing Indian schools. The lists were combined, questioned and reduced; proposed substitutions had to be defended before the full cohort and put to a vote. The final map identified eight connected areas: infrastructure and the use of resources; practical, experiential and vocational learning; curricular flexibility and assessment; teacher preparation; workload and student–teacher ratios; parent–school–student collaboration; mental health and integrated student support; and exclusion across gender, disability, sexuality and social background. The session moved the cohort from naming everything that mattered to deciding what most urgently deserved investigation and where a responsible intervention might begin.

Preparation for immersion started on 29 June with a collective map of capacity. Changemakers recorded where they would be based, the time they could offer, the skills and networks available to them, and the questions they might pursue. On 30 June, Ritika Singla helped them surface the assumptions they would carry into schools and

communities. A rapid word-association exercise revealed how easily phrases such as "government school," "village," "teacher" and "principal" summoned inherited stories. The discussion then turned to positionality, consent, permissions, safeguarding, photography and the danger of entering a community only to extract information and leave. Preparation meant more than arranging a visit. It meant learning how to enter another person's space with humility.



A government-school visit later gave Puspalata a concrete setting in which to test the assumptions surfaced during preparation.

On 1 and 2 July, Stories from the Ground brought the cohort into conversation with people already working through educational problems. Lopa and Manasvi Shah spoke about healing-centred, conflict-responsive education in Kashmir. Rajeshwari described the realities of building and rebuilding low-fee schools. Saidevi Sanjeeviraja showed how nature and the city itself could become a classroom, while Purva Parwani and Muskan traced Clay Lab's movement from mentorship towards sustained, community-based relationships. Muskan's principle, "connect first, then correct", captured a lesson running through the two days. These stories were not presented as models to reproduce. They showed how ideas change when they meet histories, institutions, families and places.

On 3 July, the cohort began turning this preparation into executable work. Interests coalesced around teacher education, educational games, hidden curricula, classroom toolkits, mental health, disability inclusion and other emerging concerns. The groupings remained deliberately permeable: people could collaborate across projects, pursue individual questions or change direction when evidence required it. From 6 July, the

offline immersion began in earnest. School visits, interviews, surveys, workshops, observations and small experiments unfolded alongside daily online debriefs. Fieldwork was not the stage at which reflection ended. A visit could expose a weak question; an interview could overturn a confident assumption; a failed plan could reveal a more important problem.



Students at a government school, captured by Puspalata.

From 13 to 16 July, this fieldwork ran alongside sessions with Changemakers from previous F.A.I.R. cohorts. They returned to describe what their own journeys had become after F.A.I.R. Aryaa Praseed spoke about giving children responsibility rather than merely trying to control them. Suraj Bansal shared the difficult work of building community mental health support and navigating public institutions. Kirti Advani examined remote schooling, early-childhood systems and the distance between goodwill and structural change. Yatharth and Khushi Garg used design thinking to ask whether the problem first presented to us is always the problem that needs solving. Because the 2026 Changemakers were already conducting their own work, these were no longer distant accounts. They became mirrors, warnings and practical provocations for choices being made in the field.

Thirty-one ways into one question

What could bring such a cohort together without flattening its differences?

Not agreement about the ideal school. Not a shared ideology. Not the assumption that youth automatically possess a purer view. The common ground was more practical: a willingness to stay with a public question after the first answer.

That willingness was visible in the way Changemakers used personal experience. A difficult school memory could become an accusation against every similar institution, or it could become the starting point for a wider question about education. A successful intervention could be presented as proof of a universal method, or it could be understood as evidence shaped by a particular place, set of relationships, and conditions.

The distinction is crucial. Experience is not a problem to be removed from reasoning. It is often the reason a person notices what others miss. The task is to know when experience is opening a question and when it is closing one.

The 2026 cohort learned this repeatedly. Their strongest field notes did not simply describe what was wrong. They recorded what the observer had expected, what actually happened, and what a second attempt made visible. Their strongest school designs did not claim to serve every value equally. They named the trade-off. Their strongest reflections did not end with self-criticism. They converted discomfort into a more careful next move.

This book carries thirty-one distinct routes through education. It also carries the proposition that a public institution can be understood only when those routes meet.

Before the Conversation

Friends before Changemakers

The first shared experience of the 2026 cohort was not a lecture or a discussion about education. It was a pair of Open Houses: two informal gatherings designed simply to let thirty-one people meet. Before the opening session, Aparna's voice notes titled "Thinking Aloud" acknowledged the weight of the word Changemaker and invited the cohort to set that responsibility down for an evening. Before they were asked to think together, they were given time to laugh, become curious about one another and begin forming friendships.



The Open Houses turned quick introductions and unfinished conversations into the beginning of friendship.

The structure was deliberately loose. Changemakers entered small breakout rooms, responded to conversational prompts and were moved from one group to another. The movement rarely waited for a convenient pause. A person might be halfway through a story when the screen changed and they found themselves facing an entirely different set of people. Just as a conversation began to settle, the rooms shifted again.

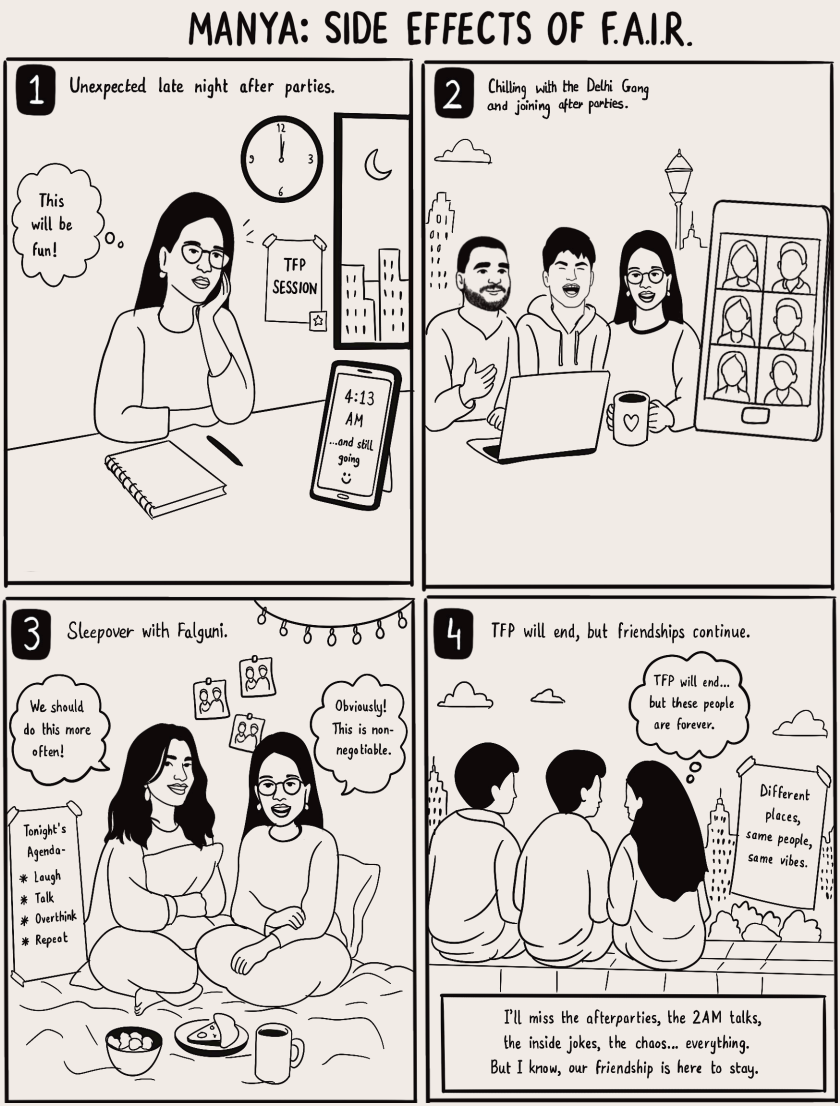
The result was a kind of friendly chaos. Falguni had barely begun telling a story before being moved and jokingly wanted to know who was responsible. Manya asked why her room kept changing and, after being separated from Sasidhar, wanted him sent back so they could continue talking. Her mock complaint revealed that the movement was already achieving something: people were beginning to miss conversations, and one another, before the Open House had even ended.

Every new room offered another beginning. The prompts moved through comfort food, childhood memories, films, imagined abilities, books, politics, pets and the places people called home. One conversation with Sasidhar travelled from food to Bengaluru and then, somehow, to bioluminescence. He and Anjana discovered that they could speak Malayalam together, while he and Mahin quickly developed an easy rapport. Elsewhere, a discussion about Kolkata and Hyderabad biryani gathered energy of its own.

The group chat became an extension of the rooms. A poll about loyalty to rajma chawal divided the respondents. Another asked whether Daksh was Japanese and received a unanimous verdict from those who voted. Photographs of cats and dogs appeared alongside Harry Potter references, film recommendations, childhood television memories and pictures people wanted the others to see. A simple prompt about comfort food produced answers ranging from pongal and filter coffee to chole chawal and anything made by one's mother. None of these exchanges was consequential by itself. Together, they created the beginnings of a shared language.

The frequent movement also meant that no one was defined by a single introduction. A person who had been quiet in one room might find common ground in the next. Some connected through energetic group conversations; others were more comfortable speaking to one person at a time. Some began with humour, while others built relationships by listening carefully or responding thoughtfully in the chat. The Open Houses did not require everyone to participate in the same way. They allowed familiarity to grow through repeated encounters.

Running alongside the gatherings was the Room of Rambles, the cohort's WhatsApp group chat, where the cohort shared songs, photographs, personal reflections and stories about the experiences that had shaped them. What began with music recommendations and introductions soon became a space in which people responded to one another with care. They did not merely post their own accounts; they read what others had written, asked questions, offered encouragement and recognised parts of their own lives in someone else's story.



The cohort gave Manya more than memories; it gave her best friends.

Puspalata later described feeling that the cohort had become more than a group. People were listening, reflecting, supporting and growing together. Her reflection gave words to something the Open Houses had created without formally announcing it: the possibility that vulnerability could be met with attention rather than judgement.

The cohort did not leave the Open Houses knowing everything about one another. Many stories remained unfinished, and not every pair of people had spent the same amount of time together. But friendship does not begin with complete knowledge. It begins when names acquire voices, when unfamiliar faces become people one hopes to meet in another room, and when a group starts developing memories that belong to everyone inside it.

The chaos had done its work. The constant shuffling prevented introductions from becoming rehearsed performances. It allowed conversations to be incomplete, resumed and carried into other spaces. It gave the Changemakers reasons to seek one another out again. By the end of the two Open Houses, they were no longer simply thirty-one people selected for the same programme. Through interrupted stories, improbable conversations, affectionate jokes and the desire to remain in touch, they had begun to become friends.

That was the real beginning of the 2026 cohort: not agreement, certainty or a shared position, but the discovery that a community could emerge from the chaos.

Introducing the Theme



Isha Kakkad Lakhani, author of The Better School; facilitator of The F.A.I.R. Project

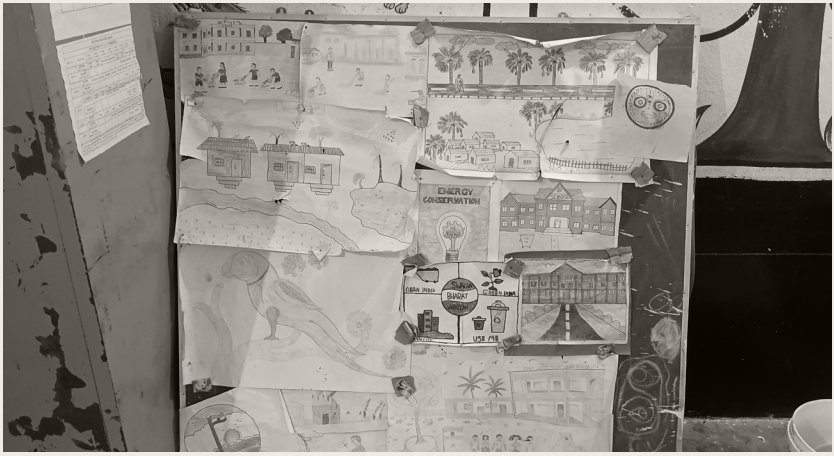
Isha Kakkad Lakhani: Why are we coming together for Better Schools?

We are coming together because schools shape far more than what children know. When a child first leaves the familiarity of home and enters a school, they begin learning how to understand themselves in relation to other people, institutions and authority. They encounter labels such as "good student," "bad student" or "talkative child," and absorb ideas about success, ability and belonging. Some of these experiences strengthen their confidence and curiosity; others quietly limit what they believe is possible for them. Better schools must therefore be concerned not only with what children learn, but also with what they learn to believe about themselves.

We are also coming together because many of the most consequential losses in education remain invisible. A child may perform well in examinations yet struggle to think aloud, respond to an open-ended question or explore an idea without being given a prescribed method. Questions dismissed with "you will learn that in a later grade," anxiety

around a subject, or a difficult relationship with a teacher can gradually form what I think of as a learning abyss. These losses rarely appear on report cards. By the time they become visible, a learner may already have concluded, "I am weak at this" or "I cannot do this." A better school must recognise and reduce this abyss before it becomes part of a child's identity.

No teacher, parent or school leader can do this alone. A school is a network of relationships, and meaningful change requires the people within that network to work together from the perspective of the child. Expectations can narrow a learner's future, but they can also expand it. I have seen school leaders build connection through seemingly modest acts, from a principal taking birthday selfies with students and sharing them with their families to a community helping provide uniforms that children wore with pride. Such actions remind us that better schools are not created through infrastructure or policy alone. They are created wherever children experience curiosity, dignity and belonging. We are coming together to ask how those conditions can become part of every child's educational journey, and what kind of society we might build if they do.



Art by the students of a government school, seen through Puspalata's lens.

We remember school before we analyse it

The conversation about Better Schools began not with a definition, but with a memory. Isha invited the Changemakers to consider two questions: What is your earliest memory of school? And, knowing what you know now, what would you look for in a school? The first returned everyone to the child entering an unfamiliar institution. The second asked

them to reconsider that institution as adults. Together, the questions allowed the group to explore why Better Schools matter before attempting to decide what one should look like.

Priyasha's first memory held fear and friendship together. Being left at school felt traumatic; she remembered crying, sitting in shock and wondering how her parents could leave her there. Yet school was also where she met her first friend during playtime. Falguni remembered crying too, but inventing a different explanation each day because saying "I want to go home" felt embarrassing. Manya remembered accidentally calling her teacher "mumma" and the immediate self-consciousness that followed. Ramit's attachment took the opposite form: kept home with a fever at the age of three, he slipped out to find a teacher he loved, discovered that she was absent and quietly returned home without telling anyone.

Other memories revealed how many different emotions can coexist within the idea of school. Arya remembered waking at four in the morning to practise the alphabet and the healthy competitive relationship she developed with a classmate. Maitrei recalled Christmas celebrations, when she and her friends caught the toffees thrown by Santa and shared them with classmates who had received none. Lakshmi remembered misunderstanding a "match the following" exercise and happily drawing her own dots and lines instead. These were recollections of curiosity, affection, play and the small acts through which children first learn to participate in a community.

Puspalata shared her difficult memories with the cohort. Fear kept her away from school until Grade Three, and much of what followed was marked by judgement about her clothes, her appearance, her caste, her religion and how a girl was expected to behave. She remembered being made to stand outside for wearing a frock instead of a salwar suit and being told that sweeping was a girl's duty. When people asked whether she would like to return to her school days, her answer was no. Her experience made clear that a school does not shape a child only through lessons. It also teaches them whose identity is accepted, what behaviour is rewarded and how much of themselves they are permitted to bring into the classroom.

Naisha's story showed the influence of a single adult's expectations. As a highly active child, she often encountered teachers who were annoyed with her behaviour, although she was too young to understand what they expected. One day, her grandfather told her, "You will do wonders; you just need a little more focus." For the first time, she felt that someone believed in what she might become. She entered a science competition, won it, later became head girl and began approaching school with a different sense of possibility. His words did not change the child she was; they changed the way her potential was seen, including by Naisha herself.

NAISHA: SOME WORDS STAY FOREVER.



Some stories stay with you forever.

Naisha taught us that belief is not just encouragement; it can change a child's reality.

These memories established the emotional ground of the session. Before a child understands school as a system, they experience it through separation, friendship, embarrassment, encouragement, authority and belonging. They are learning letters and numbers, but they are also learning which adults can be trusted, what happens when they make a mistake and what the institution appears to believe about them.

The school we would choose

Isha's second question moved the conversation from memory to decision making. If the Changemakers were choosing a school for a child today, what would they look for?

Reeya and Pavitra placed nature, movement, art and outdoor learning near the centre. Lakshmi wanted physical and social safety, open doors for exploration and a school willing to help children unlearn discrimination. Arya asked for multiple approaches to learning rather than one uniform method, including learning stations, experiential activities and peer conversations. Maitrei wanted qualified teachers, practical exposure, moral development and a school in which no child was mocked or discriminated against. Saarika emphasised games as a source of both enjoyment and cognitive development.

For Naisha, a school focused entirely on academic achievement would be a warning sign. She wanted meaningful support for extracurricular participation and counsellors who could respond to bullying, ragging and other difficulties. Anjana went further, asking whether a school's promise of inclusion was supported by a genuine network of special educators, counsellors, psychologists and social workers. Falguni added that such support should not isolate the very students it was intended to include.

Several Changemakers focused on how schools treat children while they are still discovering themselves. Keya expressed the standard directly: "I would look more at how school treats the child while they are becoming than what the school promises a child would become." She wanted to know whether teachers understood students as individuals, whether children felt safe asking "stupid" questions and whether mistakes were treated as failures or opportunities to learn.

Prasannaa was equally wary of promises about what a school would produce. "If the school promises to make my child a genius, I would never send them there," he said. He wanted a place where a child could make mistakes, surprise themselves and gradually discover one pursuit, or several, that would give their life meaning. Rashika similarly looked for physical, emotional and intellectual safety: a school where children could remain curious, spend time with nature, build relationships and understand the world rather than being prepared relentlessly for the next examination or career milestone.

The discussion also exposed how early academic pressure enters childhood. Iqra recalled her six-year-old cousin saying, "Stop irritating me, I have an exam tomorrow." Manya remembered play periods being taken away so that teachers could finish the syllabus, while Kushala pointed to IIT foundation programmes beginning as early as Grade Five. These examples raised a simple but difficult question: if education continually displaces play, curiosity and exploration in the name of preparation, what is childhood being prepared for?

Can a school respond to every learner?

The aspirations named by the group led Ramit to introduce a practical challenge. If every learner is different, can a school realistically respond to every difference? If institutions can support only certain groups at first, who decides which needs will be addressed and which will remain outside the system?

Lakshmi acknowledged the scale of the challenge but resisted using it as a reason not to begin. Schools could start with differences already receiving greater public attention, including learning disabilities, varied learning styles and the equal recognition of academic and co-curricular abilities, and expand their understanding of accessibility through experience. The finish line would continue to move, she argued, but that did not mean schools should stop running towards it.

Pavitra added that changes designed for students with identified learning differences often benefit a much wider group. Scaffolded teaching and adjusted learning environments are not useful only to children classified as atypical learners; they can make participation easier for many children. The question was therefore not simply how schools could create separate accommodations, but how learning environments themselves might become more responsive.

Isha then returned the discussion to the child's experience. When children enter school, they are trying to make sense of a new world and to define themselves within it. Schools shape that process through labels such as "good student," "bad student" or "talkative child," as well as through comparisons with siblings and classmates. They introduce children to authority, relationships, judgement and the social meaning attached to marks, examinations and achievement.

Urbi wondered whether this abyss eventually becomes the conviction, "I am weak in this; I cannot do this." Ramit added, "Sometimes, we don't ever become aware of what all fell into the abyss." Reducing that abyss, Isha suggested, requires more than changing classroom technique. A school is a network of relationships. Teachers need the support of management; parents cannot completely outsource responsibility to the institution;

school leaders work within financial and structural limits; and children move through interconnected years of primary, middle and secondary education. Any effort to create a better school must therefore begin from the child's perspective while recognising the responsibilities and constraints surrounding them.

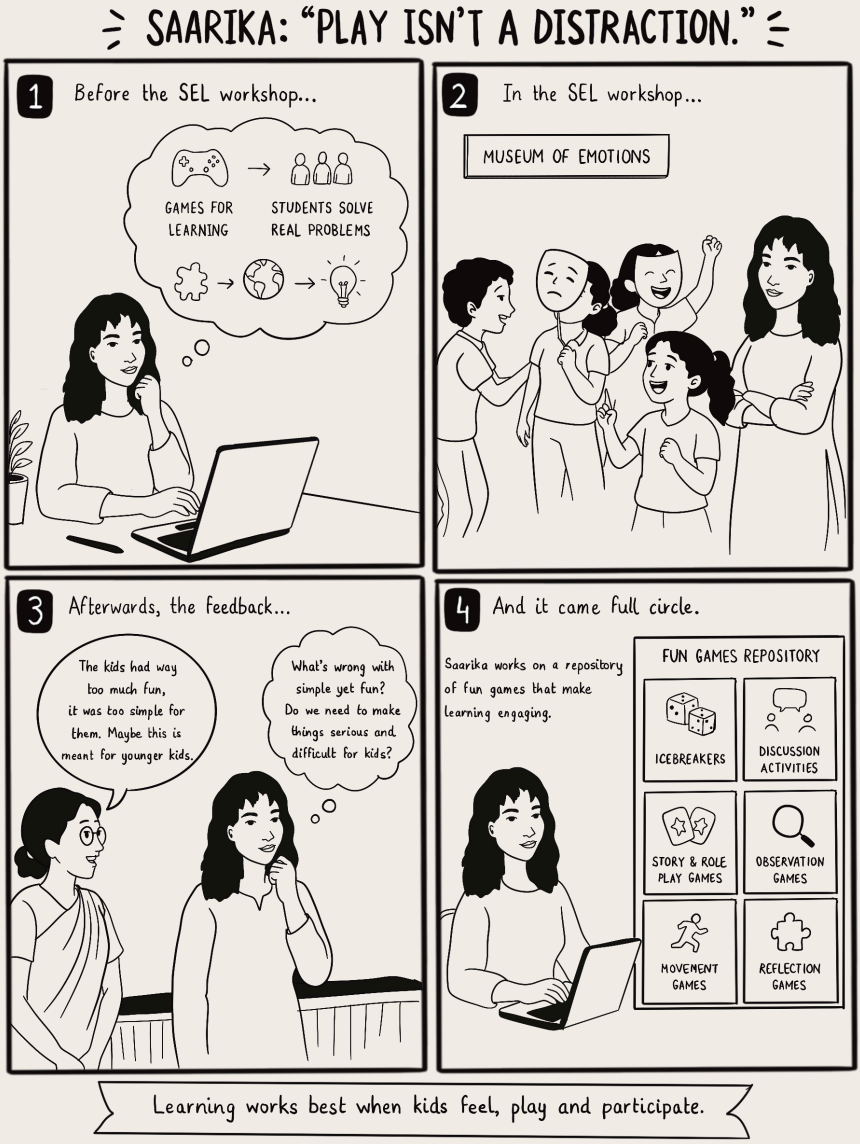
Testing the ideal

The Changemakers then moved into four breakout rooms. Two groups considered what an ideal learning environment should offer. The other two examined whether schools that depart from mainstream educational expectations can realistically survive.

The conversations about ideal learning environments returned repeatedly to safety, empathy and participation. Changemakers questioned classrooms in which teachers are treated as unquestionable authorities and children are divided into categories such as "toppers" and "backbenchers." They imagined teachers acting as facilitators, creating smaller and more participatory spaces in which students could ask questions without fear. At the same time, Pavitra and Saarika cautioned that safety did not mean the complete absence of authority. Children still needed boundaries and structure, but authority should be exercised with empathy rather than arbitrarily.

The groups also recognised that learner-centred education depends on the conditions in which teachers work. Greater pedagogical freedom means little if teachers are underpaid, unsupported or constrained by rigid requirements. Parent–teacher relationships also needed to become collaborative rather than accusatory, with both sides treating a child's development as a shared responsibility. Flexibility had to coexist with foundations; individual interests had to be supported without deciding too early what kind of learner a child was.

The groups examining alternative schools confronted a different set of tensions. Manya and Pakhi were interested in holistic, flexible and experiential models, but Iqra questioned whether such schools were accessible or affordable to most families. Abu raised the practical demands of funding, certification and parental trust, as well as the concern that students would eventually need to enter mainstream systems of higher education and employment. Umar argued that involving families in decision-making and developing more varied funding models could reduce some of those barriers.



Saarika challenged assumptions and let her experiences lead the way.

Anjana cautioned that many features described as educational innovations were, in fact, basic requirements that every school should meet. Different pedagogies could exist, but dignity and minimum standards should not depend on economic privilege. Prasannaa similarly questioned the assumption that an alternative school was automatically better. Highly selective institutions could distance children from the wider society around them; a strong community school might offer a more inclusive alternative. The discussion therefore did not produce a contest between "traditional" and "alternative" schooling. It revealed the difficult choices involved in making an educational vision accessible, sustainable and responsive to the world beyond the school.

What expectations make possible

Isha closed the session by introducing the Pygmalion Effect: the idea that expectations can profoundly influence outcomes. She shared an example from a school where a leader had created connection despite limited resources. In a municipal school in Rajkot, a principal mobilised community support to provide T-shirt uniforms that students wore with pride.

The example did not depend on an elaborate facility or a sweeping reform. Its significance lay in the belonging and dignity they created. At the same time, Isha did not romanticise the constraints schools face. Public and private institutions alike contend with inadequate facilities, transportation costs, limited resources and competing expectations. Yet educators and school leaders continue to show up because they understand how deeply these conditions affect children's lives.

The session had travelled from memory to aspiration, from aspiration to practical tension, and from institutional design back to the influence of human expectations. It did not end with an agreed blueprint for a Better School. It ended with the question Isha left for the cohort: beyond the practical problems schools face, what do those challenges reveal about the kind of education system and the kind of society we are trying to build?

Kicking Off the F.A.I.R. Methodology

Building context before forming conclusions

The Introduction to the Theme had begun with personal experience: what school had felt like, what it had made possible and what it had quietly taken away. The next step was to widen the frame. Before the Changemakers could examine Better Schools in any depth, they needed to encounter educational realities beyond their own classrooms, institutions and communities.

This was the purpose of Fact-finding and Familiarising. Fact-finding did not mean searching for one authoritative account of Indian education. No speaker, school or organisation could provide that. The intention was to give the Changemakers as much context as possible from as many perspectives as possible. Across four sessions, they would hear from philosophers, researchers, school founders, institutional leaders, early-childhood practitioners and specialists working with educational systems and emerging technology. Each would bring a different vantage point from which to approach the same broad question.

The four sessions were designed as a progression. The first would ask why education exists. The second would examine how schools function. The third would ask who can access education and experience belonging within it. The fourth would consider how technology, particularly artificial intelligence, might change what education needs to become. Isha would facilitate the conversations, helping the cohort connect the guests' expertise with its own questions and experiences.

The Fact-finding and Familiarising phase began with a broad inquiry into education: its purpose, how schools function, who gets to fully participate in them and how technology may reshape their future. Guests were invited from diverse contexts across education, including classrooms, school leadership, teacher development, early childhood, research and technology. Their varied perspectives gave the Changemakers the context to question assumptions, recognise complexity and begin exploring what creating Better Schools might truly require.

Before the first F session, Aparna compared each participant's knowledge to a lantern illuminating only a small patch of a dark ocean. Reports, degrees and experience

could enlarge the visible circle, but none could turn it into the whole sea. Her practical instruction was triangulation: consult different kinds of sources and speak to people in different positions, not to confirm an initial belief but to discover what it omitted.

F: Fact-finding and Familiarising

Purpose of Education



Dr Shailesh Shirali



Professor Sugata Mitra



Sandeep Rai

Isha opened the first Fact-finding and Familiarising session with a question most people pass through years of education without being invited to ask: What is education for?

Joining the cohort were three guests whose work placed them in different relationships with that question. Dr Shailesh Shirali, Head of The Valley School, brought the perspective of an educator shaped by philosophical inquiry and alternative schooling. Professor Sugata Mitra, a retired professor at Newcastle University, brought decades of research into how children learn independently when given tools, opportunity and freedom. Sandeep Rai, Chief Executive Officer of The Circle India, approached education through schools, communities and the social responsibilities attached to learning.

Isha asked the speakers and Changemakers to look beneath the familiar answers. Education is commonly associated with knowledge, qualifications and employment, but what does learning actually mean? What role should it play in a human life? And what happens when the institutions created to provide education begin determining its purpose?

The three opening responses immediately pulled the question in different directions.

Dr Shailesh questioned an understanding of education centred on accumulating knowledge, securing careers and acquiring status. For him, education had to be concerned with becoming fully human. He connected the narrow pursuit of achievement and power to wider problems in contemporary life, including damaged relationships and environmental destruction. Education could not be evaluated only by asking what a person had acquired; it also had to ask what kind of person they were becoming.

Professor Sugata questioned the familiar language of "acquiring" knowledge, arguing that it treats knowledge as though it were a possession to be collected. Unlike material resources, knowledge is not diminished when it is shared, making the metaphor itself misleading. He proposed that education should help people live happy, healthy and useful lives, while immediately raising a deeper question: who gets to define what happiness, health and usefulness mean? Rather than offering fixed answers, he invited participants to examine the assumptions embedded in the purposes assigned to education.

Sandeep kept the social purpose of education in view. In India, he acknowledged, education is rightly valued as a route to economic mobility. It can change the possibilities available to an individual and a family. Yet individual advancement could not be its only measure. Education also had to cultivate responsibility towards one's community and prepare people to participate meaningfully in the society around them.

The chat began moving before any of these positions could settle into a final definition. Priyasha asked whether knowing must always involve accumulation, noting that some forms of understanding are not materially acquired. Puspalata questioned the image of the mind as an empty vessel waiting to be filled and returned learning to curiosity. Jaina described knowledge as a continuing cycle of learning and unlearning, one that demanded openness long after formal schooling had ended.

Professor Sugata's formulation prompted another set of questions. What would it mean to live happily, healthily and usefully? Pavitra, Arya and Mahin tried to define happiness as a state in which a person's inner beliefs did not produce guilt or regret. Their responses showed how quickly a question about education could become a question about how one ought to live.

Dr Shailesh argued that the two questions could not be separated. Education should help people understand themselves, listen to others, cooperate and examine the quality of their relationships. Professor Sugata resisted the implication that contemporary life was necessarily in decline. Humanity had also made significant progress, he reminded the group, and people today enjoyed possibilities unavailable to many earlier generations. The first tension of the evening had emerged: how could education diagnose the failures of the present without overlooking what had improved?

Who holds authority?

Once the purpose of education became connected to the purpose of life, the conversation moved towards authority. Isha questioned the assumption that schools must remain the primary drivers of education. If learning can occur through experience, relationships and independent inquiry, what role should the formal institution continue to play?

Pavitra responded with an example that had shaped her own thinking. While reading about the Soviet Union, she encountered accounts of highly educated people working ordinary jobs for modest salaries while maintaining intellectually rich lives through books, theatre and public conversation. The example led her to question why education in India is so closely associated with professional status and prestige.

Professor Sugata cautioned against romanticising that account. From his own experience of the Soviet Union, people there had been as varied as people anywhere else: happy and unhappy, secure and poor, fulfilled and troubled. No society could be made to carry a single explanatory story.

Dr Shailesh brought the discussion back to authority itself. The answer, he suggested, was not simply to remove authority from education. Authority should become something learners were equipped to examine. Why are people drawn to power? Why does being skilled at something become evidence that one person is superior to another? Education should help students recognise and question the assumptions through which status is created.

Sandeep extended that inquiry into the classroom. Schools often reproduce hierarchies even when they claim to prepare students for democratic participation. He asked what genuinely shared power might look like within an educational institution. Schools had been designed partly to provide stability, he noted, which allowed them to endure social upheaval. The same stability could make them resistant to change.

Lakshmi identified the paradox: educational systems are controlled and regulated by authority, yet those same systems are expected to teach students to question power. Could an institution encourage genuine criticism of the structures on which it depended?

Maitrei asked who was allowed to define superiority in the first place. Daksh challenged the idea that authority always acted as a single force, pointing out that resistance could also emerge from disagreements within powerful institutions. In his view, decentralisation was possible; the deeper obstacle was that people were reluctant to surrender control. Pavitra added a warning: decentralised and alternative schools already existed, but many remained inaccessible to most children. Changing where authority sat did not automatically answer the question of whom a school chose to serve.

Karthika then posed a more fundamental question: if life itself teaches us, why do we need an educational structure at all?

Professor Sugata responded through his research on self-organised learning. Groups of children, he explained, can learn complex things independently when they have access to appropriate tools and the freedom to explore together. Learning in these settings is collaborative rather than solitary. The adult does not need to remain the sole source of knowledge; a teacher can instead create the conditions in which curiosity and shared inquiry become possible.

Saarika connected this to the earlier discussion about skill. A child may be pushed towards a path simply because they are good at it, even when they do not enjoy it. Treating skill as one part of a person, rather than the measure of their worth, could leave more room for discovery.

The question was no longer whether teachers or schools were necessary. It was what their presence should make possible.

What changes when a machine can answer?

Artificial intelligence brought a new urgency to the discussion. Professor Sugata described introducing children to AI chatbots and telling them that they could ask the technology anything. The children promptly used it to seek help with mathematics for an examination.

Instead of treating their response as evidence that AI was corrupting education, he asked whether the examination system was the real problem. If children used a powerful new tool primarily to prepare for a test, perhaps the technology was revealing the narrowness of what the system had taught them to value.

Sandeep argued that AI forced educators to confront their underlying vision of society. If schools are small versions of the world children are being prepared to inhabit, educators must become clearer about the values, relationships and forms of participation they want that world to contain.

For Dr Shailesh, AI made it increasingly difficult to defend knowledge acquisition as education's central purpose. Machines could already store and retrieve information beyond human capacity. Education therefore needed to strengthen the ability to question, not merely to produce more answers, but to investigate meaning, relationships and the conditions of life itself.

The Changemakers complicated any easy distinction between machines and people. Vidhi suggested that the important human capacity might not be possessing knowledge but creating it. Pavitra added that knowledge creation contains an affective and creative dimension. Daksh cautioned against drawing the boundary too confidently: AI had been designed by cognitive scientists using human thought as their available model, so claims of absolute human difference could become a form of species-based pride.

Lakshmi pointed out that AI also absorbs the knowledge systems people have created, including their biases, and can reproduce those biases at scale. Maitrei wondered whether this made formal educational structures more necessary, as places where technology could be interpreted responsibly, or less necessary, because access to information no longer depended on them. Priyasha raised the environmental and ethical costs of AI, while others questioned whether technology could ever be separated from the economic incentives shaping its development.

The discussion about AI became a discussion about human beings. Naisha reflected on how education categorises people through skills, interests and achievements until those categories begin to restrict identity. She also described relationships within universities becoming transactional, with students attending classes to satisfy requirements rather than from curiosity or connection. For her, creative work remained one of the experiences through which she felt most fully alive, yet formal education often trained students to consume information rather than create something meaningful.

Ramit asked the question directly: What does it mean to be human?

Saarika answered with creation. Puspalata spoke of dreaming beyond what appears possible, loving deeply, stumbling and beginning again. Lakshmi described humanity relationally: recognising what might harm another person and trying not to cause it. Anjana called human existence a brilliant, messy paradox, something continually in progress. Rashika returned the answers to education. Did schooling help people discover their interconnectedness, she wondered, or did competition and ranking teach them the opposite?

Dr Shailesh located one obstacle in fear. People often choose safety over exploration, accepting conformity rather than venturing into the unknown. Education, in his view, should help learners develop enough clarity to move beyond that fear.

Whose education was being discussed?

Professor Sugata then shifted the discussion with a different set of questions. How many of the concerns being discussed, including identity crises, self-actualisation, nihilism and the search for meaning, described the lives of most learners? Would the same language resonate with students in a government school in Punjab? How much of India's population was actually represented in the room's examples?

He recalled working with a group of twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls in Hyderabad who wanted to improve their English. He gave them access to a computer and asked them to work it out. When he returned months later, their accents had changed. The girls explained that they had learned to speak like "them", people they associated with education, confidence and social advantage.

The story raised a difficult question about aspiration. The girls had learned successfully, but they had also absorbed an idea of which voices sounded educated and which identities carried authority.

Sandeep warned against developing educational ideas entirely within isolated intellectual circles. Parents, teachers and students from varied social backgrounds needed to participate in defining educational change. Naisha responded that a conversation beginning in a privileged space could still generate ideas with wider relevance, particularly capacities such as articulation, reflection and critical thinking. Pavitra agreed that those capacities mattered, but insisted that the experiences of government-school students and marginalised communities had to shape the conversation itself.

Lakshmi observed that digital platforms did not automatically correct exclusion. Algorithms continued to reward fluent English, polished clothing and recognisable markers of class. Maitrei noted that someone could be exceptionally articulate in Hindi and still be dismissed as inarticulate because English had become a proxy for education. Rashika connected this to her work with first-generation learners: students could possess sharp observations yet hesitate to speak because they were unsure whether they were expressing themselves properly.

The distinction was important. Access to a room was not the same as feeling entitled to speak within it.

Dr Shailesh extended the principle to the relationships around a child. Parents and teachers often position themselves against one another, leaving the learner between competing expectations. They needed to see themselves as partners. Children, too, had to participate actively rather than remain passive recipients of decisions made on their behalf.

When the conversation turned to schools influenced by Krishnamurti's philosophy, he described the tension between an institution's educational ideals and the expectations families bring into it. Some parents become collaborators; others continue to evaluate schooling through university admissions and career outcomes. Even a school designed around a different philosophy cannot fully escape the social world surrounding it.

How much structure is necessary?

Ramit later asked the speakers what experiences had shaped their own thinking.

Professor Sugata traced his work to curiosity and research. His Hole in the Wall experiments had challenged assumptions about who could learn, what they could learn and how much direct instruction they required. Watching children teach themselves to use computers convinced him that learning can emerge when curiosity is given tools and room.

Dr Shailesh described encountering the writings of Jiddu Krishnamurti and beginning to understand teaching as a shared process of inquiry. The teacher was not simply transmitting completed knowledge; teachers and students could investigate questions together.

Ramit noticed the connection between their otherwise different journeys: both speakers had retained a deep desire to learn. Perhaps the first requirement for education was not a building or a method, but the presence of a learner.

The conversation then returned to structure. Karthika asked why large educational systems were necessary if meaningful learning could happen without extensive institutions. Education had become a measurable right, and access was consequently equated with enrolment in formal schooling. Did the institution make learning possible, or had it become the definition by which learning was recognised?

Professor Sugata argued that schools had historically been designed to cultivate obedience. Dr Shailesh added that large systems of assessment and testing could crowd out the very qualities education was meant to develop. Nikhila described education as a commodity distributed from the top down and, even then, distributed unevenly. Daksh drew on his mother's experience as a government-school teacher to show how administrative duties could consume the time intended for teaching.

Other Changemakers defended the need for structure. Naisha argued that systems make scale possible: without organisation, providing education to large populations becomes extraordinarily difficult. Pavitra added that formal structures establish legal

and social accountability, however imperfectly. Lakshmi suggested treating structure as a blueprint rather than an unquestionable prescription: a point of exposure from which learners might begin, rather than a boundary within which they had to remain.

Ramit asked whether structures enable scale or limit it.

Naisha answered with a paradox from economics: structure may enable growth up to a point and then become the very force that restricts it. Lakshmi argued that the answer depended on where a learner stood. For someone who did not know where learning could begin, structure might be essential. For someone ready to move beyond its limits, the same structure could become a constraint.

No final resolution appeared. Large systems could extend rights, resources and accountability to millions while diminishing the relational, exploratory qualities the group valued. Informal and alternative models could create freedom and depth while struggling with access, recognition and scale.

In closing, Professor Sugata observed that governments, parents, educators and students often want different things from education. Governments look to educators for answers, even when educators themselves cannot know with certainty what the future requires. His final message to the Changemakers was deliberately stark: "You are on your own."

Dr Shailesh ended from a different direction. Society may assign enormous importance to institutions such as the state and the nation, but educational transformation begins with individuals willing to care, question and undertake the work of reimagining what education could be.

The session had begun with one question: What is education for?

By its end, the cohort had not reduced the answer to a sentence. The question had instead opened into others. What is a good life? Who holds authority? What remains distinctly human when machines can answer? Whose experiences define educational success? How much structure enables learning, and when does it begin to restrict it?

The first Fact-finding session did not provide the Changemakers with a purpose of education. It showed them why there could never be only one.

How Schools Function



Kiran Bir Sethi



Preethi Vickram



Rajesh Awasthi

What holds a school together

Isha opened the second Fact-finding session by asking the Changemakers to look beyond the features most immediately visible when someone enters a school. Classrooms, facilities and examination results could be observed and counted. They revealed much less about the people, values and processes holding the institution together. What, then, made a school truly function?

The three guests brought the experience of building and sustaining distinctive educational environments. Kiran Bir Sethi is the founder of Riverside School in Ahmedabad, known for its culture of empowerment and the I CAN mindset. Preethi Vickram is the founder of Tapas Progressive School in Bengaluru. Rajesh Awasthi is the director of the Choithram Group of Institutions.

Rajesh began by questioning what people meant when they used the word school. He traced its origins to the idea of thought: not a building or a collection of subjects, but a philosophy. Real life does not arrive divided into mathematics, history, science and language, yet schools commonly teach those subjects in isolation. He asked what difference knowing the date of the Battle of Plassey or learning to balance a chemical equation made if a child could not connect that knowledge to life.

At Choithram, textbooks were treated as resources rather than the limits of a curriculum. Familiar characters could create unexpected entrances into learning: Chhota Bheem might help children think about states of matter, while Mowgli could open a discussion about bullying and belonging. The institution had created its own curriculum and social-

emotional learning framework, aligning national policy with the philosophy it wanted children to experience.

Rajesh asked the Changemakers to imagine being given a doll and told to describe how it should grow over fifteen years. The task would immediately exceed a list of subjects. One would have to consider relationships, emotions, values, skills and the ability to navigate the world. Daksh agreed that subjects could become disconnected from life, while offering a practical counterpoint: silos also made large institutions easier to organise. The problem was not merely recognising that subjects intersected, but designing a school capable of acting on that recognition.

Preethi approached the question through the failures that had led her to establish Tapas. The first was that a person could complete sixteen years of education and still not know who they were or what role they wished to play in the world. The second was that schooling could produce an intensely consumerist view of life.

She illustrated this through a Grade One worksheet that asked children to identify the uses of a cow. The phrasing placed the natural world entirely in relation to human benefit. For Preethi, this was not a harmless classroom exercise. It reflected a way of thinking in which everything around us exists to be consumed. Tapas therefore tried to ask, in the design of its campus and its learning experiences, whether education was meaningful to children in their present lives.

The phrase building future leaders particularly troubled her. Children were already people, she argued, not unfinished citizens waiting to become important. A quarter of a human life might be spent inside educational institutions; that time could not be treated solely as preparation for some later existence. Daksh sharpened the criticism by asking why it was always the leaders of today who instructed young people to repair the future. Perhaps adults should concentrate on doing their own work well enough to leave behind a better inheritance.

Kiran's school had begun from an equally personal dissatisfaction. When her son entered school, she encountered a system that rewarded compliance and silence. Riverside began in her home with a promise that every child would have voice and choice. Over time, Kiran realised that those commitments were still incomplete. Newspaper reports celebrating IIT results appeared alongside reports of IIT suicides. A child might possess voice and choice and still believe that a grade determined their worth.

At Riverside's first graduation, the father of a student who had died in an accident offered an image that became central to the school's philosophy. Education could teach someone how a car worked. It could teach them the skill of changing a tyre. Values appeared in what the person did with that knowledge: slowing down when a

child crossed the road, making way for an ambulance and refusing to drive under the influence. As he put it:

> "Education is not about the knowledge and skills you will have. It is what you will do with it."
>
> *A parent at Riverside School, recalled by Kiran Bir Sethi*

The task of a school, in Kiran's understanding, was to make human beings humane by design rather than by accident.

Puspalata connected voice with accessibility, asking what it meant to create space for people who had historically been denied it. Lakshmi reflected on how easily self-worth becomes attached to performance. Young people are continually told to accomplish more, then encounter a world in which others appear able to convert learning into success with effortless ease. Anjana noted that when a young person dies by suicide, society often labels the generation fragile instead of examining the pressures and silences that surrounded them.

The question of how a school functioned had already moved beyond timetables and facilities. It concerned what the institution taught children to believe about their own value.

How does a vision survive?

Isha then asked how the three educators sustained their commitments amid resistant parents, financial constraints, institutional demands and a society that continued to prefer conventional forms of schooling.

Kiran returned to Riverside's scheduled opening day, when a major earthquake struck Gujarat. After beginning under those conditions, she found other difficulties easier to place in perspective. The quality that carried an educational vision was not talent alone, but stamina: the willingness to keep showing up and remain with difficult questions. A school leader also needed clarity about non-negotiables, including not only what the institution would do, but what it would refuse to do when pressured by funding, scale or convenience.

Preethi described the work as a marathon sustained by other people. After attending an education forum in Japan, she had returned overwhelmed by the scale of the problems before her. The answer was to make one small change that day, then another. A long educational project needed a village around it.

Rajesh agreed that clarity mattered, but added that families and teachers also needed evidence. When they could see changes in how children thought, behaved and related to others, and not only in marks, many objections softened. Philosophy had to become visible in ordinary school life.

Pavitra then drew attention to one of the central tensions faced by progressive schools. What happens when parents want a creative and liberal educational process but still expect the conventional outcome of admission to an IIT or another prestigious institution?

Preethi divided the answer into attracting families and retaining them. Tapas tried to help prospective parents understand its philosophy before admission. A profound mismatch between the family and the school would eventually be borne by the child. Once a learner enrolled, the school made its processes visible through repeated meetings, experiences and detailed portfolios.

Even this did not resolve every conflict. One family left because it wanted a conventional report card despite receiving a fuller portfolio of the child's learning. Pavitra named the tension precisely: the family wanted a different process but the same outcome. Preethi agreed that it was difficult for parents to imagine a reality for which they had no reference.

Rajesh connected parental expectations to economic security. For many families, academic performance and livelihood are inseparable. He sometimes asked parents whether they would choose for their child to be sound in values or sound in grades. The question opened a more honest conversation about priorities.

Kiran rejected the assumption that schools such as Riverside required a choice between character and academic learning. She also resisted the labels such as "alternative" and "experimental". Meaningful learning could produce strong academic performance because children understood and cared about what they were doing. The falling learning levels within conventional systems, she argued, were hardly evidence that the familiar model was succeeding.

Keya reminded the room that parental ambition often began in genuine care. The hope of giving a child a better life could nevertheless narrow into marks, status and a respectable career. Kushala described the social pressure surrounding families who chose differently. Neighbours and relatives could turn every competitive-examination result into evidence that a conventional school was safer. Lakshmi and Saarika added that children absorbed the same comparisons and could begin believing that an unconventional path had to be constantly justified.

What happens beyond the school gate?

Lakshmi asked what happened when students developed broad capacities in a progressive school and then entered a society that rewarded only a narrower set of skills. She connected the question to her own experience of completing a degree and discovering that many of the capabilities she valued were not equally rewarded by the economy.

Rajesh responded that Choithram defined career through competency rather than professional title. He shared stories of students who had resisted paths selected for them. One submitted blank mathematics papers until his family allowed him to study commerce. Another student of his, scored exceptionally well in science but wanted to paint. Rajesh negotiated an exhibition with her father: if half the paintings sold, she could pursue art. All thirty-eight sold by the second day. She went on to study at the JJ School of Arts on scholarship.

The stories were not promises that every unconventional choice would succeed. They illustrated the importance of helping young people distinguish their inner voice from the noise surrounding them. Kiran acknowledged that Lakshmi's fear was real, while insisting that the world needed people with the capacities she described.

Manya shifted the conversation from career choice to purpose. Were there processes through which children, not adults, could discover the difference they wanted to make?

Kiran adjusted the language. The goal was not to be different; it was to make a difference. Children needed a bridge between learning and life. Whether the subject was physics, biology, mathematics or art, they should be able to ask what it allowed them to understand or improve.

Preethi explained how Tapas built that bridge through sustained interdisciplinary projects. A question about the Indus Valley civilisation could become a project on what ancient city planning might teach Bengaluru about traffic. Within a single project, learners could approach the problem as archaeologists, writers, designers or other professionals. Across roughly three projects a year and ten years of schooling, a child might encounter about thirty professional lenses.

Isha recalled seeing this work at Tapas: one group had explored women's rights through Victorian fashion, while another connected an imagined oxygen tank in a utopian world to the respiratory system. Subjects had not disappeared. They had been reorganised around questions that gave them consequence.

Adolescence, agency and belonging

Nikhila asked how schools could make kindness and civic responsibility feel relevant to adolescents, especially boys who might dismiss them as uncool.

Rajesh resisted beginning with correction. Adults often design rules for teenagers without taking adolescent experience seriously. Instead of ordering students to walk silently in a line, he suggested giving them freedom to move through the corridor while asking them not to disturb nearby classes. The shared principle remained, but students had agency in meeting it. A quiet classroom, he warned, was not necessarily a good classroom. It might simply be a cage.

Preethi questioned the assumption that adolescents were naturally indifferent or unkind. Apparent hostility often emerged from weak belonging and an uncertain identity. At Tapas, learners created classroom rules together and addressed anonymously submitted problems through a weekly student-led Town Hall. Because they helped create the rules, they had a reason to uphold them.

Pavitra drew on her work with adolescent boys. Approaching them in good faith often surprised students who expected adults to assume the worst. Rules became more meaningful when connected to consequences for the community rather than obedience to authority. Preethi added that adolescents responded to honesty. An adult willing to say, "I don't know, can we figure this out together?" could create more trust than one pretending to have every answer.

Anjana argued that voice and kindness were not opposites. Young people could question authority, set boundaries and disagree while remaining respectful. Isha added that early adolescence is precisely when the brain begins discovering its capacity to challenge systems. In her view, dismissing that capacity as rebellion meant misunderstanding a developmental milestone. Like a child who had just discovered a crayon, she suggested, adolescents naturally test this new ability on every available surface.

What remains when the educator leaves?

Arya brought the discussion into an underserved community where she had taught primary-school children. During one lesson, a child sat crying because his mother had been arrested. Her co-teacher helped her understand that such experiences were not unusual in the community. A five-day rain holiday could erase learning, while parents occupied by immediate survival could not always participate as educational stakeholders. How could an educator create something that endured after they left?

Preethi replied that regression during breaks occurred across school types. Learning was more likely to remain when children understood why it mattered and could apply it to problems they cared about. More important than retaining every piece of content was learning how to learn, self-correct and reflect.

Isha added the peer group as another stakeholder. When adults were absent or overwhelmed, children still had one another. Building resilience and mutual support across age groups could create a community that remained after a particular teacher departed.

Preethi described Tapas's mixed-age CREW groups, organised around Courage, Responsibility, Empathy and Wellbeing. Students taught one another language and academic concepts while building relationships beyond their immediate class. Progression grids also allowed learners to translate objectives into their own language, assess themselves using evidence and discuss that evidence with a facilitator.

Reeya then returned the conversation to access. She valued what she had heard but noted that many alternative schools remain financially inaccessible to many families. Her question remained an important tension within the evening: a compelling model could not be considered fully successful without asking who was able to enter it.

Difference, failure and the freedom to try again

Maitrei asked how the schools included children with special needs. Choithram had fifty-eight such learners supported by special educators, counsellors and, where needed, shadow teachers. Rajesh stressed that support for an individual child had to be accompanied by acceptance and empathy from classmates.

At Tapas, Preethi said, approximately thirty per cent of learners had special needs. Inclusion therefore could not remain an aspiration. It had to organise everyday practice. The wider community included neurodiverse educators, LGBTQIA+ staff and people from different economic backgrounds. An annual Difference Week treated difference not as a problem requiring correction, but as an ordinary feature of human community.

Naisha then asked how schools could separate failure from identity. A disappointing result might be manageable in childhood, but become devastating in adulthood when the stakes were higher and emotional support less available.

Rajesh returned to learning as an emotional phenomenon. Choithram's social-emotional framework was woven into academic content. A lesson on vertebrates using Mowgli could also ask whether a child had ever felt unwelcome. Emotional learning had to appear in how people behaved, not merely in policy documents.

Preethi described the power of yet: I cannot do this could become I cannot do this yet. Tapas also used Austin's Butterfly to teach that strong work develops through drafts and feedback. When a visiting parent asked one learner to describe a failure, the child recalled an unsuccessful attempt to grow mushrooms. After thinking, the learner concluded that it was not a failure but "one way of not growing mushrooms."

Isha closed the thread with a question from Kiran's book: "Are we telling children they are markable, or remarkable?"

Falguni's final questions returned to project-based learning. How were projects chosen, and how did the school prevent the most outspoken student from dominating? Preethi explained that projects grew from learners' questions and facilitators' genuine interests. Pair work, small groups, whole-class discussion and circle time allowed different kinds of participation.

When Falguni asked whether abstract ideas such as fairness could become projects, Preethi described a curriculum built around the Japanese concepts of Shizen and Ikigai. Learners made Shizen tangible by documenting every living creature sharing their campus. They explored Ikigai through a game show in which parents answered questions about what mattered to them and why. The work required facilitators who could tolerate uncertainty; not knowing exactly where a project would end was part of its educational value.

The session had begun by asking what held a school together. By the end, the answer was not a single philosophy or technique. A school functioned through the alignment, or misalignment, of its values, relationships and ordinary decisions. The test was not what appeared in its prospectus, but what children, teachers and families were able to experience every day.

Age, Identity and Access in Schools



Mainak Roy



Swetha Guhan

Access is only the beginning

The third Fact-finding session started with a question about power: Who decides who gets to learn, how they learn and on whose terms?

The guests were Mainak Roy and Swetha Guhan, both former Teach For India Fellows who had gone on to work within public-education systems. Mainak is one of the co-founders of the Simple Education Foundation, whose teacher competency framework was being used by approximately 80,000 government-school teachers in Delhi. Swetha is one of co-founders of the Key Education Foundation (KEF), which works with children between three and six and brings together teachers, families and schools around early-childhood development.

Swetha began by describing a trap within conversations about scale. When considering more than fourteen lakh schools and twenty-five crore children, it was tempting to treat access as the finish line: provide something to everyone, and the task was complete. Yet early-childhood education had until recently remained outside the Right to Education, and entry into a service revealed only the first layer of the problem.

After access came quality, usually described through standards, metrics and international frameworks. Swetha felt those measures still left something out. Her own understanding had changed while reviewing an interview with an Uber-driver father.

When asked what he wanted from education, he said,

> "All I want for my child is she should feel like she belongs."
>
> *A parent, recalled by Swetha Guhan*

Belonging became KEF's organising idea. The child should feel that the classroom was theirs. The teacher should feel capable and valued. The parent should be able to enter without feeling judged. Quality would emerge through the relationship among all three.

Mainak connected the session's terms. Access was the beginning. Identity developed through what a person could access and how they were treated there. Age shaped how those experiences were understood at different stages of development. Mahin added an example from his organisation, where children participated in both age-based syllabus classes and mixed-age foundational groups.

Do fifteen days matter?

Isha tested the age question through school-admission cut-offs. A child who missed the required age by ten or fifteen days could be made to wait an entire year. Was that good developmental policy or administrative convenience?

Swetha defended the cut-off, despite knowing that many parents disliked it. Fifteen days could be developmentally significant, and the youngest child in a cohort might expend greater neurological effort simply to keep pace. Another eleven months in a play-based environment could substantially increase readiness.

Her defence ended at admission. Inside the classroom, she opposed rigid age-based assessment. Children should be understood along a developmental continuum spanning two or three years rather than expected to reach every competency simultaneously.

Mainak agreed. Some structures had valid origins, while others survived without justification. The larger problem was that institutions rarely explained why a rule existed. Once families discovered an arbitrary requirement, they could begin distrusting all requirements. Broad developmental windows still mattered because falling significantly behind peers could affect not only learning but identity and social belonging.

Are constraints explanations or excuses?

Isha then asked whether ideas such as belonging and holistic development were realistic in government and municipal schools where resources were stretched and attendance itself could be uncertain.



Inside a government school classroom, captured by Puspalata.

Mainak rejected the idea that constraint justified a lower aspiration. Every design responds to its context. SEF had adapted extended project-based learning into shorter performance tasks that could develop collaboration and critical thinking within the time and resource conditions of government schools. Constraints were design parameters, not reasons to expect less from children.

Urbi observed that deficiencies in public systems were often so normalised that people stopped asking why they existed.

Swetha challenged some assumptions about public-school resources. In Karnataka, she said, the government spent approximately ₹68,000 per child each year, compared with roughly ₹9,000 in an affordable private school. Government teachers were generally better qualified and better paid, and infrastructure was often stronger than popular descriptions suggested. The difficulty lay in systems and processes that prevented those resources from becoming meaningful learning.



Students in a Government School

Swetha described how KEF's 63-point checklist for determining whether it could work in a space had been reduced to two questions: ***Is a caring adult present? Can they dedicate four hours a day to being with children?*** She strongly believed that if the answer to both was yes, quality education was possible anywhere.

Swetha recalled visiting Nagaland and finding classes held inside roofless bamboo circles. She initially worried about the absence of conventional classrooms. Parents asked different questions. Were children playing? Was the teacher trained? Was the environment safe and developmentally appropriate? If so, the bamboo circle could be enough.

Mainak agreed that the caring adult was the decisive condition. Teachers burdened with election work, paperwork and duties unrelated to learning could not give children their full attention. When those burdens were removed, teachers often brought such commitment that imperfect pedagogy still produced learning.

Isha connected this with municipal schools she had visited in Rajkot, where teachers spent much of their energy simply persuading children to attend. She had discussed operating in a kind of battery-saving mode: conserving energy during draining obligations so that something remained for the moments that mattered most.



Children at play in Indore, photographed during immersion, echoed the session's insistence that education must make room for childhood as it is lived.

Why does strong policy become weak practice?

Isha asked whether quality was consciously treated as an afterthought in educational policy.

Swetha said it was not. Policy rooms were often filled with highly qualified people who held idealistic views of what every child deserved. Indian policy documents could be excellent at describing aspiration. The problem was that they rarely explained how to realise it.

She drew on her experience with the Karnataka State Education Policy group. The state had rejected the National Education Policy and National Curriculum Framework for political reasons and spent nine months creating a replacement that contained little substantially new. No government-school teacher had participated in drafting it. When teachers were eventually asked to sign off, they identified an immediate contradiction: the policy mandated English-medium classrooms while the state had approximately 19,000 vacancies for teachers capable of filling those positions. Creating a bilingual workforce would take five to eight years; the policy expected it almost immediately.

Mainak explained that education was placed on the Concurrent List precisely because it required contextual translation. National policy might contain strong principles, but

states lacked money for the work of adapting them. Central funding was often tied to specific mandates, encouraging compliance even where the mandate poorly fitted local conditions. Kerala's investment in infrastructure for multi-grade, multi-level classrooms offered an example of more thoughtful adaptation.

He also implicated philanthropy and nonprofits. Funders repeatedly asked whether an intervention could scale. Standardisation appeared to offer the answer, but education could not be reproduced like shampoo or software. States differed in language, culture, staffing and administrative structure.

Manya asked how policies written by talented people could lose so much before reaching the ground. Swetha returned to the missing teacher voices and impossible mandates. The damage caused by a weak policy might become visible only after a generation, allowing harmful decisions to resemble progress in the short term. Mainak added that governments work within electoral windows of two or three effective years, while educational change requires decades.

Puspalata brought the problem into village life. Nutrition and health schemes existed, yet stigma, migration, low awareness and irregular participation prevented the most vulnerable families from receiving them. Water schemes could be formally present while households continued depending on borewells because those better matched immediate needs. Policy intention and lived access were not the same.

When identity enters the classroom

Maitrei asked how adults should respond when a young child questioned gender or sexual identity. Too often, she observed, the response was dismissal: the child was young and would understand later. She also placed the counterargument before the group: an eight-year-old would not be allowed to make a permanent decision such as getting a tattoo, so how should adults understand a child's statements about identity?

Swetha answered through an unsuccessful experience. KEF had piloted a gender and body-safety curriculum across twenty schools, but some language proved culturally unacceptable in the communities. The failure taught the organisation to ask whether the community was ready for the conversation and whether the language emerged from local understanding. KEF now focused on body safety while continuing to develop its evidence base.

Her practical advice was to allow gender expression. A boy could wear nail polish; a girl could play with cars. Adults did not need to turn every expression into a permanent declaration. They needed to avoid treating nonconformity as something requiring

correction.

Mainak focused on what children saw in educational material. SEF audited textbooks and handbooks for gender assumptions and intentionally included different bodies, religions, orientations and roles. A boy who wanted to cook should be able to see another boy cooking.

Arya recalled a child whose question had been passed between school and family until no adult answered it. Lakshmi argued that identity was a journey of discovery and that parents required sensitisation alongside children. Daksh and Urbi suggested that acknowledging a child's confusion or desire not to conform was an important first step. The group returned repeatedly to how historically unstable the categories of boy things and girl things were, despite being presented to children as natural facts.

Does birthplace determine learning?

Arya cited the 2024 ASER finding that approximately forty-five per cent of Grade Five children could read only a Grade Two text. In the urban Chennai schools where she had worked, outcomes were sometimes worse than the rural figures. Did birthplace determine educational possibility?

Mainak's answer was direct: geography mattered enormously, but not through a simple rural–urban divide. Regional economies shaped how families valued schooling. In agricultural communities, children's work at home could compete with attendance. In Uttarakhand, the distance and danger involved in reaching upper-primary schools contributed to girls leaving after Grade Five. Caste could determine where a child sat within the classroom and whether repeated humiliation eventually made attendance feel pointless.

Swetha identified urban migrants as especially overlooked. Their children could spend long days caring for themselves and younger siblings while both parents worked. They might lack adequate nutrition and the caring adult who asked what had happened at school. Neither settled urban nor rural systems were designed around them.

Arya asked what had happened to the guests' former Teach For India students. Mainak reported that almost all his students had completed college, several had pursued postgraduate education and one had joined Teach For India. Swetha remembered initially fearing that her students would struggle once the Fellows left. Instead, they organised collectively and demanded a physics teacher the school had failed to provide. Access to an advocate had helped, but the deeper outcome was that they had learned to advocate for themselves.

What should nonprofits do?

Lakshmi asked whether nonprofit organisations could reduce the administrative burden on teachers.

Mainak supported help but resisted outsourcing a core government responsibility. The state already possessed the capacity and mandate to manage buildings, water, sanitation and administration. Nonprofits should concentrate on areas where government genuinely needed technical partnership: early-childhood curricula, teacher development, assessment and research.

Swetha admitted that the nonprofit sector had begun believing that its job was to scale. Someone had reminded her that she was not the government; she was a technical partner. Government had to scale. The missing work was often rigorous research into the specific, everyday reasons a teacher could not implement a lesson plan.

Ramit added that community work and policy advocacy demanded different organisational capabilities. An organisation might become so focused on lobbying for change that it weakened the ground-level relationships from which its conviction had emerged.

Rashika, training to become a teacher, asked why problems acknowledged for decades continued without structural change.

Mainak replied through systems thinking: "The system is always designed to give the outcomes it is currently giving." Poor learning and absent teacher agency could not be treated as accidents if the surrounding structures repeatedly produced them.

Swetha argued that teachers were viewed as implementers rather than creators. Agency required trust, and teaching remained socially regarded as a low-aspiration profession. She described Bachcha Manao, through which organisations celebrated teachers and Anganwadi workers, encouraged officials to recognise them and deliberately handed educators the microphone when nonprofits received public attention.

Mainak told Rashika that, over a teaching career, she could affect at least two thousand lives. Swetha encouraged teachers and trainees to keep records of their experiences so that practitioner knowledge would not disappear.

Which choices should education prepare us to make?

The questions continued to reveal how access intersected with social life. Shreejita asked how differences between public and private schools affected confidence and aspiration. Swetha argued that the educational-quality gap between government schools and community private schools was often smaller than perception suggested. Yet families could be shamed for choosing a government school, as though enrolment itself proved that they had failed to provide.

Ravya asked whether education should help young people understand love, relationships and partnership after describing a girl who left school following a friend's elopement at sixteen.

Mainak cautioned against assuming from outside that an early marriage inevitably produced a negative life. Education should not merely prevent choices; it should help people understand what they were choosing. Swetha argued that a single sex-education lesson arriving after puberty was insufficient. Parents and other adults needed education so that adolescent relationships did not produce only punishment, panic and confinement. Manya contrasted Swetha's painful school experience with a male teacher who had created a comfortable conversation in her own classroom when she was in Grade Nine.

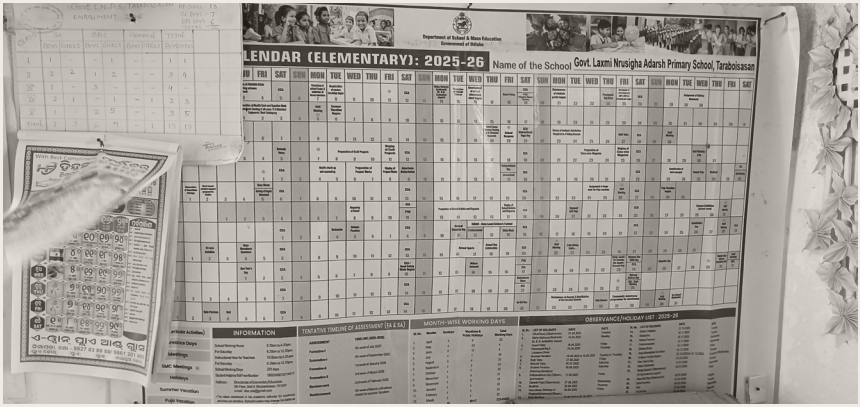


Children at the school Puspalata visited during her immersion, captured by Puspalata..

The session's final question came from Puspalata, drawing on her work as an Anganwadi worker. Anganwadis already provided nutrition, health monitoring, early-childhood education and community services. What place could they realistically occupy within an ideal early-learning system?

Swetha described workers overwhelmed by health schemes, prenatal care, banking support, child-marriage intervention, surveys and numerous administrative duties. In some places they had even been assigned dog-vaccination work. Protecting four hours for teaching became structurally impossible.

Yet the Anganwadi was present in almost every village and often held extraordinary community trust. Swetha described Chandrapur, where KEF refused to proceed until the district protected teaching time from morning until mid-afternoon. Once the order was issued, Anganwadi workers were able to teach consistently. KEF later published a Bundeli storybook celebrating them.



A school timetable recorded how limited time was divided across classes, subjects and responsibilities.

Puspalata confirmed the burden from her own experience. She continued trying to teach the children who came to her centre, taking small steps within the time that administrative work left available.

The session had begun with access. By the end, access had become the least sufficient word in the conversation. A child could be enrolled and remain unheard. A policy could exist and remain unreachable. A teacher could be present and have no time to teach. Belonging required more: a caring adult, a responsive institution and the experience of being recognised as someone for whom the educational space had genuinely been made.

The Future of Education and AI



Treta Sharma



Charles Fadel

When the future entered the classroom

Isha introduced the fourth and final Fact-finding session through two guests positioned differently within the rapidly changing conversation about artificial intelligence.

Treta Sharma is a learning-science researcher at Northwestern University, a former Teach For India Fellow and a former learning-experience designer and curriculum specialist. Charles Fadel is a globally recognised education futurist and founder and chairman of the Boston-based Center for Curriculum Redesign, with experience across engineering, technology and education, including work involving the OECD, UNESCO, the World Economic Forum and Harvard University.

Treta began by locating herself within the educational landscape she was about to discuss. She had taught sixty boys in a Delhi government school, many of them first-generation learners whose parents could not read or write. She later trained Teach For India Fellows, worked at the well-resourced Shiv Nadar School and joined an education-technology company serving low-income private schools across twenty states. She had observed classrooms at very different points on the spectrum of access before moving to the United States for postgraduate study and research.

Paulo Freire's ***Pedagogy of the Oppressed*** had shaped her conviction that change begins through dialogue. Pavitra immediately recognised the reference, having studied the book during a course on education and imperialism.

Treta's central formulation was that "AI happened to us." It was not developed through a collective decision about what children, teachers or communities needed.

She traced a line from the naming of artificial intelligence at Dartmouth in 1956, through machine learning and pattern recognition, to Deep Blue's defeat of Garry Kasparov in 1997 and the arrival of generative AI in everyday life. The unease surrounding a machine defeating a chess champion had returned at a different scale when AI systems began producing language, images and decisions.

The technology was already present across medicine, defence, finance, agriculture, manufacturing, supply chains and education. Treta had seen it used for tutoring, assessment, interactive lessons, narrated videos, debate preparation, individual learning plans, administrative work and communication with parents.

What came next was uncertain. She anticipated more accessible model creation, AI agents managing other agents, the increasing use of synthetic data, growing environmental costs, labour displacement and the creation of work that did not yet exist. Two human capacities would become especially important: cognitive autonomy and emotional resilience.

The chat immediately tested the scale of her claims. Shreya and Arya considered the possibility of AI-assisted genome engineering. Puspalata asked what such tools might mean for climate-resilient crops and food security. Kushala contributed an example of remote robotic surgery.

The excitement quickly encountered environmental concern. Changemakers discussed the water and energy consumed by data centres, particularly in cities already facing water insecurity. Mahin described removing AI from some workplace systems to restore human imagination. Lakshmi observed that people might be economically compelled to learn AI even while objecting to its environmental cost. Puspalata and Mahin brought the question back to agriculture: digital infrastructure could not be separated from decisions about whose water and livelihoods were placed at risk.

What counts as original?

Treta then asked what original thinking meant when AI could produce advanced academic work. She compared the question with changing attitudes towards recorded music. Music had once been considered authentic only when performed live. Recorded and streamed music was now accepted without qualification. Might AI-generated work undergo a similar change in perception?

She also asked how individual achievement should be understood when a tool accomplished something at the scale of AlphaFold's contribution to protein research. AI was consequential in education precisely because it had not been designed for education, children or equity. It emerged from scientific and commercial systems pursuing capability and market dominance. Educators were now responsible for adapting a technology they had not helped create.

Pavitra distinguished knowing from knowledge. Lakshmi compared the moment with the arrival of the internet, when easy access to information was also feared as a threat to effort and thought. Over time, people developed more selective habits. Schools might similarly need to build awareness before embracing AI's benefits.

Priyasha questioned who benefited in contexts of low digital literacy and unequal access. If students delegated their thinking to AI, what happened to cognitive development? Pavitra warned that children using such systems before forming foundational capacities might never exercise those capacities fully. The brain, Priyasha added, needed use in order to develop.

Treta responded by naming the skills she believed the future required: adaptability, lifelong learning, digital and AI literacy, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, ethical reasoning and readiness for repeated career change.

She then contrasted the United States and India. In the United States, students were reverse-engineering robotic arms, districts were forming partnerships with AI companies and many states had produced guidance for teachers. The same system also faced rising screen time, data breaches and unmonitored phone use.

India's baseline was very different. Of approximately fourteen lakh schools, only a proportion had computers, internet access or functioning devices. Ambitions framed around 2030 or 2047 had to be examined against that reality. The divide was not only technological; it concerned the mindset produced by learning in an environment of abundance or constraint.

Where will children actually encounter AI?

Isha questioned the reliability of official statistics on computer access. She had seen institutions receive devices that were never installed. At the same time, phone access among lower-income students had increased sharply. Those children were more likely to encounter AI privately through a phone than through a supervised computer laboratory.

Treta agreed. Managed devices in many American schools allowed software restrictions

and guardrails, although informal phone access was growing there too. Responsibility for safety could not rest only with children or schools; model developers had obligations as well.



A safety message displayed at school: protection depends on systems, adult responsibility and what learners are taught to notice.

Isha then described well-resourced Indian schools considering AI not as a learning tool but as a means of streamlining workflows and reducing staffing costs. Was the same happening in the United States?

Treta said American policy currently treated AI as a tool rather than a teacher replacement, partly because parents and communities remained wary of documented bias. Yet lesson plans were already being generated with AI. The technology had

therefore entered some of the intellectual work of teaching even if it had not replaced the teacher.

Isha asked about student-facing tools, beginning with Khan Academy's Khanmigo and its attempt to preserve a Socratic interaction. Treta named other platforms but noted a significant limitation: students did not respond to a chatbot's prompts in the same way they responded to a teacher who knew them and could create consequences. AI could provide a resource; relationship still changed how a learner engaged.

Ramit asked whether AI might accelerate homeschooling. Treta acknowledged rapid growth in American homeschooling but remained sceptical. Learning was inherently social. Children developed through unpredictable encounters with people, disagreement and environments beyond their control. A highly efficient two-hour academic model might remove precisely the social experiences through which character and cognitive flexibility grew.

Should children be protected from AI or taught to confront it?

Pavitra asked how children could make ethical decisions about AI when adults themselves remained uncertain about originality, authenticity and environmental responsibility.

Treta opposed simply withholding the technology. AI literacy could begin early. A class might compare a human-written story with an AI-generated one and discuss what felt emotionally different. Children needed opportunities to develop a conscious relationship with AI rather than discovering it only through unsupervised use.

Shreya worried about teenagers turning to chatbots for emotional support. She compared her own childhood habit of writing in a diary with a younger cousin typing feelings into an AI system. Keya asked what constant interaction with a non-judgemental machine might do to identity, given that human identity develops partly through disagreement, conflict and exposure to other perspectives.

Lakshmi described a teacher who assumed students would use AI for essays and redesigned the assignment accordingly. Students were graded on how carefully they evaluated and revised the machine-generated draft. Priyasha asked whether this developed genuine synthesis or merely evaluative skill. Lakshmi replied that repeated use made AI's patterns visible; learning to identify its formulas could itself sharpen judgement.

The conversation did not settle into prohibition or acceptance. Lakshmi described students who opposed AI on ethical and environmental grounds while simultaneously delegating intellectual work to it. Should educators persuade them that AI was limited, or teach them that it could be controlled?

Treta answered through communities of practice. Human relationships with AI would be developed collectively rather than solved by individuals in isolation. She acknowledged her own duality: AI could appear threatening while producing something as extraordinary as AlphaFold. People needed time and permission to work out their relationship with it.

A cognitive technology

Charles entered by recognising the balance in Treta's account. Environmental costs mattered, but humanity was also encountering a technology capable of operating at a cognitive level.

He situated AI within a longer history. Writing weakened some forms of memory while making knowledge preservable and shareable. GPS weakened navigational instinct while making most journeys easier. A technology could reduce one human capacity and still produce a larger benefit. The challenge was to evaluate the whole effect rather than only its most alarming edge cases.

Charles introduced a framework for determining where AI performed well. It excelled where data was plentiful, patterns were strong and outputs could be verified. It struggled where data was scarce and correctness was difficult to establish. Between those poles, it could verify work alongside human judgement or generate possibilities alongside human creativity.

He distinguished incremental from radical creativity through the evolution of a razor. Adding a second, third or fourth blade extended an existing idea. Creating a blade that pivoted with the face represented a qualitative leap. AI could extrapolate readily; the deeper imaginative pivot remained more difficult.

Which parts of a job can be automated?

Charles asked the group what a doctor did. Isha named diagnosis. Daksh mentioned coordination with medical staff. Vidhi raised the reassurance of patients. Lakshmi described collecting symptoms and signals before prescribing treatment.

Charles divided the work into tasks: taking a history, performing a physical examination,

ordering and interpreting tests, forming a diagnosis and delivering news. AI could assist substantially with some tasks, particularly interpreting data. It could not conduct a physical examination or fully reproduce the subtle human judgement involved in interviewing a patient.

The better question was therefore not whether AI replaced a doctor, but which tasks it enhanced. Where doctors were scarce, could a nurse supported by AI perform some general-practitioner functions?

The same reasoning applied to teaching. AI might assist with planning and data collection, while the teacher remained responsible for human judgement, relationships and the live interpretation of thirty different learners.

Charles identified university entrance examinations as a major constraint. They were designed to predict performance within university rather than a person's life beyond it. As long as those examinations remained unchanged, schools had only a limited margin within which to experiment.

He then introduced the Center for Curriculum Redesign's four dimensions: Knowledge, Skills, Character and Meta-learning. AI increased the importance of conceptual understanding, epistemic judgement and radical imagination. Asked to reduce the educational response to one word, he chose adaptability: not a classroom simulation of flexibility, but the capacity built through unfamiliar and unpredictable situations.

Curiosity, character and cultural context

Ramit returned to Charles's framework and questioned whether AI really lacked curiosity. Contemporary models asked follow-up questions and appeared to investigate intent.

Charles acknowledged that the technology had advanced. He distinguished operational questioning, produced through training, from intrinsic and self-directed curiosity. AI could behave curiously within a task without possessing the embodied impulse that made a human or animal explore independently. He also warned that people compared AI with the best human rather than the average one. In many areas, it already outperformed the latter.

Shreya asked what character meant within the four-dimensional framework. Charles explained that the term was more widely understandable than social-emotional learning. After examining hundreds of related words, his team had selected four generative qualities: curiosity, courage, resilience and ethics. The harder work lay in moving from naming those qualities to cultivating them.

Daksh challenged a simple division between Eastern and Western philosophies and questioned whether some anxiety about AI emerged from species-based egoism. He also argued that much academic production had always reproduced knowledge rather than creating it; AI was exposing work that was formulaic before the technology arrived.

Charles agreed that publish-or-perish academia had generated poor and irreproducible research. He clarified that logic and formal ethics did not always produce wisdom. Lying to protect someone from violence might violate an abstract rule while remaining the humane choice. Education needed to prepare people to balance such dualities rather than imagine that every conflict could be permanently resolved.

Vidhi raised the Western bias of AI training data. She recalled aid boxes sent after an earthquake in Gujarat that contained pork the recipients would not eat. A technically useful response could fail if it did not understand the community receiving it.

Charles called the necessary human work sociocultural translation. Small languages and marginalised cultures would never possess the quantity of commercially valuable data available in English. People able to interpret and adapt an AI response within a community would therefore remain indispensable. Knowledge of an underrepresented language or culture might become more valuable precisely because AI could not reproduce it reliably.

Daksh observed that some young people already found AI more available and less judgemental than human advisers. Friends used Claude during stressful college applications because it listened seriously and did not gossip. He himself used it for education and career guidance while remaining concerned about what happened to personal data.

The session ended inside that contradiction. AI could reproduce bias, consume scarce resources, weaken human capacities and enter children's lives without adequate safeguards. It could also expand access to knowledge, support overburdened professionals and offer help where no trusted person was available. The future had not simply arrived in the classroom. It had arrived unevenly, without common rules and without waiting for educators to decide whether they were ready.

Conclusion: Four lenses on Better Schools

The four Fact-finding and Familiarising sessions did not assemble a model school piece by piece. They made the idea of a Better School more difficult and more honest.

The first session asked what education was for and found that no single purpose

could contain human development, livelihood, community, freedom and meaning. The second moved from purpose to practice, asking how values survive through institutional decisions, relationships and pressure. The third showed that access means little without quality, participation and belonging. The fourth placed all of those concerns inside a technological future already reshaping knowledge, work and identity.

Across the four sessions, the Changemakers encountered philosophy, school leadership, public systems, early-childhood practice, technology and lived experience. The perspectives did not always agree, nor were they meant to. Fact-finding was not the collection of quotations that confirmed a preferred answer. It was the effort to understand a problem from enough positions that easy conclusions became harder to maintain.

Better Schools could not be reduced to better buildings, different curricula or new technology. They would have to be judged by the purposes they served, the relationships they sustained, the people they included and the futures for which they prepared children. The F sessions gave the cohort no final blueprint. They gave it something more useful at this stage: a wider field of vision and better questions with which to enter it.

A: Advocating for the Alternate Viewpoint

The schools before the arguments

The Advocating for the Alternate Viewpoint sessions began with four schools that existed only on a shared board. They had been constructed from positions surfaced during the earlier conversations, but they were not proposals for schools to be built. They were thinking devices: four coherent institutions through which different educational choices could be followed to their practical consequences. What made these sessions significant was that all Changemakers were expected to hold and defend views that opposed their own beliefs.

Aparna had framed the transition in her voice note: "It's not enough to be open to being challenged; you must actively create the conditions where others feel safe to challenge you." The exercise made that intellectual humility practical. A strong defence required listening closely enough to understand what an opposing position was trying to protect.

The F.A.I.R. School, a Community Foundation School, began with the individual child but placed a stable common foundation first. Learning would begin with local language, community, history and environment. Teaching would follow a consistent framework across classrooms; students would ordinarily progress with their age group; resources would be distributed broadly equally; and assessment would use common standards. Artificial intelligence would be introduced later, after foundational capacities had developed, and the senior years would offer clear routes into higher education and work.

Sapiens School, a Child-Centred Adaptive School, also began with the individual child and the child's immediate context, but refused to fit every learner into one common mould. Teachers would have substantial freedom over methods and pacing. Students could progress according to demonstrated learning rather than age alone. Additional support would follow need, assessment would recognise different forms of growth and mastery, and preparation for life after school would emphasise exploration and adaptability. Like The F.A.I.R. School, it would delay direct student use of AI until the later years.

Global Abode Public School, a Public Standards School, treated education as a public institution responsible for preparing children for society, mobility and shared

opportunity. It adopted a globally aligned curriculum, consistent teaching frameworks, age-wise progression, broadly equal resources and common standards of assessment. Guided AI literacy would begin in the early years. Higher education, careers and livelihoods would be built visibly into the school's pathways.

Back to the Future, a Global Adaptive Futures School, prepared students for an interconnected world that could not be predicted in advance. Its curriculum was globally oriented, but teachers could adapt its delivery to their learners. Students would progress according to readiness and learning level; resources would be directed towards need; assessment would recognise context and different forms of achievement; and guided engagement with AI would begin early. Rather than directing students towards a fixed set of destinations, the school would cultivate the ability to learn, unlearn and move between pathways.

The arrangement was deliberate. The F.A.I.R. and Sapiens schools shared a commitment to the individual child, local rootedness and later AI, but differed over consistency and adaptation. Global Abode and Back to the Future shared a society-facing, globally oriented outlook and supported early guided AI use, but differed over common standards and individual responsiveness. The four schools were not arranged along a simple line from conventional to progressive. Each combined familiar educational values in a different way.

Eight committees, no neutral seat

Every school was then passed through the same eight institutional functions.

The **School Management Committee** set the governing direction of the institution and determined whose interests would guide major decisions. The **Curriculum Committee** decided what knowledge, languages, experiences and contexts would enter the school. The **Academic Committee** determined how teaching would be organised: through a common instructional framework or through greater professional discretion. The **Promotion Committee** decided how students would move through school, primarily by age and academic year or by demonstrated readiness and learning level.

The **Finance Committee** decided how resources would be distributed, including whether an equal entitlement should take priority or whether additional provision should follow need. The **Assessment Committee** defined what would count as evidence of learning and how achievement would be reported. The **Technology Committee** determined when and how AI would enter the educational experience. The **Careers Committee** connected school to the world beyond it, balancing clear routes into higher education and livelihoods against exploration and adaptability.

The role of each committee remained constant across the four schools. What changed was the philosophy that guided its decisions. A finance committee prioritising to equal entitlement would behave differently from one committed to need-based support. An academic committee protecting consistency would place different limits on teacher discretion from one built around professional autonomy. An assessment committee seeking comparability would construct a different account of achievement from one beginning with growth and context.

Together, the committees turned each school from a collection of attractive principles into an institution. Its values now had to appear in governance, teaching, progression, budgets, assessment, technology and the pathways offered to students.



The four fictional schools used during the Alternate Viewpoint phase, each organised around a different set of educational trade-offs.

Only after this architecture was clear did the Changemakers enter the argument. Each person had been assigned both a school and a committee position. The position could differ from what they personally believed, but it could not be exchanged. A participant could privately agree with another school, but during the deliberation they had to defend the institution they had been given and speak from the committee they represented.

On 22 June, Sapiens School faced Global Abode Public School, while The F.A.I.R. School faced Back to the Future. The schools presented their models and questioned one another's assumptions. On 23 June, unresolved arguments were reopened before the task became harder: each school was asked to account for the contradictions inside its own design.

The first test: another school

What does fairness require?

The longest dispute between Sapiens and Global Abode concerned equality and equity.

Manya began Global Abode's defence with a common floor: the same books, facilities and opportunities for every child, with additional support when disability might otherwise become a barrier. Shreya questioned whether equal provision could create fairness when children entered school from radically unequal circumstances. Shreejita pressed the definition further. If resources changed according to need, was Global Abode not practising equity while continuing to call it equality?

Manya responded by separating equal entitlement from identical treatment. A common floor did not require teachers to ignore difference or use exactly the same pedagogy with everyone. Reeya located equality in aspiration: children might need different forms of help, but the school should not lower the horizon it held for any of them. Puspalata connected common standards to public responsibility. A public school, she argued, had to provide families, particularly those from marginalised communities, with some assurance that every child would receive a credible minimum.



Children's paintings, documented during immersion, offered another reminder that ability and participation become visible in more than one form.

The questioning also exposed weaknesses in the alternative. Kushala observed that income could not function as a reliable proxy for educational need. Two children from households with similar incomes might have entirely different learning gaps, while a low-income child might require social or financial support without needing academic remediation. Daksh conceded that this was a genuine flaw in the Sapiens financial framework. He retained its commitment to need-based provision, but reframed it around admission without prejudice followed by support based on the child actually encountered, rather than assumptions drawn from a single indicator.

The disagreement therefore became more precise. Both schools accepted that some children would require more. They remained divided over whether such provision should be understood as an exception to a common entitlement or as the starting principle of fairness itself. They also left open Lakshmi's question: who determines which benchmarks are fair, and what protects that decision from the biases of the people or measures involved?

The same tension appeared when The F.A.I.R. School questioned Back to the Future about device allocation. Mahin worried about the resentment that might arise when one student received more access than another. Manan answered with an equal baseline followed by additional access where a specific need or opportunity justified it. Arya went one step further: children's understanding of fairness is itself learned. A school that consistently explained why different children sometimes need different forms of support might not produce the expectation that fairness always means treating everyone the same.

No final formula settled the issue. What changed was the quality of the question. It was no longer simply whether equality or equity sounded more desirable. The schools had to explain what the common floor contained, how need would be identified, who would make that judgement and which inequalities their chosen model was prepared to tolerate.

One road or many?

The F.A.I.R. School and Back to the Future met most sharply over progression. Should students move mainly with their age group, or according to what they were ready to learn?

Pavitra asked where challenge would come from if children remained only among peers working at the same level. Arya argued that automatic age-wise progression could fail in both directions: it could hold back a younger child who had already mastered more advanced work, or move another child forward without the understanding required for what came next. Back to the Future therefore proposed carefully assessed, subject-specific movement based on readiness, interests and strengths.

The F.A.I.R. School placed a different value at the centre. Mahin described same-age cohorts in which groups could be regularly changed so that learners with different strengths still worked together. Jaina emphasised continuity, friendship and belonging. The school did not deny difference, but sought to address it through enrichment and remedial support within the age group rather than repeatedly moving children between levels.

Naisha then made the developmental concern more concrete. In the early years, a small difference in age could carry a large difference in confidence, maturity and social power. Placing a younger child among older students could reproduce the familiar senior–junior hierarchy and leave the child feeling threatened or subordinate. Pavitra accepted that childhood development is measured in months rather than broad years, but questioned how much of the perceived gap was created by the school system itself. If a seven-year-old was ready for more advanced reading, she argued, administrative convenience should not make age an absolute barrier.

Back to the Future clarified that it was not proposing arbitrary mixed-age classrooms. Pavitra drew on her own childhood: she had read English at a much higher level than mathematics. In this model, she could have worked with older students for reading while remaining at her own level for mathematics. Movement would be based on evidence within a particular area, not on labelling an entire child as advanced or behind.

Its foundational curriculum and "super curriculum" would also operate in parallel. Every student would continue with common subjects while undertaking projects and experiences connected to interests and emerging strengths. The second was not a reward unlocked by success in the first.

That clarification answered one concern but opened another. Jaina asked how the model would serve a child performing below the expected level, particularly one struggling across several areas. Moving a fourth-grader into a much younger group could create a different form of humiliation. She also asked how extensive customisation could be sustained with finite teachers and resources, and whether a child's experience would become dependent on the luck of receiving an unusually capable teacher.

Pavitra answered that every child possessed some area of strength and should receive both support for difficulty and room to experience competence. Naisha challenged the emotional premise from her own schooling: doing well in social science had not neutralised the defeat she felt on receiving a poor mathematics result. Achievement in one subject did not necessarily erase the pain of struggling in another.

The debate clarified the disagreement without eliminating it. Back to the Future made its grouping more bounded, assessed and subject-specific. The F.A.I.R. School showed

that age-wise progression did not have to mean one undifferentiated classroom. What remained unanswered was how either model would guarantee both belonging and meaningful progress for the child who continued to fall behind.

Assessment placed the same disagreement in another form. Ravya proposed that understanding could be demonstrated in more than one way. A learner might explain photosynthesis orally, in writing or through a presentation; the concept mattered more than the chosen form. Manya tested the proposal with calculus: were there subjects in which the method of demonstration was itself part of what had to be learned?

Saarika proposed a deliberately plural structure in which examinations, presentations, essays, creative work and field projects each carried weight. The design would allow a child to draw on areas of strength while continuing to encounter less familiar forms. Urbi asked what indicators would still allow the school to say that learning was occurring. Lakshmi questioned the time, expertise and money required to design and maintain such a system, while Kushala asked how parents could interpret results if different students were being assessed differently.

Once again, the disagreement was not between assessment and its absence. The Changemakers were deciding what assessment had to preserve: conceptual understanding, different ways of demonstrating learning, a comprehensible account for families, comparability across students, or preparation for the common examinations and credentials outside the school.

How early should the future enter?

Artificial intelligence divided the schools into two broad positions. Sapiens and The F.A.I.R. School wanted children to develop attention, memory, literacy, reasoning, creativity and social judgement before AI became a direct learning companion. Global Abode and Back to the Future argued that early, supervised familiarity was safer and fairer than leaving children to encounter the technology without guidance.

Rashika distinguished exposure from dependence. Global Abode was not proposing unrestricted chatbot access for a six-year-old. It imagined a gradual curriculum through which children learned that AI could make mistakes, that synthetic content required verification and that more direct use would come later. Parents and teachers would remain part of that process.

Maitrei compared the opposing concern to giving a young child a calculator before helping them develop numerical understanding. If the tool arrived before the capacity, it might replace rather than extend thought. Lakshmi countered with an analogy to sex education: withholding a subject does not prevent children from encountering it; it may

simply make the encounter less informed and more dangerous.

The question remained open, and the cohort deliberately returned to it the following day during the A-session. Prasannaa developed the same taboo argument, while Umar narrowed the disagreement by distinguishing conceptual knowledge about AI from active use of generative tools. A child could learn that AI existed without being given an account or invited to use it as a source of answers. He also returned to a UNESCO age-thirteen recommendation and asked how an early-integration school would accommodate a parent who did not consent to their child's participation.

Pavitra clarified that Back to the Future's early use would remain teacher-mediated. AI might support an exercise, produce feedback or help adapt material, but children would not be given independent accounts or encouraged to share personal and emotional information. Naisha replied that mediation did not answer the developmental question. A six-year-old was still forming a basic sense of what was real; expecting that child to evaluate synthetic information or confident machine errors placed the demand for judgement before the foundation on which judgement depended.

Bias made the question still more difficult. Arya reminded the group that human teachers were not neutral either. Their decisions carried the influence of culture, geography, upbringing and institutions. Umar agreed that both humans and systems could be biased, but argued that the scale and fluency of machine-generated answers could make them appear neutral in ways that were particularly difficult for a young child to recognise. Jaina then asked the functional question beneath the entire debate: if phonics practice, gamification and feedback could be provided through simpler technologies, what educational need uniquely required generative AI? She also brought its environmental cost into the calculation.

Sidharth identified the small area of agreement. The schools were not divided over every use of AI; both could accept administrative applications. They disagreed over direct pedagogy with young children.

The discussion resisted a simple age-based answer. Instead, the Changemakers separated questions that had initially been bundled together: awareness or active use; teacher demonstration or independent access; assistance or dependence; human bias or machine bias; generative AI or simpler software. "Future-ready" could no longer stand as a complete argument. The educational purpose, developmental timing, safeguards and available alternatives all had to be named.

The harder test: a school against itself

Questioning another institution made it possible to protect one's own model. The later exercise removed that protection. Each school was given a contradiction within its own philosophy and asked to decide what it would preserve when its commitments could not all be satisfied.

The F.A.I.R. School: the individual child and equal provision

The F.A.I.R. School called itself child-centred while committing to common foundations, common standards and broadly equal resources. Jaina stated the contradiction directly. Mahin initially argued that individual development should retain priority, while Sidharth distinguished individuality from receiving an entirely separate structure. A common platform could give every child the opportunity to participate without determining what the child would think, make or become.

Naisha added that early customisation could restrict individuality rather than protect it. A child exposed to literature at home might be labelled naturally literary, while another without that exposure might never be offered the same possibility. A common foundation allowed children time to encounter a wider world before adults fixed their identities around early performance.

Resources made the choice harder. Mahin proposed giving every child an equal pool of funds to use for individual interests. Naisha observed that those interests did not cost the same: equipment, coaching, travel and competitions could place very different demands on the school. Sidharth suggested a defined ceiling on assistance, recognising that the institution could support opportunity without making unlimited commitments.

The group ultimately chose consistency, common foundations and broadly equal allocation. It accepted that the school would not fully fund every individual ambition. The contradiction was not made to disappear; the school stated which side of it would govern decisions and acknowledged the limitation that followed.

Sapiens School: autonomy with a destination

Sapiens had granted teachers substantial autonomy while retaining a locally rooted curriculum and common educational purposes. The group realised that autonomy had been left too vague.

Shreya distinguished freedom over pedagogy from freedom over destination. Teachers could decide pacing, classroom methods and how to respond to learners, while the school collectively established the broader knowledge and capacities children should develop. Ravya supported flexible pacing, noting that a fixed timetable often pushed

teachers to move on before learning had taken place. Nikhila placed professional judgement inside agreed objectives and shared institutional principles.

Daksh then separated accountability from bureaucratic compliance. Monitoring should protect fairness, wellbeing and a credible educational foundation, but should not require every teacher to follow the same schedule regardless of the students in front of them. He also resisted the strongest version of individualised assessment, arguing that some common knowledge and capacities remained necessary for adult life.

Sapiens arrived at a bounded form of autonomy: common learning goals, with substantial freedom over how learners reached them and demonstrated progress. The group accepted that this would make comparison between classrooms more difficult. Responsiveness was the value it chose to protect; reduced uniformity was the cost it was willing to acknowledge.

Global Abode: global opportunity and local reality

Global Abode described itself as a public school preparing children for the society in which they would live, yet it organised its curriculum around global frameworks. The challenge was whether this expanded opportunity or privileged possibilities inaccessible to most learners.

Manya began by questioning whether local and global life could still be separated cleanly. Urbi asked whether "global" meant genuinely plural knowledge or simply dominant Western perspectives. Rashika, Puspalata and Kushala pointed to technology, migration, climate change, health and employment as forces through which even deeply local lives had become connected to wider systems.

The opposing challenge remained serious: a curriculum oriented towards distant opportunities might underprepare students for the region-specific institutions and pathways they were more likely to encounter. Urbi partly accepted this from personal experience, recalling the difficulty of entering spaces that demanded forms of exposure she had not received while growing up in a remote village.

Puspalata made the trade-off personal. Local rootedness had given her important knowledge and experience, but limited exposure had also made it harder to enter wider educational and social spaces. Manya therefore reframed the school's purpose. It was not meant to direct every child towards an international future; it was meant to ensure that a lack of exposure did not exclude them from one.

Global Abode accepted that some local specificity might receive less attention. It chose wider exposure because the absence of that exposure could itself become a barrier.

Unlike several other disputes, this one ended with the cost named and deliberately accepted.

Back to the Future: individual pathways and a shared world

Back to the Future had committed itself to individualised progression, adaptive teaching and diverse pathways, while also claiming to prepare students for participation in a shared, interconnected society. The contradiction lay in whether a school that allowed each learner to follow a highly personalised route could still sustain a common civic foundation.

Pavitra began by defending the value of individual pathways. A rapidly changing world, she argued, required learners who could navigate uncertainty, pursue emerging opportunities and adapt across domains. A rigid common structure risked preparing students for a world that no longer existed. Arya added that forcing uniformity could suppress strengths that might later become essential in unpredictable contexts.

Naisha, however, questioned what would hold the school together if every learner's experience diverged too far. A shared society required some shared knowledge, language and reference points. Without these, students might leave school highly capable in their own domains but unable to communicate, collaborate or understand others whose paths had been different.

Manan proposed a layered structure. At its base would be a common core: essential literacies, numeracy, civic understanding, ethical reasoning and exposure to diverse perspectives. This would ensure that every student developed the capacities required to participate in a shared world. Above this foundation, pathways could diverge more freely, allowing learners to pursue interests, strengths and emerging opportunities.

Jaina pressed the practical question. How much time would remain for individual pathways once a meaningful common core had been secured? If the core expanded too far, the promise of personalisation would shrink; if it became too thin, the shared foundation would weaken. Pavitra acknowledged that the balance could not be fixed in advance. It would require continuous adjustment based on evidence of learning, student wellbeing and the demands of the wider world.

Assessment complicated the issue further. If students followed different pathways, how would the school communicate achievement to families, higher education institutions and employers? Saarika suggested a dual system: a common record of foundational competencies alongside a portfolio capturing individual work, projects and achievements. This would preserve comparability where necessary while allowing individuality to be visible.



The school Puspalata revisited as an adult held local belonging and wider aspiration in the same frame.

The group ultimately chose to protect both commitments, but in a defined order. A shared foundation would be non-negotiable, ensuring that every student could participate in a common civic and intellectual life. Within that boundary, pathways could diverge significantly. The school accepted that this would create tension in scheduling, assessment and resource allocation. It also accepted that not every pathway could be equally supported at all times.

The contradiction remained visible. Back to the Future did not resolve it by collapsing one side into the other. Instead, it defined the limits within which both could coexist and acknowledged the ongoing work required to maintain that balance.

What the exercise revealed

By the end of the A phase, the four schools had moved from abstract positions to institutional commitments. Each had been required to answer not only what it valued, but how those values would operate when translated into governance, teaching, progression, resources, assessment, technology and life beyond school.

No school emerged without trade-offs. The F.A.I.R. School protected consistency and common provision while accepting limits on individual customisation. Sapiens preserved responsiveness and teacher autonomy while accepting reduced uniformity and comparability. Global Abode chose wider exposure over local specificity, acknowledging the risk of misalignment with immediate contexts. Back to the Future balanced individual pathways with a shared foundation, accepting the complexity that followed.

The disagreements between schools did not disappear, but they became more precise. Equality and equity were no longer slogans but questions about floors, ceilings and decision-making authority. Progression was no longer a choice between age and readiness alone, but a problem of belonging, challenge and feasibility. Assessment required decisions about what learning must be visible and to whom. AI demanded clarity about purpose, timing and alternatives.

Most importantly, the exercise showed that there was no neutral position. Every committee decision carried a philosophy, whether stated or not. To design a school was to choose which tensions to hold, which to resolve and which costs to accept.

The A phase did not produce a single model to be adopted. It produced something more demanding: a clearer understanding of the questions that any school would have to answer, and the recognition that those answers would shape not only what students learned, but how they experienced fairness, belonging, opportunity and the future itself.



Defending Jaina's arguments during the A-Sessions quickly became the cohort's toughest assignment.

I: Introspection and Interrogation

The observer enters the frame

The first Introspection session began while the arguments of the previous two days were still fresh.

Shreya was surprised by how invested she had become in positions she did not originally hold. Researching an unfamiliar case had helped her see value in perspectives she might otherwise have dismissed. Naisha described entering a "flow state", in which the pressure of defending a position generated ideas she had not expected to produce. Arya found that some arguments which had initially seemed entirely opposed to her beliefs had begun to sound rational enough to leave her with unresolved questions.

Pavitra had entered the debate firmly opposed to the early adoption of artificial intelligence. Having to defend it made her consider what responsible, guided exposure might protect. More broadly, the experience challenged the assumption that people who hold an opposing view must be irrational or malicious. Sidharth and Mahin observed that disagreement did not always require complete opposition. Lakshmi noticed something else: preparing under pressure had strengthened relationships within her group, and the team had developed arguments more nuanced than any one member might have produced alone.

Isha then moved the conversation away from what had been argued and towards what had happened beneath the argument. The visible exchange of evidence and claims had also involved competition, loyalty, hesitation, persuasion, discomfort and attachment.

Vidhi gave this inward turn a single governing question:

How do I arrive at what I think?

She introduced biases and heuristics as recurring patterns through which people interpret information and make judgements. They were not presented as diagnoses or moral failings. The purpose was not to decide whether a participant's conclusion had been right or wrong, but to notice what had drawn their attention, what had made an argument

persuasive, which ideas had caused discomfort and why some claims had remained in memory while others had disappeared.

The cohort worked through twelve thinking patterns across three rounds. Changemakers were not expected to admit that every pattern applied to them. Some recognised themselves immediately. Others accepted only part of a description, offered a different explanation for their behaviour or rejected the label altogether. Those disagreements became part of the inquiry.

Round One: when a position becomes ours

Social desirability: did I try to sound acceptable?

The first prompt asked whether Changemakers had said or avoided saying something in order to appear polite, agreeable or correct.

Several Changemakers did not believe this had strongly affected them. Sidharth, Kushala, Manan and Pavitra felt that the debate environment allowed disagreement without demanding self-censorship. Daksh remembered challenging members of his own team so directly that they occasionally asked whose side he was on. Urbi said that her movement towards the middle reflected a genuine change in thinking as the group researched its position, not a desire for approval.

Other apparently cautious behaviours had different explanations. Naisha often introduced a point by saying that she was unsure or might not be completely correct, but understood this as genuine humility rather than an attempt to appear agreeable. Umar sometimes withheld questions, not because he feared judgement, but because he wanted other people to have room to speak. Arya did not change her argument to please the room, although she consciously altered her wording when she worried that a phrase might sound insensitive or uninformed. Saarika could acknowledge that an opponent had made a strong point while continuing to defend her assigned position.

For others, concern about the room was more visible. Puspalata answered the question with "sometimes, yes". She had occasionally disagreed with her school but hesitated to say so fully because she wanted to avoid conflict or the possibility of appearing uninformed. Lakshmi privately accepted several opposing arguments without acknowledging that agreement in the public debate. Shreya remembered withholding an analogy involving sex education because she worried that it might sound inappropriate or bizarre. Rashika sometimes searched for language that would make her sound correct and found herself moving towards a polite middle position rather than choosing one side firmly.



The thinking-patterns framework used during the Introspection sessions to examine how bias, identity, status, memory, and group dynamics shaped judgement.

Keya, who had not attended the debates, answered from her knowledge of her own temperament. If she felt unable to represent an argument properly, she believed she would probably avoid conflict and move towards the middle. Ravya described a different route to apparent agreement: during a long discussion on standardisation, she eventually accepted an opponent's framing because she was mentally exhausted.

The conversation showed why behaviour alone could not identify the bias. A softened statement might come from approval-seeking, humility, sensitivity, turn-taking, uncertainty or depletion. Introspection required Changemakers to ask not only what they had done, but what had produced it.

In-group bias: when a team begins to feel true

The next question asked whether familiarity or similarity had made some people easier to trust.

The assigned schools had existed for only a short time, yet several Changemakers felt a genuine loyalty forming around them. Pakhi noticed that repeated internal conversations about teacher autonomy made her group's case increasingly persuasive, even though she suspected that not every teammate personally believed the arguments being developed. Kushala trusted members of her school more as closeness and a shared identity grew. Manan remembered trusting Ravya quickly, despite having only recently met her, because they were defending the same position.

Naisha gave one of the most candid accounts. With little time and a collective desire to succeed, she sometimes supported an argument made by a teammate before she had fully understood or agreed with it. Shreya found it difficult to challenge people she regarded as being on her side and sometimes allowed them to speak because she believed they could articulate their shared view better. Arya recognised an even stronger response: when an argument sounded like her own thinking and came from someone in her group, she could surrender to it before examining it closely.

Affinity also came from experience and identity. Puspalata felt more immediately connected to people who had worked closely with communities and government systems. Pavitra noticed herself paying greater attention to women and feeling an instinctive familiarity with people from similar educational, cultural or social backgrounds. She also described deliberately listening across those differences as a way of checking the tendency. Lakshmi did not think general similarity determined whether she found an argument convincing, although she felt more readily understood by people from related academic disciplines and trusted Changemakers who appeared to be skilled questioners.

Not everyone experienced the group in the same way. Urbi said that her teammates

regularly cross-questioned one another. Mahin sometimes felt isolated rather than protected by his group because his position did not always receive support. Saarika thought the online format reduced personal bias because Changemakers knew relatively little about one another. Daksh wondered whether the stronger pattern had been an out-group bias: teams were not automatically believing their own members so much as constantly searching for weaknesses in the opposition. Umar concluded that some degree of team loyalty was built into the structure of the exercise itself.

A group created for a temporary task had quickly become capable of shaping trust. The important discovery was not simply that loyalty existed, but that it could influence whose argument received the benefit of the doubt.

Confirmation bias: listening for support and weakness

Confirmation bias asked whether Changemakers had noticed information that supported what they already believed while giving less attention to evidence that complicated it.

Naisha recognised the pattern in the act of debate itself. Once her team had a position to defend, she listened to opponents for contradictions and weaknesses. Even a reasonable point first appeared as something to discredit. Mahin similarly remembered hearing convincing arguments from the other side without acknowledging them publicly because his role required him to defend his school.

An assigned position could begin reorganising attention even when it was not originally believed. Sidharth had initially opposed early AI use, but as his team researched the case for it, supporting frameworks and evidence became easier to find and the assigned position became increasingly defensible. Lakshmi also began from disagreement with her assignment but became more invested as she encountered evidence that strengthened it.

Existing experience worked alongside the assignment. Puspalata entered with a strong commitment to community-based and inclusive education, so arguments supporting those values initially felt more convincing. Shreya's belief in structure, routines and consistency made her receptive to arguments carrying those qualities, even when they came from an opposing school. Pavitra recognised that some of her scepticism towards AI arose from her own discomfort with technology. Engaging with a different case helped her consider its responsible use without erasing her concerns.

Falguni experienced the pattern in the opposite direction. Although assigned to defend a globally oriented curriculum, she continued finding local rootedness more persuasive and struggled to locate examples of the global position that genuinely convinced her. Arya noticed herself resisting arguments partly because they came from people whose

broader views differed from hers. Confirmation bias, in other words, did not always strengthen the assigned school; sometimes an earlier belief resisted the role.

Several Changemakers described deliberate attempts to interrupt the pattern. Pakhi searched for ways to counter her own position while debating Jaina. Umar's group used its WhatsApp discussions to play devil's advocate against its own case. Urbi said research and reports gradually unsettled some of her assumptions. Saarika continued defending her position while openly recognising the strength of opposing arguments. Kushala and Anjana did not feel the bias had strongly determined their reasoning, while Manan said that his beliefs had shifted so often that he could no longer confidently identify which view counted as his original one.

The discussion complicated the idea that confirmation bias simply means refusing to change. Changemakers could change towards an assigned view, resist it through an earlier conviction or deliberately test both. The practical question was whether they had searched as seriously for disconfirming evidence as they had for material that helped them win.

Sunk cost: when effort becomes attachment

The final prompt of the first round asked whether the time and identity invested in defending a position had made it harder to let go.

Many recognised the effect. Mahin said that once he had spent significant effort defending an argument, abandoning it became difficult even when the other side had made valid points. Pavitra and Saarika also felt that repeated defence increased commitment. Lakshmi had personally favoured specialised support, but the labour of constructing a case for standardised provision made her increasingly attached to the position she had been assigned.

Shreya continued searching for articles about one of her arguments even after the debate had ended. Arya felt that commitment arose not only from her own work but from everything the group had invested together. Umar found that research and preparation reinforced loyalty. Ravya continued defending an interpretation after the conversation had become repetitive and confusing, while Rashika kept looking for examples of schools that might justify her team's approach.

Kushala ended the exercise feeling that her assigned school might be the strongest model. She compared the process to spending a long time with a persuasive research paper: sustained exposure can gradually change what seems reasonable. Falguni believed that repeated defence had shifted some of her actual views, particularly on AI, while also noticing that group loyalty could make people defend policies that did not fit

neatly together.

Sidharth recognised that investment had strengthened his team's commitment but hesitated to call the experience a sunk-cost fallacy. Manan largely rejected the pattern in his own case. He did not closely tie his identity to a belief unless he was highly certain of it and felt able to change his mind when presented with a convincing argument.

This distinction mattered. A person may remain with a position because the work has revealed genuine value in it, or because abandoning it would make the work already spent feel wasted. From outside, the two can look identical.

Round Two: what becomes evidence

Anchoring: the point from which everything else is measured.

Anchoring bias asked whether the first idea, experience or position encountered had become the reference point for everything that followed.

For Pakhi, age and experience could become anchors. She tended to give an older or more experienced participant's argument additional weight before testing the claim independently. Shreejita similarly noticed that ideas expressed by respected speakers could become reference points through which later information was interpreted.

The assignment itself became an anchor for others. Naisha treated her school's position as the baseline from which every opposing argument had to be challenged. Kushala also found herself repeatedly returning to the stance she had been given, despite not fully believing it at the beginning. Shreya said that the specific issue she had been assigned organised the direction of her later thinking.

Sometimes the anchor was a committee role. Umar found himself evaluating many questions through assessment because that was the part of the institution he had been assigned to represent. The lens helped him notice particular problems but could also narrow his view of the school as a whole.

For Saarika and Rashika, an early weakness in the opposing case became the reference point. Their groups repeatedly returned to opening statements even after the other school had added qualifications and detail. Arya was less attached to her assigned position, but familiar counterarguments became reusable starting points from which to question the other side.

Personal experience also acted as an anchor. Anjana returned to particular students she

had worked with when thinking about promotion and intervention. Ravya drew repeatedly on the educational experience of someone who had worked in her household. Puspalata recognised that her own encounters had shaped which educational ideals initially appeared realistic.

Mahin offered one of the clearest cautions. His team repeatedly cited a UNESCO age-thirteen recommendation during the AI debate. Because the claim had become central to their case, he continued using it even though he had not personally verified the source. His observation showed how repetition within a group can make a claim feel settled before each person relying on it has examined it independently.

Manan and Lakshmi did not feel strongly anchored during the exercise, while Urbi described herself as continually re-evaluating. Sidharth said an initial viewpoint gave him a place to begin, but challenging information tended to increase his engagement rather than close it down.

The first thing heard was only one kind of anchor. A professional role, a familiar child, a respected speaker, a repeated statistic or the official position printed beside one's name could all become the fixed point around which later reasoning moved.

Availability: the story that arrives first.

The availability heuristic asked whether an example had been used because it was easy, vivid or recent rather than because it represented the wider reality.



Manan visited Vikas Bhavan as part of his offline immersion.

This pattern was widely recognised. Under time pressure, Naisha returned to a small set of arguments because they could be retrieved quickly. Pakhi used familiar case studies even when they did not fit the question perfectly. Saarika noted that everyone had attended school, making personal educational experience an especially tempting source of evidence.

Manan repeatedly returned to a simple hypothetical school with ₹10,000 and ten students when explaining resource allocation. Puspalata drew on community experiences and examples from her district. Mahin relied more heavily on personal and recent encounters than on wider evidence. Shreejita used examples from current politics because they were immediately available in memory.

Nikhila recognised that her own positive experience of student-centred and adaptive learning made similar systems feel naturally persuasive. Arya repeatedly used examples involving differentiated learning and neurodiverse students because they were strong and difficult for opponents to challenge. Falguni found one theory supporting her school and continued relying on it despite encountering several competing theories.

Lakshmi's experience captured the risk with particular clarity. During a discussion about global learning, she reached for ***Goldilocks and the Three Bears***. Halfway through explaining the story, she realised that it weakened rather than strengthened her argument. The example had arrived before its relevance had been tested.

Examples were necessary; the debates could not proceed through abstractions alone. The problem began when ease of recall was mistaken for representativeness, or when a strategically effective story took the place of examining the wider body of evidence.

Fundamental attribution: when a position becomes a person

The next prompt asked whether Changemakers had judged a view through who the speaker appeared to be rather than the situation in which the argument was being made.

The assigned-role structure sometimes protected the cohort from this error. Anjana, Shreya, Kushala, Daksh and Pavitra consciously reminded themselves that the person speaking might not believe the position they had been given. Jaina remembered someone openly acknowledging that they agreed with her in principle but still had to defend their school. That moment helped her keep the participant separate from the role.

The protection was incomplete. Pakhi's respect for experience sometimes affected how she judged the argument itself. Saarika felt that articulate speakers appeared more convincing even when she knew little about them personally. Naisha initially believed she

had avoided the bias, then realised that she had sometimes judged people as debaters. When someone's argument became inconsistent, she blamed the individual before considering how difficult it was to improvise a coherent defence of an assigned position.

Rashika remembered her group being interrupted and questioned repeatedly without receiving the same opportunity in return. The group began to interpret the opposing side as aggressive. Lakshmi wondered whether some Changemakers genuinely believed their claims or were deliberately trying to provoke a reaction. Arya noticed that when someone adopted a persona, she sometimes began interpreting everything they said through that character.

Puspalata had made assumptions about why people held particular views on AI. As the conversation continued, she began considering how their backgrounds, opportunities and experiences might have produced those positions. Ravya similarly recognised that she had sometimes assumed a participant could not personally believe what they were defending.

Falguni noticed a more tactical effect. When a participant appeared less secure in debate, the competitive structure made that person a natural target for further questions. Her reflection did not reduce the moment to an individual failing; it revealed how quickly a format organised around winning can turn perceived vulnerability into an opportunity.

Several Changemakers described intentional corrections. Urbi separated discomfort with how something had been said from judgement of the person. Shreejita tried to criticise an action without treating it as evidence of an entire character. Umar said he preferred to rely on what people communicated rather than invent explanations of who they were.

The exercise made situational awareness easier because everyone knew that roles had been assigned. Even so, confidence, fluency, interruption, vulnerability and presentation continued to influence whose argument appeared credible.

The spotlight effect: arguing while imagining the room

The final prompt of the second round asked whether concern about being watched or judged had changed how Changemakers spoke.

Saarika strongly recognised the effect. She was sometimes caught between defending her role and expressing what she actually believed, and occasionally withheld her own view because she worried about its reception. Rashika felt intimidated by the opposing team's style and intensity and consequently held back during the first discussion. Sidharth remembered restraining reactions because he was conscious of how they

might appear.

Naisha's response was not withdrawal but performance. She wanted her arguments to sound coherent, interesting and persuasive, and this awareness influenced how she presented them. Falguni felt she became self-conscious about her ability to articulate a position and wondered whether she was explaining it poorly or facing a more skilled opponent. Pavitra worried that her intensity might be read as aggression, although the concern did not change the position she defended.

Urbi felt uncomfortable being associated with some of her assigned school's claims. She repeatedly tried to introduce equity into the argument so that it more closely reflected her own values. Here the imagined judgement of the room did not merely affect tone; it altered the position itself.

Others felt relatively free of the spotlight. Manan, Shreya, Kushala and Arya did not report substantial anxiety about personal judgement. Daksh monitored how much he spoke, but understood this as making room rather than managing his image. Lakshmi was concerned about whether her argument could withstand scrutiny, not about what the room thought of her as a person. Shreejita occasionally wondered how she appeared but did not believe the concern changed her participation.

The imagined gaze of others therefore produced different effects: silence, restraint, greater preparation, self-doubt, altered language and, sometimes, no significant change at all.

Round Three: what happens when a belief is challenged

Cognitive dissonance: discomfort in motion

The third round began by asking what Changemakers did when an idea challenged an existing belief.

Naisha described feeling pressured and competitive rather than defensive. When the other school made a good point, her first impulse was to find a stronger counterargument rather than remain with the discomfort. Sidharth similarly wanted to ensure that his school did not appear weak. Lakshmi felt an immediate need to justify her stance whenever it was challenged.

For others, the discomfort came from the distance between personal belief and

assigned role. Anjana, whose professional work as a school counsellor had made her strongly child-centred, found it especially difficult to defend a standardised, globally oriented school. Urbi searched for examples supporting positions with which she remained uncomfortable. Shreya and Arya sometimes became defensive simply because their role required them to protect an argument they would not ordinarily have chosen.

Nikhila described herself as "closed off" rather than defensive. Her positive experience of child-centred education had made it difficult to engage seriously with society-centred arguments. Recognising that closure did not immediately remove it, but it allowed her to locate its source.

Speed and misunderstanding intensified the reaction. Ravya felt she became defensive when opponents described her school as resting on assumptions. Pavitra felt defensive when her argument was misunderstood or represented inaccurately. Falguni observed that, once the exchange became heated, defensiveness could displace clarity. Saarika felt flustered by the number of new points arriving and sometimes continued speaking before she had fully formed her response. Shreejita also noted how difficult it was to track arguments when they accumulated quickly.

Defensiveness did not always close inquiry. Daksh recognised an immediate emotional resistance to being corrected but tried to move beyond it. Umar could defend his position while continuing to think about the questions that remained unresolved. Puspalata felt tension because both sides appeared valid and chose to examine that discomfort rather than dismiss one of them. Manan did not experience much dissonance, seeing the exchange as a disagreement over justification rather than a clash between irreconcilable beliefs.

The prompt revealed several possible responses to discomfort: counterattack, withdrawal, hurried explanation, curiosity and continued uncertainty. Naming the feeling did not determine which response followed.

Hindsight: the answer that appears afterwards

Hindsight bias asked whether past choices now seemed more obvious than they had felt in the moment.

Many Changemakers resisted the label. Naisha and Sidharth believed their positions had become coherent through extensive preparation rather than retrospective certainty. Ravya continued to see the issues as genuinely unsettled. Shreya, Daksh, Umar, Nikhila, Pakhi and Manan did not feel that the outcomes had become falsely obvious to them. Pakhi felt that she had encountered perspectives she genuinely had not anticipated.

Others recognised some degree of retrospective certainty. Kushala could see weaknesses in particular technology and curriculum proposals more clearly after the debate than she had during it. Puspalata found that certain possibilities appeared obvious only after she had heard several perspectives. Lakshmi later discovered merit in positions she had previously opposed. Jaina noticed herself retrospectively treating some arguments as predictable while defending a position she did not personally hold.

Several comments described regret more than hindsight. Rashika, Mahin, Falguni and Saarika continued thinking of points they wished they had made. Urbi revisited the AI arguments after the session. Pavitra observed that stress and uncertainty make it harder to process information in real time. Shreejita cautioned against blaming one's earlier self without remembering the mental and emotional conditions under which the original decision was made.

Thinking of a better answer later does not prove that the answer was obvious all along. The distinction protected reflection from becoming unfair self-judgement.

Halo and horns: the impressions that travel

The Halo and Horns prompt asked whether one positive or negative impression had shaped everything else a participant believed about a person or idea.

Sidharth acknowledged forming mental categories about who seemed approachable, who might become a friend and how he perceived different members of the cohort. Ravya noticed that certain people influenced her more strongly than others. Pakhi again recognised her tendency to assume that older or more experienced Changemakers were likely to be right. Saarika found clear speakers and strong examples easier to believe.

Arya illustrated the halo effect through humour: once someone's joke worked, people became more disposed to enjoy the next one. Manan recognised that a single negative action could shape his everyday opinion of a person, although he did not think this had strongly affected the debates.

Several Changemakers described catching and revising these impressions. Rashika realised that persistence or aggression during a debate did not necessarily reveal how someone behaved outside it. Urbi separated feeling hurt by a reaction from judging the whole person. Daksh tried to move beyond first impressions towards the reasons behind a position. Lakshmi briefly judged people who interrupted frequently, then reminded herself that interruption and competitiveness were partly features of the format.

Kushala, Shreya, Mahin, Jaina and Shreejita all returned to the protection offered by

the assigned roles. The positions were performances of an argument, not complete accounts of the people making them.

The impression never disappeared entirely. The more realistic task was to prevent one memorable quality, such as confidence, age, humour, aggression or fluency, from becoming the explanation for everything that followed.

The compromise effect: synthesis or escape?

The final question asked whether Changemakers had moved towards the middle because it represented their considered view or because choosing a side felt uncomfortable.

Several defended compromise as a genuine conclusion. Sidharth had found real merit in opposing arguments. Kushala's views became more moderate as the exercise continued. Shreya believed that a hybrid model suited education better than either extreme. Mahin felt that both sides often contained valuable insights. Urbi said that middle positions had reflected her thinking from the beginning. Anjana wanted to combine the strongest elements of several schools rather than choose one complete model. Pakhi felt that almost every debate contained something worth preserving on both sides.

Others recognised the practical attraction of the middle. Arya said it was both: sometimes her thinking genuinely changed, while at other moments compromise allowed the group to move beyond a repetitive disagreement. Falguni noticed that when neither side would move and the conversation would not end, meeting in the middle became easier than continuing. Lakshmi felt that much of her school's defence had relied on constructing middle positions. Saarika sometimes acknowledged the opposing case while continuing to represent her own.

Manan did not feel drawn towards compromise because he saw little disagreement over the central principle he was defending. Rashika noticed the search for a position between entirely local and entirely global education.

The discussion concluded with an observation from Shreejita. During the exercise, she had repeatedly found that competing positions could both make sense. The difficulty was not always deciding that one was wholly true and the other wholly false. It was learning to hold conflicting truths together without using the middle as an escape from examining their consequences.

What the room had observed

The session did not produce a list of people who possessed biases and people who did not. It revealed how strongly context affected the pattern.

The assigned role could create confirmation bias while protecting against personal judgement. The team could produce in-group loyalty while also becoming the place where a position was most rigorously questioned. Concern about the room could silence one person and make another prepare more carefully. A middle position could represent intellectual growth or simple fatigue. The same behaviour could arise from very different mental processes.

Nor did naming a bias prove that it had been overcome. What changed was the precision with which Changemakers could examine the interval between hearing an argument and deciding what it meant.

Diving deeper into Introspection

The previous session had examined the patterns operating within individual judgement. This session shifted the focus from individual reasoning to the dynamics of the group. A bias did not live only inside one person; it travelled through a room through the voices granted authority, the work that remained invisible, the identities a group began to protect, and the risks people calculated before admitting doubt.

Interrogation therefore began where introspection had stopped. The question was no longer only ***What shaped my judgement?*** It was also: ***What did we become together?***

The A sessions were closer to life than they appeared

Several Changemakers had felt that the biases discussed were recognisable in ordinary life but less visible during the A sessions, where everyone knew that positions had been assigned.

Ramit nudged them to rethink this distinction. Everyday life also requires people to defend positions they do not wholly believe. Vidhi illustrated this through the identities people carry between places. She found herself defending Delhi while in Bengaluru and defending India while speaking with friends living abroad. She could recognise the weaknesses in what she was defending and still feel compelled to protect it.

In such moments, a person may not be defending a proposition. They may be defending the part of themselves attached to a city, institution, profession, country or community.

Manan observed that he usually avoided arguments about identity in everyday life. Yet within a moot, debate or structured defence of a school, something changed. The artificial boundary produced real stakes. He felt the urge to hold the line.

Mahin tried to enter the identity from another direction. While defending his fictional school, he asked whether he would actually want its policies if he were one of its students. He was not content to repeat the brief; he wanted to know whether the identity he had been assigned was one he could inhabit honestly.

Anjana's reflection moved beyond formally assigned groups. Her work with adolescents had shaped her thinking because relationships accumulated into identity over time. A person's social self was formed not only through labels such as school, profession or nationality, but through the communities whose lives had become connected to their own.

The fictional schools had lasted only a few days. The psychological processes they activated were not fictional at all.

Whose voice carries?

Vidhi then asked the group to consider social influence. A conversation may formally offer everyone an equal opportunity to speak, but that does not mean every voice carries equal weight.

Shreya recalled how the room had responded to Manya. Because Manya was a lawyer and spoke with intensity, people expected her arguments to be airtight. When Shreya later watched the recordings, she heard Manya explain that she sometimes interrupted not because she intended to be rude, but because she became genuinely excited by the debate. That detail changed how Shreya interpreted the same behaviour.

Sidharth noticed a different form of influence with Jaina. He recalled Ramit's observation that some people might speak rarely but make especially valuable points when they did. Jaina came to occupy that position within the F.A.I.R. School. Sidharth found himself trusting her contributions almost immediately, sometimes before he had fully processed the argument.

Naisha identified several qualities that could create this authority: speaking early enough to establish a role in the group, sounding confident, expressing an idea fluently, or developing a reputation for being reliable. Pavitra's measured and structured reasoning gave her influence. Mahin became an early anchor for his group because he could remain composed while arguments arrived quickly.

None of this meant that their contributions lacked substance. It showed that substance was not evaluated in isolation. Reputation, profession, confidence, timing and fluency affected how readily an argument received attention.

Contribution seen and unseen

When one or two people appeared particularly capable, another group process emerged. Vidhi introduced social loafing, or diffusion of responsibility: the tendency to reduce one's visible effort when the mind has concluded that someone else already has the task under control.

Manan candidly acknowledged that Falguni, Arya and Pavitra had driven much of his group's preparation and defence. Because they appeared to have the work covered, he found it easier to sit back. Iqra also described taking a less visible role and credited Pavitra and Falguni for carrying significant parts of the discussion.

Lakshmi complicated the label. Quieter Changemakers had not necessarily stopped working. Some were contributing in the group's WhatsApp conversation or adding questions and arguments to the shared document. Anjana, for example, had supplied valuable points in writing even when she did not insist on speaking them aloud in the main room.

The difference was visibility.

A live debate naturally foregrounded the person who spoke. It could conceal the person who researched an example, tested an argument privately, wrote a question in the chat or helped a teammate reconcile an assigned position with their actual beliefs. Silence could indicate withdrawal, but it could also conceal labour that the format was not designed to display.

The group therefore resisted turning social loafing into a judgement about particular people. The more useful question was whether the structure distributed responsibility fairly and whether it recognised contribution in all the places where it occurred.

How a school became a fortress

Isha asked the cohort to trace how the temporary schools had changed across the two A sessions.

On the first day, the groups had entered without knowing exactly what the encounter would require. Was it a debate, a discussion or a collaborative design exercise? By the second day, uncertainty had produced strategy.

Pavitra described how her group began remembering the opposition's earlier claims, aligning internally before the next exchange, and preparing to present a united front. Other groups went through similar transformations. Sidharth recalled the pressure his school felt when Pavitra's team opened strongly. Mahin remained composed while fielding questions until he sent a message to his teammates: "Guys, I'm running out of arguments, please back me up."

That evening, the group debriefed on WhatsApp. By the next session, they had decided that they would speak first, arrive better prepared and take control of the exchange.

Vidhi identified the movement as group polarisation. Internal disagreement became quieter as the external challenge intensified. Arguments were rehearsed, reinforced and pushed towards a firmer version. By the second day, Changemakers were no longer only individuals temporarily assigned to the same model. They had started behaving like one school with one position.

The strange part was that nobody had announced a winner. There was no prize.

Isha asked why a group would still feel compelled to win.

Lakshmi located the answer partly in camaraderie. Her group's private conversations helped people find morally acceptable ways to defend policies they had not initially supported. If one person felt unable to justify a position, someone else supplied an interpretation that made it less alien. Feeling dismissed by the opposition brought them back more unified.

Rashika connected competition to shared ownership. The schools had absorbed hours of collective thought: names, mottos, policies, arguments and revisions. Criticism no longer felt directed only at a proposition. It touched something the group had made.

Reeya described the mechanism succinctly:

"Once an identity is formed and value systems are agreed upon together, protection of that identity becomes almost automatic."

Shreejita compared this impulse with nationalism and patriotism. A group does not need a literal war or material reward for defensive solidarity to appear. The act of being positioned against another group can be enough.

Shreya saw the same process producing an echo chamber. One person made a point, another strengthened it, and a third supplied an example. As the group amplified its own reasoning, hearing the other side became progressively more difficult.

The previous day had established that in-group loyalty existed. The second session showed how it escalated: uncertainty produced preparation; preparation produced shared ownership; shared ownership produced belonging; and belonging could turn an exchange without a prize into a struggle for victory.

The safety of acceptable thought

The discussion of middle ground then moved beyond the earlier question of compromise. Karthika asked whether moderation was always the product of careful reasoning or whether it could become another socially approved position.

To seek the middle is already to assume that the correct answer lies somewhere between two poles. That assumption can offer genuine balance. It can also protect a speaker from being placed too firmly inside an unpopular ideological category.

The deeper question concerned freedom of thought. What happens when following an idea honestly threatens to locate a person outside the political or social community with which they identify? A nuanced argument can be misunderstood as prejudice. A criticism of one's own side can attract agreement from people whose wider views one rejects. The possibility of being misclassified encourages people to reach for acceptable vocabulary before they have fully examined what they believe.

Pavitra described a private conversation that a friend had called "post-woke": a position that could be understood responsibly only after someone was familiar with the progressive critique it was attempting to move beyond. In a less informed room, the same words could be mistaken for the reactionary position they were trying to question. Worse, they could attract precisely the kind of agreement the speaker did not want.

She also described deliberately spending time with people outside her usual political and academic circles. It reminded her that the intellectual world in which she had grown up was only one among many. Difference did not automatically indicate moral failure; it often reflected different histories, opportunities and social environments.

Karthika extended this towards the relationship between academic knowledge and lived experience. Education can provide fluency, theoretical frameworks and the language of analysis. It can also create an arrogance in which reading the accepted texts begins to feel like qualification to understand other people better than they understand themselves. Encounters outside the academy correct that assumption. People without formal theoretical language can possess insight built through experience that no framework can replace.

A related exchange began when Isha asked about anger within feminist movements.

Anger could mobilise people and make injustice impossible to ignore. It could also exhaust those carrying it or make others feel that they were the target rather than a participant in change.

Lakshmi held that the anger was often justified while recognising that it was not always perceived that way. Pavitra reflected that she had once been a "constantly angry feminist" and had found the position exhausting. Protecting herself from material that repeatedly triggered that anger had become, for her, another form of feminist care. Shreya preferred to state a position calmly, even at the risk of not being understood, rather than allow anger to become the reason a crowd agreed.

No single emotional style was declared correct. The exchange revealed another calculation people make before speaking: not only *What do I believe?* but *Which version of me will this room think it has heard?*

Karthika left the group with a more difficult possibility:

"What if the real fear isn't being placed in the wrong part of the spectrum, but discovering that you can't be placed at all?"

Thinking outside a box sounds attractive in the abstract. Living without the reassurance of a box can feel far less comfortable.

The same silence can mean different things

Nikhila brought the conversation from ideological classification to structural power.

During a meeting at the hospital where she worked, she noticed a member of the support staff who appeared to want to contribute but remained silent. Afterwards, Nikhila asked why she had not spoken. The woman explained that she did not believe anything she said would matter.

Nikhila sometimes stayed quiet too, but her silence came from a choice not to argue. She retained the confidence that she could speak if she decided to. The other woman's silence came from a belief that the room had already made her irrelevant.

From the outside, both people were simply quiet. From the inside, one silence contained agency and the other contained powerlessness.

Karthika asked whether a statement matters because it is said or because somebody acknowledges it. The A sessions had given Changemakers positions and surrounded those positions with group validation. But what happens to an idea spoken by someone

whom the room has not learned to validate?

The question altered the meaning of participation. Providing time to speak is not enough when a person has learned that their contribution will carry no consequence. Voice depends not only on permission but on a reasonable expectation of being taken seriously.

Can empathy be claimed?

Nikhila then questioned the language of empathy itself. In medical education, professionals are taught protocols for breaking bad news because an appropriate response does not necessarily emerge automatically. Care can be learned, scaffolded and performed.

She wondered whether what people often called empathy was sometimes closer to respect: recognising that a thought or experience belonged to another person and treating it seriously without claiming to feel what they felt.

Prasannaa had noticed a transactional version of empathy during the debates. A group might say, "We see where you're coming from," and then immediately return to its original position. The acknowledgement functioned as a bridge in the argument, but it was difficult to know whether it had changed the group's understanding.

Pavitra drew on supporting a bereaved student whose distress appeared through difficult behaviour. She and her colleagues responded through counselling, conversations and adjustments. Yet she resisted describing their response as empathy. They did not share the child's experience and could not claim access to the depth of that grief. What they possessed was an understanding that the circumstances were more difficult than their own and a professional duty to help.

Vidhi approached the limit through personal loss. Before experiencing bereavement herself, she could sympathise with another person's grief but did not believe she understood it from within. The later overlap in experience gave her a point of reference she had not previously possessed.

Naisha connected this with how pain is perceived. Each person reaches towards another's experience using the closest material available in their own history. The familiar assurance, "I know exactly what you're going through", may be kindly intended, but it remains an imperfect translation of one person's pain into another's.

Shreya suggested that empathy, understanding and compassion may exist precisely because human beings cannot all share the same experiences. They are ways of

sustaining community across those gaps, not proof that the gaps have disappeared.

Lakshmi was unsure what word best described what she had felt during the debates. When she sensed that a good argument was being lost in noise, she wanted to hear more of it. Whatever the emotion was, it expanded attention rather than closing it.

A question in the chat asked whether understanding was the same as empathy or merely one of its conditions. Daksh described understanding as more passive and empathy as active, something "beyond lingual" that people often feel before finding a label for it. Lakshmi added that she could understand the reasoning through which someone arrived at a terrible act without emotionally resonating with it or excusing it.

The group did not settle the vocabulary. Its restraint was valuable. Claiming empathy too quickly can centre the person doing the empathising. Respect, compassion, understanding and duty may sometimes support another person more honestly than declaring that their experience is shared.

The flaw we do not admit

Ramit closed the formal session with one final question: during the school defences, how many Changemakers had openly acknowledged the weaknesses in their own position?

Very few had.

Pavitra admitted that her views on AI in education had changed. Entering the exercise with strong opposition, she found that defending that opposition made its absolutism more visible. Some of her earlier arguments sounded narrower when she heard them returned from the other side. She moved towards a more qualified position, while remaining suspicious of using "both sides have merit" as a permanent refuge from difficult choices.

Shreya's shift concerned local rootedness and global opportunity. She had begun with a strong preference for global approaches. Defending another position made the force of local grounding harder to dismiss. She began imagining sequence rather than opposition: give children a strong local foundation, then build global opportunity around it.

Daksh argued that his instinct was to begin by identifying a position's flaws and then work towards repair. Debate discouraged that honesty. A person who acknowledged weakness risked appearing uncertain. He compared it to preparation cultures in which even considering a Plan B is treated as losing the mental battle.

Prasannaa said he would admit a problem in his argument when he already had a possible solution. Naming a weakness without knowing how to address it could simply hand the

opposition a weapon.

Shreya stated the question of trust directly:

"If the other party is open-minded enough to understand that I'm naming the problem in order to reach a solution. Yes, I'll admit it. If they're going to use it as a weapon, I won't. At least not to begin with."

The silence around a flaw did not necessarily mean that the speaker had failed to see it. People often recognised the weakness, felt themselves moving towards another position, and chose not to disclose either fact because the relationship or format did not feel safe enough.

Ramit connected this to collaboration. Real collaboration requires the possibility that nobody yet knows the answer. If a person has already decided the destination and is merely recruiting others to help reach it, the process may be coordinated and participatory without being genuinely collaborative.

That was the final interrogation. The barrier to collective reasoning was not only bias or inadequate evidence. It was the absence of enough trust to admit uncertainty without having uncertainty used against you.

The following day would ask the cohort to reason towards a shared set of educational priorities. Before making that choice, the Changemakers had confronted a necessary distinction: were they entering the room to discover an answer together, or to gather support for one they had already chosen?

R: Reasoning and Rationalisation

By the time the cohort reached R, it did not lack concerns about Indian schools. It had too many. Fact-finding had widened the field; advocacy had made apparently simple choices more difficult; introspection had revealed how experience, identity and group loyalty shaped judgement. The final stage of the methodology therefore asked a different question: **with everything we have now heard and noticed, what deserves our collective attention?**

Reason and Rationalise marked the movement from exploration to decision. The task was not to produce an exhaustive catalogue of everything wrong with education, nor to rush towards solutions. It was to identify a workable set of critical challenges and explain why those challenges should be carried forward. A concern could not earn priority merely because it was familiar, emotionally powerful or important to one participant. Its place had to be supported by reasons that others could examine and challenge.

The process began deliberately with breadth. In four breakout rooms, the Changemakers listed as many meaningful challenges as they could, without ranking them or dismissing an idea too early. These lists were then brought together so that recurring concerns could be distinguished from those raised by fewer groups. Repetition gave an issue weight, but it did not make the common list unquestionable.

The cohort returned to the list to test it. Was each item a systemic challenge, or simply a change the group considered desirable? Was something essential missing? Should one priority be replaced, removed or reframed? Any proposed change had to be defended before the full cohort and considered on the strength of its rationale. Reasoning had to become public: clear enough for another person to question, and strong enough to survive that questioning.

The result was not intended as a final verdict on Indian education. It was a collectively refined working map, a way of deciding where attention might begin while recognising that field experience and new evidence could still alter the judgement. R did not close the inquiry. It gave the inquiry direction.

From a field of concerns to shared priorities

By the time the cohort reached R, the list of school problems was long enough to become overwhelming.

Infrastructure, teacher preparation, curriculum, assessment, practical learning, mental health, disability, technology, parental engagement, language, governance, gender, safety, early childhood, administration, career pathways, and many more concerns had surfaced. Each could support a programme of work. The task was not to prove that some did not matter. It was to decide where collective attention might reveal relationships among them.

Reason and Rationalise asked the cohort to make criteria visible. How many people were affected? How serious was the harm? Did the issue shape several others? Could young Changemakers investigate it responsibly? Was there room for a meaningful intervention within the programme? What evidence was available, and what access would be required?

The first round took place in four breakout rooms, and the concerns arrived with people attached. Lakshmi began with the administrative work that consumes teachers' time; Rashika asked what happens when the school is expected to repair every social failure. Pakhi described schools equipped with computers but lacking the people and support needed to help children use them meaningfully. Keya spoke of learners who understood concepts well in their regional language but were labelled weak because they struggled in English. Abu raised schools closing under extreme weather. Puspalata and Arya connected sanitation and menstrual dignity to attendance. Nikhila questioned rules about skirts and braided hair that seemed more urgent to institutions than the learning they were meant to organise. Anjana described counsellors whom students did not know existed, or who had been assigned unrelated work.

Isha then made a distinction that prevented the list from becoming a catalogue of everything desirable: a systemic challenge is not the same as a change one would like to see. The four rooms received a common list and had to defend every removal or replacement. Pavitra's case for replacing the symptoms of rote learning and exam pressure with curricular inflexibility and assessment design received ten votes and passed. Arya's proposal to replace technology adoption with weak parent–school–student collaboration also reached ten after Nikhila's reasoning persuaded Manya and Naisha to change their votes. Pavitra, Daksh, Naisha, and Anjana exposed too many links between the two for the substitution to hold.

Through that incomplete consensus, eight challenge areas emerged. They were not a national ranking and should not be read as one. They were the cohort's shared map for moving into fieldwork.

Eight challenges, one connected system

1. Infrastructure and the use of resources

The group identified inadequate infrastructure and uneven access to resources as a foundational concern. Buildings, sanitation, water, electricity, ventilation, transport, learning materials, libraries, laboratories, devices, and safe play space affect who can attend and what a school can do.

Yet the wording expanded from the ***presence*** of resources to their ***use***. A locked room, an unused suggestion box, an unmaintained device, or material that teachers have not been supported to integrate can satisfy an inventory without changing learning. The relevant unit is not the object but the practice around it.

Pakhi's computer room made that distinction plain: devices can exist while students leave school without basic confidence using them because no facilitator is available. Abu widened infrastructure to climate resilience, asking what a school building means when heat, rain, or other extreme weather repeatedly closes it.

Field inquiry would therefore ask two questions together: what is available, and what helps or prevents people from using it?

2. Practical, experiential, vocational, and life learning

Changemakers were concerned that schooling often separates knowledge from use. Practical work may be marginal, vocational routes treated as lesser, and life skills reduced to occasional sessions. Learners can perform a procedure for an examination without gaining confidence to apply it outside the familiar question.

The cohort did not oppose conceptual knowledge to experience. Good experiential learning gives concepts something to explain; good conceptual learning allows experience to travel. Educational games, student projects, nature- and place-based inquiry, theatre, sensory learning, and community tasks became possible sites of investigation.

Mahin remembered choosing Sanskrit in Grade 9 not because he understood it better, but because students feared a strict Hindi teacher. The choice looked academic on paper; in experience, it was a response to an adult relationship. Nikhila's examples of cooking, CPR, field visits, and workplace shadowing asked why knowledge for living is still treated as peripheral beside knowledge for examination.

The challenge was to avoid turning "hands-on" into another slogan. An activity is not

automatically meaningful because students are busy. It needs an intellectual purpose, room for reflection, and access for different learners.

3. Curriculum and assessment rigidity

Curricula create a shared entitlement and a sequence for teaching. Assessments make learning visible and credentials portable. The challenge identified by the cohort was rigidity: pace, content, and evaluation can become insufficiently responsive to different starting points, languages, interests, disabilities, and contexts.

Rigid assessment also shapes teaching backwards. What is difficult to score can become less valuable. Curiosity, collaboration, practical judgement, creative risk, and sustained revision may receive praise while marks continue to reward recall and speed.

Rashika described the mechanism succinctly in the breakout: schools teach primarily what is assessed. Pavitra's successful amendment moved the group away from naming rote learning as an isolated habit and towards the curriculum and assessment arrangements that keep rewarding it.

The A-phase debates prevented a simplistic rejection of standardisation. The field question became one of balance: which common expectations protect equity, where is flexibility necessary, and what workload does richer assessment create for teachers?

4. Teacher education and professional growth

No school design survives without teachers who can interpret and adapt it.

The cohort identified gaps in pre-service teacher education, induction, ongoing professional development, mentoring, and opportunities for teachers to learn from practice. Training can be too distant from classroom realities or delivered as a one-time compliance event. New expectations, including inclusion, counselling, digital platforms, competency-based learning, documentation and parent communication, may be added without time and support.

The room contained productive disagreement. Abu, reflecting on his B.Ed., described outdated methods and a widening distance between the course and the media-rich world students inhabit. Rashika, currently in teacher preparation, found much of her own training professional and current; for her, the sharper problem was whether workload allowed teachers to use what they had learned. Their accounts made it impossible to diagnose "teacher training" as one uniform experience.

Fieldwork into B.Ed. programmes, teacher experiences, toolkits, and classroom practice

asked how professional learning could become continuous, situated, and respectful of teacher knowledge.

5. Workload, administrative burden, and staffing

Teacher capacity is not only a matter of skill. It is also a matter of time.

Changemakers repeatedly encountered the expansion of the teacher's role: instruction, assessment, data entry, reporting, coordination, supervision, event work, parent communication, counselling, substitute duties, and institutional tasks. Poor student-teacher ratios and staff absence intensify the pressure. Digital systems can reduce repetition when well designed and multiply it when they require the same information in several forms or fail unpredictably.

Lakshmi's concern was the loss of time for creative and student-focused teaching. Rashika saw the school itself becoming a catch-all institution for poverty, discrimination, mental health, technology, and every other problem society had not resolved. The failed vote to remove workload from the final eight did not establish it as the root of every challenge. Instead, it highlighted how many other challenges were shaped by the time teachers had available.

The challenge was framed carefully. It was not an argument against accountability or the use of data. It was a demand that systems count the cost of producing information and protect the time on which teaching depends.

6. Parent–school–student collaboration

Schools often speak of a triangle among parents, students, and teachers. The cohort asked whether all three sides carry equal power.

Family engagement can be limited by work schedules, language, distance, digital access, previous experiences of school, or fear of judgement. Teachers may encounter intense pressure from families without corresponding institutional support. Students are frequently discussed by the two adult groups rather than included in the conversation.

The group became interested in the design of collaboration: when meetings occur, what language is used, whether feedback can move in more than one direction, and whether student voice is consequential. An unused Idea Box is a small but exact image of the difference between providing a channel and creating participation.

Puspalata first named weak communication between schools and parents; Arya argued for collaborative governance across the whole school. Keya noted that many families

encounter the institution chiefly through report cards or disciplinary calls. Their proposal displaced technology from the final list not because digital access was unimportant, but because strong relationships between schools and families were seen as more fundamental.

7. Mental health and integrated support

Academic pressure, family circumstances, violence, discrimination, uncertainty, social comparison, and the ordinary difficulties of growing up enter school with the learner. Teachers encounter these realities even when they have not been trained or given time to respond.

The cohort identified weak or marginal support systems, role confusion around counsellors, stigma, and the tendency to treat mental health as a special event rather than part of school culture. A counsellor may be present but positioned outside core decision-making. A teacher may be asked to provide emotional support while carrying an impossible workload. Students may fear that seeking help will not remain private or will change how adults see them.

Pavitra resisted the assumption that mental health infrastructure is wholly absent. Teachers, coordinators, families, and peers already notice and respond; the system often fails to connect or prepare them. Anjana supplied the institutional absurdity behind that point: a school counsellor can formally exist and still be placed in charge of an entire kindergarten department. Availability on an organisational chart does not guarantee a usable path to care.

The field question was not whether every difficulty should be medicalised. It was how schools can build relationships, referral pathways, boundaries, and everyday practices that allow distress to be noticed without turning care into surveillance.

8. Exclusion and unequal belonging

The final challenge cut across all the others. Gender, disability, sexuality, caste, class, religion, language, and social background influence access to space, knowledge, safety, expectation, and voice.

Exclusion can be explicit. It can also be designed into ordinary routines: a staircase treated as the only route, a uniform rule built around one body, a textbook in which some lives appear only as problems, a career conversation that assumes family networks, an assessment that confuses fluency with understanding.

Keya and Pavitra showed how English can make conceptual understanding disappear

from institutional view. Puspalata asked where braille and other supports were in schools that formally welcomed disabled children. Nikhila's examples of hair and uniform rules revealed identity control operating through details adults can dismiss as minor. Each example asked the same question: what additional labour must a learner perform simply to be recognised as a learner?

The cohort's emphasis moved from adding an inclusive programme to examining the institution as a whole. Who must ask for an exception? Who is expected to explain themselves? Which learner is imagined when a rule is written?

Priority is not isolation

The eight priorities gave the cohort a common point of reference, but they were not intended to become eight fixed lanes for fieldwork. The formal F.A.I.R. stages concluded on 26 June; preparation for immersion began on 29 June. The question had changed. The Changemakers had considered what required attention; now they had to ask what they could realistically do together.

A shared Canva board became the first map of that possibility. Each Changemaker recorded where they would be based during the immersion period, how much time they could offer, the skills and experience they carried, the institutions and networks they could access, and up to three ideas they wanted to explore. Isha was clear that the exercise was not meant to restrict anyone to the eight challenges identified during Reason and Rationalise. Its purpose was to make the cohort's collective capacity visible before deciding what shape the work should take.

That capacity was distributed unevenly, and usefully. Reeya brought an interest in qualitative conversations, substantial time and access to schools in difficult terrain. Sidharth brought an existing body of research on the midday-meal scheme, which he offered to share when Falguni recognised its connection with her own interests. Manya brought documentation skills and university networks while openly identifying where she needed support with research methodology. Others brought relationships with teachers, experience running learning centres, access to students, ideas for educational games, or connections to organisations already working in the field. No one person needed to possess the question, the method, the access and the answer.



Abu shared his work establishing eighteen school-based Climate Cafes across Kerala.

Abu entered this map with work already under way. Through school-based Climate Cafés and the development of a climate-education toolkit, he had been testing how environmental questions could be translated into children's everyday learning. Sharing that work gave the cohort both an existing site of practice and a reminder that contribution could begin by opening one's own project to other people's scrutiny.

Over the following days, these possibilities began to turn into initiatives. Some Changemakers continued with the broad groups that had initially formed. Some found a more specific direction within them. Others began separate inquiries, while several moved between two or three initiatives wherever their experience could be useful. By 7 July, the Canva sheet had become a living coordination map, tracking not only what was being attempted but also who was initiating each strand and who was contributing to it.

The distinction answered two practical questions. Who was taking responsibility for keeping an initiative moving? And who could strengthen that work without carrying its primary coordination? An **Initiator** might lead the central group, develop the first working plan or begin contacting schools and other stakeholders. A **Contributor** might offer research, ideas, contacts, field access, review, documentation, accompaniment or help with a particular task. These were not permanent ranks. Several people could initiate the same project, and someone initiating one strand could contribute to others.

The educational-games initiative showed how fluid this could be. Lakshmi asked to join as a Contributor because she wanted to offer ideas and help with specific tasks. Mahin's testing of PhET simulations with children at his learning centre was initially recorded as related work before being brought within the larger direction. The project did not depend upon everyone performing the same role; it grew because different forms of participation could meet around a shared inquiry.

The teacher toolkit, later renamed the toolkit/playbook, developed in a similar way. Its components were divided according to experience and what each person could realistically complete during the immersion. Lakshmi and Prasannaa brought observations, tutoring experience and research. Ravya prepared to pilot the approach, while Rashika, Saarika and Abu joined with additional skills and support. The work became collective without requiring every decision or activity to be undertaken collectively.

Maitrei's social-emotional learning workshops offered another model. She had already begun approaching institutions and wanted to complete an initial workshop design before opening it for wider review. That made her an Initiator. As the project took shape, others joined where they could add value:

Saarika and Falguni volunteered to accompany her during school visits, Pakhi joined as a Contributor, and members with psychology backgrounds could later help review the material. Initiating did not mean working alone. It meant holding the thread clearly enough for others to know where they could strengthen it.

The Canva sheet therefore did more than divide names among projects. It allowed an idea to have clear responsibility without becoming anyone's private territory. It made offers of time, knowledge, access and presence visible. It also allowed the map to change as people began acting, discovered new connections or realised that their contribution belonged somewhere else.

When Ideas Met Institutions

The first encounter with an institution happened before anyone reached a school gate. It began when the Changemakers examined what they already believed about the places they were preparing to enter.

Three days earlier, the cohort had mapped its locations, time, experience, networks and possible initiatives on Canva. That exercise had shown what the group might be able to do. The next question was more unsettling: what would they carry into a school without realising it?

What had arrived before them



Ritika Singla

Ritika Singla, a child psychologist and counsellor at Shiv Nadar School and a former Teach For India Fellow, met with the Changemakers over Zoom. Ritika's session was designed as a stakeholder-sensitivity orientation before the offline immersion began. She did not start with a list of rules. She began by asking the Changemakers to reveal the pictures already present in their minds.

A live Mentimeter exercise offered four prompts: ***school principal***, ***school teacher***, ***village*** and ***government school***.

The responses to ***school principal*** moved between compassionate and bossy, orderly and prejudiced, overworked and distant. Someone wrote ***tyrant***. A school teacher could be kind, observant or motherly, but also tired, biased and underpaid. One response pictured a teacher "fighting with syllabus"; another described the teacher as someone who "can make or break your life."

The word ***village*** produced a similarly divided picture. It brought up family, happiness, freedom and sustainable community, alongside backwardness, underdevelopment and weak internet. The descriptions of government schools were more consistently negative: unorganised, mismanaged, understaffed, noisy, corrupt, underfunded and overpopulated.

Ritika did not ask the group to defend or discard these words. She asked where they had come from. Were they based on sustained experience? A single visit? News coverage? Something repeated within a family? Had the person writing the word ever stopped to trace its source?

The answers showed that assumptions rarely came from one place.

Manan connected his impressions to school visits in Bihar, Gandhinagar and Sirsa. He had repeatedly encountered situations in which enrolled students were absent, while teachers and students offered different explanations and sometimes blamed one another.



Inside an institution Manan visited while tracing how educational questions move through administrative systems.

Iqra drew on time spent in remote village schools, including an entire day in which she had studied alongside the students. Urbi connected her responses to her own schooling, school visits and her childhood in a West Bengal village far from Kolkata.

Shreejita carried another kind of proximity. Her father was a government-school teacher in West Bengal, and his accounts of understaffing, limited recruitment and students struggling with English and comprehension had shaped what she expected to find.

Lakshmi recalled tutoring a Grade Seven student whose report-card marks in English, Mathematics and Science did not match what happened when he was asked to read and explain a basic passage. At the time, she had interpreted the gap as evidence that he had been "under-cared" for within the school. In the sensitisation session, that conclusion became part of the inquiry too. The encounter was real; the explanation still required examination.

Pavitra recognised an assumption inherited much earlier. When she was a child, the possibility of being sent to a Kendriya Vidyalaya had sometimes been used as a threat if she did not perform well. She had absorbed an image of the institution as punitive and joyless before meeting students whose experiences contradicted it.

The exercise did not suggest that lived experience was irrelevant. It revealed that experience also has to be interpreted. A visit can offer evidence, but it does not automatically explain everything that produced what the visitor saw. A family story can contain truth while still becoming an unfair generalisation. Repetition can make a belief feel observed even when its origin has been forgotten.

A school is not a type

Ritika then moved from the words on the screen to the institutions hidden behind them. She was careful to locate her own knowledge. Much of her government-school experience came from Delhi, whose political visibility, administrative structure and resources made it different from many other parts of India. The Changemakers would have to investigate their own states rather than treating Delhi as a national template.

She shared a Delhi-specific picture of more than a thousand government schools serving approximately 1.8 million students, with around 44,000 tenured teachers and 15,500 guest teachers. The distinction between the two groups mattered. Tenured teachers had greater security and paid leave. Guest teachers were generally paid only for the days they worked, without comparable security or payment during school holidays.

Jaina noticed the contradiction: a system could be described as understaffed while continuing to rely upon teachers it was unwilling to employ regularly. Abu raised the question of falling enrolment in some regions. Pavitra turned the discussion towards the emotional consequences of employment insecurity. A teacher worried about the

next salary or the continuation of a contract might have less attention available for the invisible work of noticing hunger, bullying, fear or distress.

The workload extended beyond instruction. Teachers could be responsible for following up with absent students, visiting families, maintaining records and participating in census, election or vaccination duties. Ritika complicated the familiar government–private comparison further by explaining that even educators in her well-resourced private-school setting spent a substantial part of their time on administrative work.

What appeared from outside as a teacher failing to teach could therefore contain several different realities: an insecure contract, an impossible pupil–teacher ratio, a day consumed by records, a government duty, an absent colleague or an institution trying to fulfil several social functions at once.

Ritika then presented a puzzle. If government schools were uniformly explained by the negative words on the Mentimeter screen, how could their board results sometimes remain comparable with those of private schools?

The cohort offered several possible explanations. Ramit noted that common examinations could preserve a similar external goal across school types. Isha cautioned that comparable marks did not imply comparable educational lives. Pavitra distinguished board examinations based on a fixed syllabus from competitive entrance tests in which coaching, strategy and confidence could restore the advantages associated with wealth. Naisha wondered whether some government-school students developed greater independence because academic success was understood as a route towards a different future.

None of these possibilities became the single answer. The question had done its work by disturbing the deficit story.

Ritika then offered an example from her own assumptions. Moving between government and private schools, she had expected families with greater access to counsellors and mental health language to be more open to conversations about a child's emotional wellbeing. Her experience at a government school in Vikaspuri complicated that expectation: she had often found parents there attentive and proactive when something appeared emotionally wrong.

Expertise had not protected her from assumption. It had given her more opportunities to notice when an assumption failed.

The observer enters the frame

The conversation now turned towards the person conducting the fieldwork.

Ritika warned that a visitor does not simply enter a classroom and observe its natural state. The visitor becomes another pair of watching eyes. Clothing, language, age, a notebook, an organisational affiliation or the authority that others imagine the visitor possesses can change how people behave.

Isha remembered entering municipal schools without holding any formal authority over the staff. Yet her dress and manner of speaking could still prompt appeasing behaviour. People were responding not only to who she was, but to who they thought she might be.

Ritika used ***abracadabra*** as a metaphor for creating meaning while speaking. An observer does not merely collect a story that is waiting intact inside the institution. The questions asked, the details selected and the language used to describe them all participate in producing the account that eventually leaves the school.

Isha illustrated the risk with a brief scene. She had once seen two children fighting in a classroom. From that single moment, a visitor could construct a story about undisciplined children, an inattentive teacher, a harmful school culture or a relationship whose history remained unknown. Several narratives were available immediately. Evidence for any of them was not.

Even note-taking could be read differently from how it was intended. To a Changemaker, a notebook might signal careful observation. To a teacher, it might resemble inspection. To a child, it might suggest that something they had done was being formally recorded.

Ritika encouraged the cohort to remain conscious of that power and to close the loop wherever possible. Observations and questions should be returned to the educators and stakeholders concerned, giving them the opportunity to correct, complicate or respond to what the visitor believed they had seen. The aim was not to enter, extract a convincing account and leave.

Permission is part of the inquiry

The final part of the sensitisation session addressed child safety, consent and institutional access.

The Changemakers were reminded that a child's apparent willingness was not, by itself, sufficient authorisation for photography or filming. Children should still be informed

and given a say in decisions affecting them, while the necessary adult and institutional permissions had to be secured separately. Ritika situated schools' restrictions on visitors within their safeguarding responsibilities, including those arising from the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act.

Isha urged Changemakers to begin approaching schools before the immersion period rather than assuming access would be available when they arrived. Permission could involve more than receiving approval from one principal or teacher. Different activities might require the knowledge and agreement of several adults responsible for the children and the institution.

This changed the meaning of access. A school declining a request was not necessarily resisting improvement or hiding a failure. It might be protecting children, managing examinations, responding to staff shortages or judging that it did not have the capacity to host another programme. Permission was not an obstacle placed between the Changemaker and the real work. It was part of learning how the institution understood responsibility.

The session closed with Isha returning to the evolving Canva board. She described it as giving the cohort's collaboration "a head start" and encouraged Changemakers to use the group as a sounding board for unfinished ideas. The work ahead, she reminded them, involved children, families, teachers and protected institutional spaces. It would require a different degree of care from an online discussion.

From conversation to a workable inquiry

Drawing on the earlier mapping of interests, networks and experience, the facilitation team proposed five broad areas of work:

1. Evaluating B.Ed. and teacher-education programmes;
2. Developing games for learning;
3. Investigating the hidden curriculum and invisible rules in schools;
4. Building a classroom toolkit for teachers; and
5. Exploring mental health and wellbeing in coaching centres.

These were starting directions, not assignments that Changemakers were required to obey. Changemakers could find a narrower question, work across groups or pursue an initiative that did not fit neatly into the five themes.

Before entering breakout rooms, each group was asked to return to practical questions.

What institutions could its members reach? What knowledge or experience did they already possess? How much time could they offer? What could be investigated responsibly? Groups could create their own WhatsApp spaces, brainstorm widely, narrow their direction through discussion and then decide how individual members would contribute. Ramit also encouraged them to identify other groups whose knowledge or networks might strengthen their work.

The instruction was not to produce certainty within an hour. It was to move from a broad concern towards a first answerable question.

In her voice notes, Aparna called for the discipline behind that narrowing. A workable project needed a defined scope, an honest account of constraints, a roadmap, a feedback loop and responsibilities that could be shared. "If you try to move everything, you will move nothing," she warned. The aim was a concrete outcome that could survive contact with limited time and access, not an idealistic claim about changing an entire system.

Five directions begin to take shape

The teacher-education group began with a large concern: whether B.Ed. programmes were providing meaningful preparation or functioning largely as credentials. Abu brought experience of completing a B.Ed., while Rashika was familiar with an integrated programme. Their discussion ranged across outdated curricula, practical classroom training and the gap between qualifying as a teacher and feeling prepared to teach.

With Isha's help, the group narrowed its first step to a survey. Naisha proposed the question that could hold the inquiry together: did the existing B.Ed. curriculum prepare trainees for the classrooms they would eventually enter?

Sidharth volunteered to lead the survey design and suggested speaking with current trainees as well as people who had completed their degrees in recent years. Daksh challenged the proposed time boundary. Would recent graduates necessarily have more to offer than experienced teachers who had spent years discovering what their training had failed to provide? The disagreement improved the research question before a single response had been collected.



Abu's school access helped the teacher-education inquiry move from survey design towards possible respondents and classroom contexts.

The games-for-learning and teacher-toolkit groups quickly discovered that their boundaries were porous. Saarika imagined a library of games that teachers, schools and game designers could adapt to Indian classrooms. Daksh questioned whether gamification itself solved anything. Interactive material already existed, he argued; many schools lacked basic facilities, and students might have little desire to take on an additional activity merely because adults called it a game.

The discussion became more useful when people turned to their own experiences. Karthika remembered learning the states of India through a map puzzle. Daksh recalled playing Atlas, while Shreya spoke about exploring geography through Google Earth. These experiences suggested that a resource did not always have to announce itself as educational in order to produce learning.

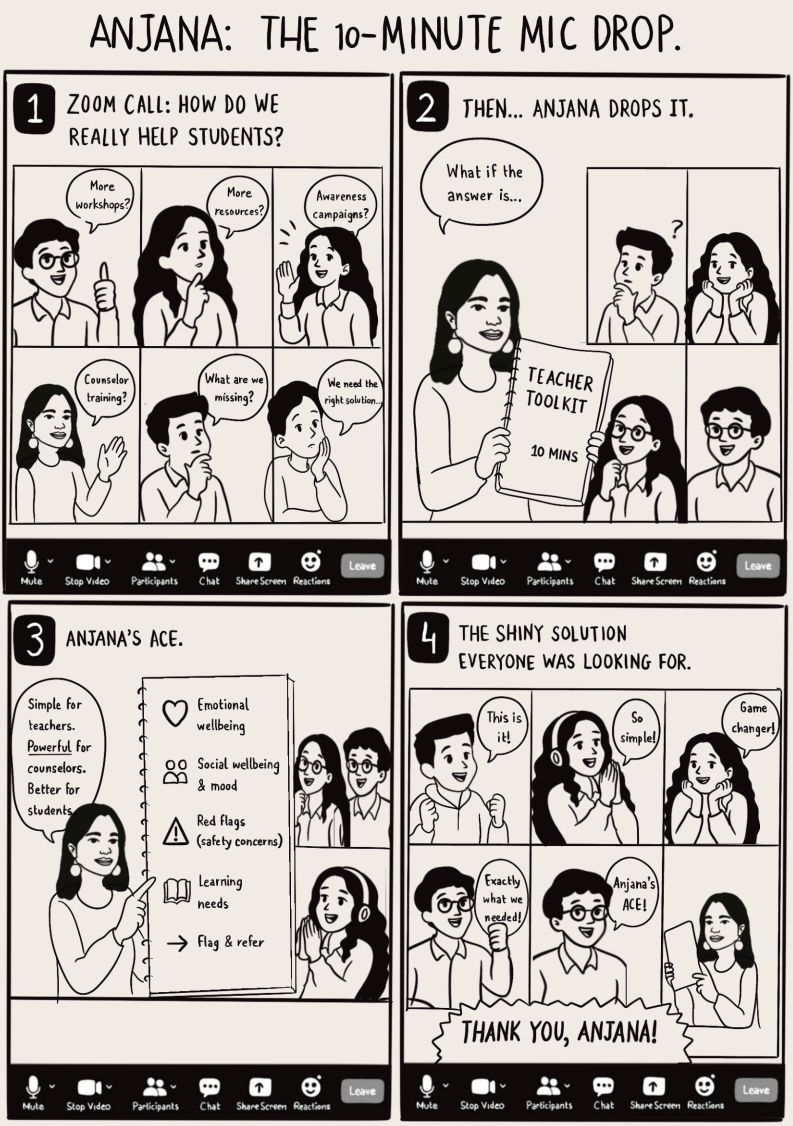
Lakshmi recognised that the two groups were moving towards the same territory. Her group had been considering step-by-step lesson plans that could be tested with tutors or small groups of students, alongside a repository of tools learners could explore

independently. She proposed collaboration rather than parallel work. Isha then helped narrow the ambition: instead of claiming to solve classroom engagement, the group could build a practical, organised and usable collection of resources, something a teacher could pick up, understand and adapt without having to design an entire activity from the beginning.



Mahin introduced learners to a digital science simulation while the games inquiry was still taking shape.

The mental health group faced a different problem. Pavitra wanted to examine the wellbeing of coaching-centre teachers and staff, whose experiences were often absent from conversations focused on student distress. Anjana brought a short checklist designed to help school teachers notice possible concerns among students and identify where referral might be needed. The two ideas could be combined, but not simply. A coaching centre might use the word counselling to mean academic or admissions guidance rather than mental health support. Staff might hesitate to speak because criticism could threaten the institution's reputation or their own employment. A checklist accepted politely might never be used. Isha pressed the group on these institutional realities. Would Changemakers be anonymous? What demographic information was genuinely necessary? What language would allow staff to speak without feeling accused or diagnosed? How would the group know whether a proposed tool had been adopted rather than merely received?



Anjana's Wellness Checklist turned out to be exactly what the cohort needed.

The group began moving towards an engagement-first approach: speak with staff about their pressures before arriving with a solution. The intervention would have to emerge from what the institution could reveal, not from what the group had already prepared.

The hidden-curriculum group began listing the rules that rarely appear in a prospectus but shape school life nonetheless. Falguni and Puspalata described questions about seating, marks, fear of making mistakes, language, gender and whose voice received space in a classroom. Spoken English could become a proxy for intelligence. Local languages could be excluded not only from lessons but from projects, competitions and other opportunities through which ability became visible.

Manan's interest in school finance and informal admission payments raised a more sensitive institutional question. Some members considered placing it inside the hidden-curriculum inquiry, but Isha advised against forcing the fit before the risks and methods had been understood. Similarity between two ideas did not automatically make combining them responsible.

Alongside the five initial themes, Kushala and Sasidhar proposed connecting government and low-fee private schools with existing evening tutoring programmes in Hyderabad and Visakhapatnam. Their idea was not to build a new support system from nothing, but to help students reach peer-based assistance that was already available through their networks.

By the end of the preparation session, no group possessed a completed intervention. Some had a survey question. Some had a possible resource. Some had identified people they needed to speak with. Others had discovered that the language, boundaries or assumptions behind their first idea required more work.

Stories from the Ground

After the sensitisation session had asked the Changemakers to examine what they might carry into a school, the next two days introduced them to people whose own ideas had already been tested by classrooms, communities and institutions.

The next two sessions featured ***Stories from the Ground***. The speakers had not simply studied educational problems; they had tried to respond to them with their teams. Their stories were not presented as models for the cohort to reproduce. They were accounts of ideas that had encountered conflict, institutional resistance, failure, trust and time and had changed as a result.

The first day asked how schools could create safety and agency under pressure. The second asked how educational initiatives could grow without losing their relationship with people and places.

When safety must be built



Lopa Shah



Manasvi Shah

The session brought together Lopa Shah, Manasvi Shah and Rajeshwari G ("Raji"), each offering a different perspective on what it takes to build and sustain schools.

The first story came from ELICIT Foundation, represented by Lopa Shah and Manasvi Shah. ELICIT develops healing-centred education with teachers in conflict-affected regions. Its work began in Kashmir and was expanding into parts of Northeast India.

Lopa traced its origins to Dolphin International School in Pulwama, South Kashmir, which she had run with ELICIT's co-founder, Farooq. Their starting question was not how to add a wellbeing lesson to the timetable. It was what an entire school might need to do differently when children and teachers were living through prolonged uncertainty.

She described protracted conflict as more than a succession of visible emergencies. Repeated exposure to violence, shutdowns, displacement and sudden changes in routine gradually alters how people relate to trust, aspiration and the future. A school may prepare examinations only to have an unexpected closure announced. A brief period of calm may not last long enough for anyone to believe that stability has returned.

Lopa identified time and agency as two of conflict's greatest casualties. When everything feels urgent, it becomes difficult to give sustained attention to anything. When plans are repeatedly interrupted, aspiration itself can begin to feel pointless.

She described several patterns that could become collective rather than remaining confined to individuals: hypervigilance; silence or over-appeasement; hopelessness; difficulty imagining a different future; erosion of self-care; and the cognitive overload produced by continually preparing for the next disruption. Over time, the institution can begin to reproduce the same patterns. Schools become reactive, deficit-focused and organised around crisis because the adults leading them are living inside the crisis too.

That recognition shaped Teach2ELICIT. If teachers were expected to build classrooms grounded in safety and empathy, they first needed space to understand what the surrounding context had done to them. The teacher could not stand outside the conflict and deliver healing to children. Teacher and learner were both part of the same social and emotional landscape.

ELICIT therefore organised its work through three connected domains: the **self**, the **classroom** and the **community**. Knowledge and conventional forms of security, including qualifications, employment and access to higher education, remained important. But they had to be accompanied by continuity, recognition, belonging and the possibility of imagining a future.

The fellows' curriculum brought together critical consciousness, context-responsive pedagogy and narrative research. Critical consciousness meant stepping back from an event long enough to ask what was visible, what remained hidden and how one's own position was shaping the interpretation. Context-responsive pedagogy meant allowing teaching to be altered by the place in which it occurred. Narrative research meant listening to individual stories while also asking what patterns those stories revealed.

Manasvi made these ideas concrete. One fellow who had come from Kerala had to

recognise his own experience of cultural displacement rather than working against the structures of the school community. In another classroom, a teacher used Instagram Reels to explore media and values. Students began asking, "Who benefits from this message?" and carried the question into other encounters with information.

Narrative research similarly asked fellows to move beyond collecting striking anecdotes. As Manasvi connected it to the F.A.I.R. process: "What stories matter, what patterns am I seeing?"

A pedagogy learns to move slowly

The most instructive part of ELICIT's story was how openly Manasvi described its unfinished development.

Six fellows joined during the first year; four left after the first semester. Programme staff sometimes entered classrooms themselves to ensure that teaching continued. The organisation's ambitions had exceeded the structures available to sustain them.

In the second year, the fellowship was reframed as a self-building fellowship rather than simply a teaching fellowship. The shift challenged the expectation that an outsider would arrive as a rescuer. Fellows were encouraged to become curious, ask for help and treat their own responses as part of the work.

By the third year, the team recognised that its community dimension remained underdeveloped. Fellows began working more closely with other teachers and school management so that healing-centred practices would not remain enclosed within a few classrooms.

The model had taken three years to begin rooting itself, and its curriculum was already entering another iteration. Slowness was not presented as evidence that the idea had failed. It was evidence that the context had been allowed to answer back.

Lopa described one practice that helped create this responsiveness as **curious distancing**: making enough space between an event and one's response to examine what was happening. It involved reflection, navigating relationships, regulating one's own nervous system and choosing a proportionate response. Of these, regulation remained the hardest. It required people to recognise exhaustion, develop grounding practices and attend to their own wellbeing while working inside a demanding system.

Shreya asked what happened when this approach still failed to reach a particular child.

Lopa clarified that the pedagogy was not a fixed sequence of steps. Fellows spent their first three months building relationships and developing classroom culture with students. When a child remained disconnected, the next response might be an informal walk, time in the library, shared reading or a quiet one-to-one conversation. Severe distress required appropriate clinical or emergency support. The teacher's role was not to force every child through the same process, but to build multiple paths through which trust could become possible.

Iqra took the question beyond school hours. What could a teacher achieve when a child eventually returned to the same instability outside?

Lopa resisted the idea that teachers should become therapists, doctors or substitute parents. That expectation would leave them overwhelmed and likely to fail. A school could create dependable structures, offer trustworthy relationships and help children develop tools they could carry with them. It could not promise that healing would follow a straight line or be completed by one intervention.

Power that can be shared



Rajeshwari G ("Raji")

The conversation then turned to Rajeshwari G ("Raji"), founder of Padmashri School and leader of Church Park International School in Bengaluru. Both were budget private schools, a category that complicated the simple division between government schools and privileged private ones.

Raji began by reflecting on Lopa's account. For more than two decades, school leadership had consumed most of her waking life. Yet the discussion of Kashmir had made her consider what might lie beyond the boundaries of her own work.

She did not equate the settings. Instead, she spoke of less visible dangers faced by some of the children she knew, including abuse within families. A school might recognise that a child was unsafe and still be limited in what it could change once the child returned home.

Raji's understanding of power had changed early in her life. As a child, she wanted to become a politician because politics appeared to offer the greatest influence. An unplanned period of teaching between the ages of twenty and twenty-two gave her a different answer. A teacher, she realised, could help shape "100 politicians, 100 doctors, 100 powerful people" who would influence their own communities.

In 2005, at the age of twenty-two, she established Padmashri School with fees of approximately ₹60–80. She was a first-generation learner without an established network of mentors. Her method, as she described it, was largely trial and error:

"You try, try, try, fail, fail, fail, then retry."

While running the school, she continued her own education through Grade Twelve, a BA, an MA, a B.Ed. and an LLB. Formal education supplied only part of what she needed. Courses and school-leadership programmes later helped her see that her responsibilities extended beyond the daily survival of one institution.

Low fees created another challenge. Some affluent families praised the progress of children from their households who attended Padmashri, yet would not enrol their own children there because the fee structure carried little social status. Raji responded by making the school's achievements visible through sport, music, parent engagement and public recognition.

In 2024, after a conflict with her partners, she was forced to leave the school she had spent almost two decades building. She initially decided that she would not return to school leadership.

Within a week, she received a call about Church Park International School, which was close to closing. She agreed to assist for six months and soon found herself leading it. This time, she did not begin alone. Former students returned as teachers, coordinators, administrators and other members of the core team. The school she had lost had produced the people with whom she could begin again.

Her story therefore challenged the image of a solitary founder. Relationships built across years had become institutional capacity.

Giving students consequential responsibility

Church Park did not have a conventional student council or parliament. Raji felt that such structures could concentrate titles in a small group of students without transferring meaningful authority.

Instead, leadership was offered through open invitations and increased with age. Grade Seven students observed. Grade Eight students began contributing to decisions. Grade Nine students became closer to equal partners, while Grade Ten students could carry responsibilities more independently.

The responsibilities were not ceremonial. Students helped decide formative-assessment dates and how much of the syllabus would be covered. They were shown the school's monthly electricity bill and helped reduce it through changes in everyday behaviour. One student volunteered to take responsibility for a new school van. Seema, a Grade Seven student, maintained a daily classroom-walkthrough tracker and raised coordination concerns directly with teachers.

Daksh connected this account to student councils he had observed, where head students and house captains possessed impressive titles but little power beyond routine tasks. Raji's response returned to the distinction between displaying leadership and practising it. Children needed real responsibility, guidance and the opportunity to fail without losing the chance to try again.

Such a culture also required the school leader to accept questions about her own decisions. Authority could not teach accountability while remaining exempt from it.

When Iqra asked how schools could support children returning to difficult family circumstances, Raji described the structures she had tried to create. Her office remained open to students without an intermediary. She conducted home visits, attended admissions and parent meetings, and spent time speaking directly with children in classrooms. The school worked with an external counselling organisation and maintained a camera-free anonymous complaint box known as the "secret spot."

These arrangements could not guarantee a successful intervention. Raji described the care required when responding to a child who disclosed harm at home. An adult might intervene with good intentions and still make the situation more complicated. Whatever followed, the child should never be made to feel guilty for having spoken.

The important achievement was not an open door by itself. It was the child's confidence that someone trustworthy might be found behind it.

The adults also needed ways to remain human under the weight of the work. Manasvi

described ELICIT's deliberately protected time for lightness as "compulsory fun." Raji spoke of a weekly "Failure Celebration Day," when staff could share and laugh about what had gone wrong. Failure was being turned from private shame into shared material for learning.

Raji closed by reminding the cohort that people did not possess equal money, time, energy or opportunity. That inequality did not make every action impossible. Becoming a Changemaker in even one person's life, she said, could be "more than enough for being born into this world."

When the city becomes the classroom



Saidevi Sanjeeviraja



Purva Parwani



Muskan Shaikh

The second day of Stories from the Ground deepened the questions participants were carrying into their own work. The guests were Saidevi Sanjeeviraja, founder of the Bengaluru-based nature and place-based education initiative Thicket Tales, and Purva Parwani, co-founder of Clay Lab Education Foundation. Purva was later joined by Muskan, who had entered Clay Lab as a student and was now a full-time team member.

Saidevi began at the foothills of the Western Ghats, where she had grown up running through rain, watching ants and noticing seasonal changes. Nature had not been a separate subject. It was part of everyday life.

Only after moving to Bengaluru did she recognise the distance between formal education and the environments children inhabited. Students studied ecosystems while lakes near their schools dried. They read about biodiversity without being given unstructured time to observe another living thing. They lived through floods, heat and

waste crises while the curriculum behaved as though learning took place somewhere else.

This produced the question behind Thicket Tales: how could learning become relevant to the place in which a child was already living?

Its year-long programme, Learn Around Nature, began during the pandemic through online conversations with researchers and naturalists. A naturalist joining from Dehradun to show children wildflowers and butterflies over Instagram Live became one of those unexpected moments in which a screen briefly opened onto a living landscape.

As the programme developed, storytelling became central. Saidevi described a session in which children arrived with familiar claims that snakes remember human faces and take revenge. The facilitators did not immediately correct them.

Instead, the children made small origami boxes and tried to place letters inside them. The letters were too long, so they had to remove everything except the most essential information. They were then asked to imagine that the box represented the limited space inside a snake's brain. What information would matter most for survival? Would there be room to preserve a human face and a plan for revenge?

The misconception weakened because the children had reasoned their way through it. They had not been told what to think; they had been given an experience that made another explanation more convincing.

After the pandemic, Thicket Tales began taking students into Cubbon Park and Lalbagh. Children returned to particular trees, observed them over time and formed relationships with them. Nature stopped being content and became a presence with which the learner had a history.

From noticing to civic agency

Thicket Tales developed a year-long arc that began with landscape and geography, moved into biodiversity, and then introduced the human systems shaping a city.

One class mapped the reduction in Bengaluru's green cover between 1972 and 2011. The students connected the map to the prolonged heat they experienced inside their own classrooms. Another inquiry compared air quality across green, residential and industrial areas, allowing students to draw connections between vegetation, industry and air.

Only after months of this grounding did the programme move towards public action.

Students investigating the absence of a usable bus stop near their school discovered that the problem was not simply the physical stop. Rude interactions with conductors and the difficulty of obtaining change also discouraged families from using buses. The students independently arrived at the possibility of QR-code payments, similar to a system later introduced in the city's public transport.

Another group documented waste-dumping sites and filed approximately forty-five complaints with the municipal authorities. Roughly twenty locations were subsequently cleared. When officials asked the students to stop filing so many complaints, the students responded that acting on those complaints was part of the officials' responsibility. Their work later developed into a broader effort towards a litter-free neighbourhood.

The learning had moved through a sequence: notice a place, understand the system affecting it, and then act within that system.

Falguni, drawing on her own zero-waste work, asked how students could engage with a crisis as large as climate change without being overwhelmed by anxiety or by the limits of individual action.

Saidevi described a staged approach. Students first considered what they could change personally. They then moved to action within the school. Only after substantial preparation did they engage with community organisations and public systems. Nature immersion continued throughout, keeping the work connected to attention, relationship and hope. Acting as a class also prevented one child from carrying the full emotional weight of the problem.

Isha added that students who had experienced collective action succeeding possessed evidence against helplessness. Hope was not being offered as reassurance. It had been built through participation.

Arya asked how the same approach might make mandated and abstract subjects, such as Pythagoras' theorem, feel relevant. Saidevi described layered questioning and hyperlocalisation: breaking a large question into smaller steps and connecting concepts to patterns, structures and problems in the learner's own surroundings. The shift was from repeatedly asking ***what*** towards making room for ***why*** and ***how***.

Thicket Tales eventually encountered a question of scale. How many classrooms could one small team enter directly? The organisation concluded that lasting change required working through teachers rather than around them. Its teacher-incubation model was designed to help educators adapt place-based methods within existing science and social-science teaching without turning them into an additional curricular burden.

The idea had grown by giving away some of its ownership.

Clay keeps changing shape

Purva asked the cohort to hold onto the metaphor of clay throughout her story. Clay begins without a predetermined final form. Clay Lab had developed in much the same way.

She described herself as a former Teach for India teacher who had grown up being classified as average because her marks were average, even though many of her abilities existed outside what marks recognised.

Clay Lab began on 24 April 2020. Purva's Grade 10 students had been unable to complete their board examinations, and children from migrant families were being pulled away from relationships built across several years of school. Purva and a fellow teacher organised one Zoom call simply to remain connected.

Seven students joined. Within three months, referrals from other Teach for India fellows had expanded participation to around seven hundred. The organisation did not begin with a theory of scale. It began because its founders did not want to lose contact with their students.

Purva organised the lessons that followed around three ideas.

The first was proximity: getting close enough to a problem that could no longer remain abstract. She was the first graduate in her own family and understood the significance of educational aspiration. Among her students, she encountered families for whom completing Grade 10 represented the highest level of education anyone had imagined. Sustained proximity made the gap between aspiration and opportunity difficult to ignore.

The second lesson was to fall in love with the problem rather than the first solution. Purva remained personally attached to Clay Lab's original one-to-one mentorship model, but attachment was not enough to make it sustainable. The organisation moved towards a School of Entrepreneurship, in which students from communities identified problems and developed their own responses. It later moved again towards an in-school fellowship, placing a fellow within a community and school rather than relying on occasional after-school contact.

The programme kept changing shape. Its commitment to long-term relationships did not.

The third lesson was to preserve a beginner's mind. Experience could produce useful judgement, but it could also persuade someone that they had already understood the people and place before them. Clay Lab's newest model depended upon years of existing trust while still requiring the team to learn a different way of working.

Purva ended her formal account with three questions for the Changemakers: What problem were they willing to get close to? What values did they want to build around their response? What small step could they take now?

From student to colleague

Muskan's presence allowed the cohort to hear the Clay Lab story from inside the relationship it claimed to build.

She had joined the organisation's first student cohort as a commerce student and had learned economics online with Purva. Over time, she moved into outreach and school visits, community-building, communications and travel to new programme locations. She was now a full-time member of the team.

What kept her there was not only commitment to an organisational mission. It was the freedom to learn, the pace at which she could grow, the trust placed in her and her participation in decisions. The learner had not remained the recipient of somebody else's intervention. She had become a colleague helping shape what came next.

Karthika asked how Clay Lab and Thicket Tales had begun their work during the uncertainty of the pandemic, when online engagement had not yet become ordinary. Purva recalled advice once given to her by a former manager when she was hesitating before an unfamiliar task: "There's only one way to find out."

At the beginning, Clay Lab was not measuring a sophisticated theory of impact. It was trying to stay connected to students. Saidevi offered a similar reflection. Thicket Tales had initially wanted one child to have one meaningful experience with nature. The language of scale and impact arrived later.

Urbi asked how trust had been built with families experiencing the economic pressures and digital inequalities intensified by the pandemic. Purva answered that Clay Lab's growth rested on two years of relationships already built in classrooms. Technology had allowed contact to continue; trust was what made students willing to answer.

Vidhi asked what happened when families were sceptical of the opportunities an educational programme was trying to create. Purva returned to the beginner's mindset:

enter as a learner rather than an expert and ask enough questions to understand what lies behind an apparently limited aspiration. Saidevi described inviting parents and school leaders to experience the programme themselves rather than asking them to trust an unfamiliar method from a distance.

Muskan offered a phrase she had heard from a community practitioner: "Connect first, then correct."

Ramit raised one final tension. If students enjoyed an enrichment programme more than their regular classrooms, could the programme inadvertently weaken their relationship with school?

Both organisations resisted positioning themselves as alternatives competing with teachers. Thicket Tales worked through open communication and increasingly through teacher development. Clay Lab had learned that a student's school life and programme life could not be treated as separate identities. Mentors and teachers needed to understand one another's work. Otherwise, even a beneficial programme could become another isolated space that the institution did not know how to hold.

Productive confusion

At the end of the second day, Isha asked where the stories had left the cohort.

Falguni said an informal conversation after the previous session had helped her narrow her interest towards curriculum and the hidden curriculum. The final form was still uncertain: it might become a practical resource or collaborative research.

Arya arrived at a different kind of clarity. Because she did not yet understand the school or stakeholders with whom she would work, she intended to spend her first weeks observing and learning from them before proposing an intervention. Where her own knowledge was limited, including in social-emotional learning, she would draw on the cohort rather than claim expertise she did not possess.

Isha reflected that adults often lose the wonder involved in simply observing the world. Immersion could offer a way back to it.

Ramit gave language to the unease that remained. People spend years being given instructions, manuals and predefined outputs. When that structure is removed, autonomy may feel disorienting rather than liberating. The discomfort did not mean the Changemakers were unprepared. It was part of learning how to move without pretending that the answer had already been supplied.

The cohort left the second evening with more possibilities and fewer certainties. That was the intended result. The ground stories had not told them what to do. They had shown how an idea must behave once it meets context: stay close, build trust, share power, begin with what is possible and remain willing to change shape.

Many Sites, One Conversation

The first week of immersion

The formal immersion officially began on 6 July. By then, the Changemakers had spent the first days of the month listening to practitioners, examining their assumptions and developing possible directions. Fieldwork did not begin with everyone entering a school at the same time. Some had secured access; others were still requesting permission. Some were testing activities with children, while others were drafting surveys, approaching public offices or turning a broad concern into a researchable question.

The cohort went out separately, but it did not learn separately. Photographs, voice notes, observations and unfinished interpretations travelled back through the daily calls and the WhatsApp groups. One person's encounter became a question for others. A detail noticed in one school changed what another Changemaker looked for in theirs.

Beginning before everything was ready

The first daily debrief opened with a practical concern. Several groups were preparing surveys, sometimes for overlapping networks. Daksh worried that the same contacts might receive numerous forms from different projects. Isha agreed that the group needed a coordinated way of approaching people, even when the surveys themselves addressed distinct stakeholders.

The exchange established an early principle: the freedom to pursue separate inquiries did not remove the responsibility to remain aware of what everyone else was doing.

Isha also asked the Changemakers to think in terms of a meaningful checkpoint rather than pretending that a two-week immersion could complete work capable of taking several years. A research paper might remain unfinished. A toolkit could have later phases. A first set of interviews might reveal that the original question needed to change. The purpose of the deadline was to make a beginning visible, not to manufacture a false ending.

Preparation and observation could proceed together. A Changemaker did not need a

perfect questionnaire before entering a school simply to listen and notice.

Returning as a visitor

Daksh was among the first to enter the field. He returned to his former school carrying the familiarity of a student and the unfamiliar status of an adult researcher.



Daksh returned to his former school carrying familiarity and a new set of questions.

Housekeeping staff who had known him now watched him more carefully when he moved through the campus without supervision. The change was small but revealing. He had returned to the same building, but the institution no longer read him in the same way.

He photographed additional railings that had appeared around the school. When the image reached the WhatsApp group, Falguni and Urbi recognised similar structures elsewhere. Pavitra wanted to return to her own school and look again. The photograph did not yet explain why the railings existed, but it had created a shared object of attention.



The school Urbi visited while documenting the messages carried by space, routine and display.

Daksh also noticed the records teachers were required to maintain. A classroom tracker documented what had been taught and was periodically reviewed by a coordinator. An art teacher told him that skill in graphic design had resulted in design work being added to his responsibilities, even though it was not part of his teaching role.

A photograph of the school canteen produced a lighter chain of comparison. Falguni remembered Frooti and samosas. Pavitra remembered cooked meals of dal, rice, vegetables and rotis, with no separate counter from which students could purchase food. What began as a menu became a conversation about the different material worlds hidden inside the common phrase ***school life***.



A canteen menu prompted a chain of memories and comparisons across the cohort. Photo by Daksh.

Trust before observation

Puspalata's first immersion began before she reached the Government Laxmi Nrusingha Primary School in Taraboi Sasan. She telephoned the head teacher in advance, explained the F.A.I.R. Project and made it clear that she was coming to learn rather than inspect. She also introduced herself as an Anganwadi worker, allowing the conversation to begin with a shared relationship with children and community work.



Puspalata with the head teacher: observation was always shaped by the relationships that made entry possible.

The school had twenty-six enrolled students. One of its two sanctioned teachers was on maternity leave, leaving a single teacher to manage all classes, including Bal Vatika, in one room. An older building had remained unusable since Cyclone Fani. Registers, surveys, electoral duties and other administrative responsibilities further reduced the time available for teaching.

Puspalata noticed a damaged water tap, a poorly maintained foundational-learning corner and an Idea Box that was rarely used. Each detail could easily have become evidence in a deficit story. Her conversation with the head teacher complicated that interpretation. The children were curious and willing to participate. The school's limitations were not evidence that nobody cared. Staffing, infrastructure and administrative obligations were quietly organising what care could look like on an ordinary day.

She returned to the group with a reflection that would remain important throughout the immersion: trust was not simply a way of gaining access. Taking time to explain her purpose and listen to the head teacher had changed the quality of what the visit could reveal.



The school's Idea Box was physically present but appeared to be little used.

Learning from the person at the gate

Manan's first field inquiry took him not to a school but to the office of a Deputy Director of Education in Delhi. He wanted to understand how private-school admissions and complaints were handled.

Before leaving, he asked the WhatsApp group what they wanted to know. Jaina proposed questions about how learning outcomes were tracked and which capabilities schools were failing to prepare students for. Pavitra asked whether the available data distinguished socioeconomic circumstances or disability.



Manan's route towards the Ministry of Education made institutional thresholds part of the inquiry.

Manan could not immediately put those questions to the officials he hoped to meet. Much of his first conversation was with the security guard.

The group responded to this with humour, but the encounter contained a useful lesson. Institutional knowledge does not always sit with the person whose title appears most relevant. The guard understood when officers arrived, how visitors moved through the building and how the office functioned from one day to the next. An apparently unsuccessful attempt had located a different source.

Projects acquire methods

With time, the Canva map was being corrected as people narrowed their questions, changed roles and joined one another's initiatives. The immersion was beginning to include at least as much design and negotiation as direct observation.

Sidharth repared three bilingual questionnaires on teacher education: one for current trainees, one for practising teachers and one for the faculty who prepared them. He invited the group to comment rather than edit immediately so that the questions could be reviewed collectively.



Manan learnt that the best insights can come from the most unexpected sources.

Priyasha refined her disability-inclusion inquiry around an accessibility checklist, the time taken for a student to receive an accommodation and interviews with the people responsible for providing support. When it became clear that the cohort had greater access to schools than universities, the project widened to make room for school-level observations.

Falguni narrowed the hidden-curriculum inquiry to questions of power and success. Who possessed authority? What knowledge was treated as legitimate? Who was invited to speak, and what happened to quieter students? When schools declined permission for direct interviews with children, she began adapting her method around observation and conversations with teachers and leaders.

The mental health group worked on questions about teacher wellbeing in schools and coaching centres. Pavitra began approaching institutions while Anjana developed a brief tool for recognising concerns among students. The group was already confronting the difference between designing a tool and persuading an institution to trust or use it.

Lakshmi, Prasannaa and Ravya began shaping the teacher toolkit/playbook. Lakshmi drew on tutoring sessions to consider how a learner who performed well in structured grammar exercises might be supported to express their own thoughts in writing. Prasannaa began gathering research and examples, while Ravya planned a small pilot.



Ravya with learners at the community centre where the playbook's assumptions met a real group.

Saarika, Pakhi and the educational-games group began assembling possible resources and asking what should qualify for inclusion. Mahin started testing PhET science simulations with children at his learning centre. Their inquiry was moving beyond whether games were enjoyable towards what they helped learners understand and what support different children needed in order to use them.

The first week therefore contained many forms of fieldwork: walking through a school, speaking with a guard, tutoring one child, building a questionnaire, testing a simulation and discovering that an institution was not yet willing to open its doors.

Mixed evidence in a small school

On 7 July, Puspalata visited a Sanskrit Vidyapith serving Grades Six and Seven. It had approximately ten students, two teachers and one member of cooking staff.

She noticed firewood stored in a classroom, plastic bottles on the floor and learning materials that were present but poorly organised. Students named Mathematics as a favourite subject, yet struggled to explain some of the terminology she asked about. One quiet child was publicly described in terms that reduced him to a presumed limitation, after which some classmates laughed. Puspalata redirected the moment towards the idea that children learn at different speeds and should support rather than ridicule one another.



Firewood stored in a classroom made the relationship between educational aspiration and material conditions visible.

A teacher then spoke candidly about exhaustion. From the teacher's perspective, reform language, street plays and experiential activities could feel remote from the immediate pressure of staffing, workload and completing lessons. Memorisation appeared more realistic than another ambitious programme.

Yet the same teacher invited Puspalata to return and take classes whenever she was free.

The invitation made a simple judgement impossible. The teacher was not rejecting all outside participation. Nor could the material environment be explained only by a lack of money. Puspalata left holding several truths together: an overburdened educator, a child whose dignity required protection, a poorly organised space and an unexpected opening for continued engagement.

Looking again at a familiar school

Puspalata returned to the government school she had attended from Grades One to Grade Eight. The children left for the day singing ***Vande Utkal Janani***, Odisha's state anthem, bringing back memories of her own time there.

The campus was recognisable but not unchanged. A muddy area had been concreted. The difficult hand pump children once used had been replaced by a proper handwashing station, although some taps were already broken. Classrooms had colourful walls and tiled floors. The main entrance, however, was closed because of a community land dispute, requiring everyone to use a side gate.



Three sites entered one conversation: a handwashing station observed by Puspalata, Pavitra's former school and student work documented by Urbi.

Inside a science class, students answered that they understood while several appeared distracted as the teacher read from the textbook. The teacher later explained the pressure of completing the syllabus with insufficient staff. One student told Puspalata that stories made lessons easier to understand. Another child, who said he had no interest in studying, produced a carefully drawn sketch of a bus.

The visit complicated both criticism and nostalgia. The school had improved in ways that mattered. It also carried shortages, unused library corners and classroom practices that left some abilities invisible. Returning as a former student gave Puspalata a point of comparison, but it did not give her a final verdict.

Around the same time, Pavitra shared photographs from her return to Queen's College in Indore: the greenery, the school meal and the playful caption, "My school is better than yours, Daksh." Urbi shared photographs of projects made by students. The WhatsApp group became part field notebook and part shared album, carrying evidence, memory and affection at once.

An institution refuses to become a simple villain

During the 8 July debrief, Manan returned with a fuller account of his visits to education-department offices. Karthika had advised him beforehand to avoid leading questions and approach the meetings as open information-gathering conversations. That changed the way he entered.

The security guard helped him understand the office hierarchy and the route followed by a complaint. Manan was shown the physical diary in which grievances were recorded. He also witnessed a case in which parents complained that their child had been stopped at a school gate; a call from an official to the principal appeared to resolve the immediate problem within minutes.

At the same time, the guard and other people Manan spoke with made serious allegations about informal payments, unequal handling of schools in different fee brackets and the limits of action against more powerful institutions. These accounts were leads, not verified findings.

Ramit therefore challenged one of the official terms used in the office: what did it mean for a complaint to be "disposed of"? A closed file was not necessarily a resolved problem. Manan began shifting his next steps towards narrower questions: the different categories of fees schools charged, what was formally receipted, what financial information could be requested and where contradictions might be documented.

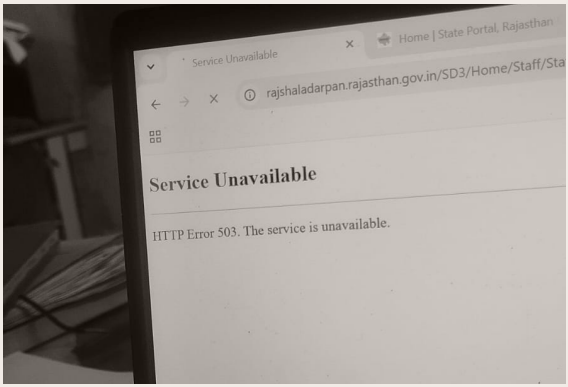
Other Changemakers widened the inquiry. Sidharth shared a family experience that made him warn Manan about the risks of investigating admission payments. Isha described how schools could themselves face informal demands while seeking approvals, producing a cycle in which institutions justified passing hidden costs on to families. Pakhi recalled the class judgement attached to using second-hand textbooks. Manya described government schemes that reached schools only when a particularly persistent principal completed the necessary follow-up.

The call did not settle whether schools, families or officials were chiefly responsible. It revealed how responsiveness, opacity, competence, fear and rationalisation could coexist inside the same system.

When technology takes time away from teaching

Daksh encountered another contradiction while observing administrative work in a government-school setting. Hardware was available, but official websites loaded slowly, required multiple sections to be completed and sometimes stopped functioning during the working day. Teachers relied upon videos created by independent users to understand how to navigate the official platforms.

The technology had not removed paperwork. It had changed its form and timing, sometimes pushing administrative work into early mornings or late nights.



Daksh attempting to access government websites unsuccessfully.

In the WhatsApp group, Daksh described the scene as "weirdly normal." Teachers discussed possible transfers, worried about the practicalities of new postings and moved through the frustrations of the portal as part of an ordinary working day. The visit did not resemble the flat picture of a government school many had carried into sensitisation. It contained working infrastructure, digital failure, humour, anxiety and routine all at once.

"When will they get the time to teach?"

Daksh Sheora



A government-school setting documented by Daksh, where digital systems and everyday staff-room life coexisted.

Observation becomes collective interpretation

A WhatsApp post dated 9 July documented a school visit Falguni and Daksh had made the previous day, with Vidhi joining them for a short debrief and lunch.

Their observations began at reception. A student preparing to leave for a zonal slogan-writing competition was stopped because she was wearing nail paint. Her hands were photographed for her parents, and when she tried to explain herself, she was interrupted and told to "at least speak in English."

Because the visitors were not permitted to speak with students directly, they resisted claiming to know what the student felt. Instead, they asked what such an interaction might mean immediately before a child represented the school publicly. The limitation on access became part of the field note.



Falguni, Daksh and Vidhi meet for lunch and a short debrief.

Rain moved the assembly onto the school's central speaker system. As Falguni and Daksh walked through the corridors, they noticed that participation appeared stronger in rooms where a teacher was actively present. They treated this as a question about context and authority rather than evidence that one set of students cared more than another.

An English teacher described the pressure of teaching four books in the primary grades. Her definition of a successful class had gradually become one in which students remained attentive and she completed what she had planned. A Social Science teacher described limitations in the prescribed account of India's diversity and carried an older textbook into class so she could introduce additional examples.

The teachers were not passive transmitters of curriculum. They selected, supplemented and interpreted it under pressure.

One teacher intentionally asked vocal students to hold back so that quieter children could answer. Falguni recognised the intention while preserving another question: did the quieter student experience that invitation as encouragement or as sudden exposure?

After the visit, Daksh represented the classroom's relationship with knowledge as a chain:

Knowledge → examination patterns and previous-year questions → teacher → student

Isha responded by asking what relevance a teacher could retain when information was increasingly available through the internet and artificial intelligence. Her answer was not that teachers had become unnecessary. Their role might lie less in possessing information and more in offering perspective, building a learner's relationship with a subject, creating intellectual rigour and co-creating the direction of learning with students.

The school visit continued inside the group long after the visitors left.

Testing an assumption with children

Mahin's early testing of PhET simulations produced another correction.

He tried the digital science activities with children from government and private schools. In the initial self-paced format, the private-school students appeared more ready to select topics and explain what they had explored. It would have been easy to interpret the difference as a fixed gap in curiosity or ability.

When greater structure and support were provided, the government-school students returned with questions and explained the scientific ideas strongly. Mahin began to see that the first result might have reflected unequal familiarity with self-directed learning rather than unequal capacity to understand.

The trial was small and could not establish a general difference between school sectors. Its value lay in how quickly the second attempt disrupted the first interpretation.

The experience also changed the games group's work. Saarika and Pakhi began defining clearer inclusion criteria for the proposed repository: curriculum alignment, social and civic learning, research support and disability inclusion. By 10 July, Saarika was proposing a structured survey through which teachers, and eventually students, could continue shaping the resource beyond the programme timeline.

The repository was becoming more than a list of games. It was beginning to include a method for questioning whether the games were useful.



Learners use PhET simulations during Mahin's more structured attempt.

The call paused; the conversation continued

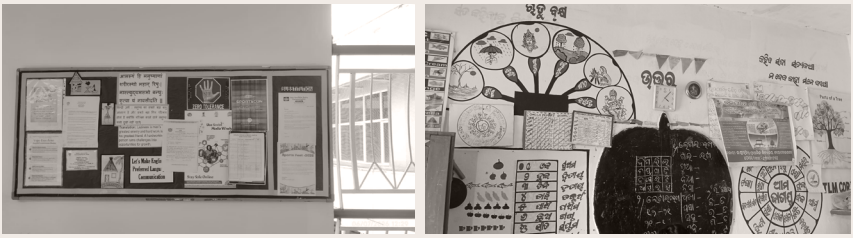
After the 8 July debrief, Isha paused the formal calls for two days. Attendance had begun to fall as more Changemakers entered the field, and returning from a visit only to rush into an evening meeting was becoming counterproductive.

She encouraged everyone to keep sharing photographs, notes and updates, and to write down observations while details were still fresh. The formal call paused; the collective interpretation did not.

By 10 July, the cohort had not resolved the questions with which it began. It had done something more useful. A photograph of a railing had become a shared line of inquiry. An unanswered question had revealed where institutional knowledge might reside. A return to a childhood school had complicated both nostalgia and criticism. A classroom encounter had reopened the question of what teachers were for. A small experiment had shown how quickly an interpretation could change when the method changed.

The first week demonstrated that immersion was not only the act of entering an institution. It was the discipline of bringing back what one had seen and allowing other people to question its meaning.

Elsewhere, a school noticeboard combined safety messages, language expectations, timetables, competition notices, and administrative information. A classroom wall gathered local-language charts, calendars, weather, numbers, and parts of a tree. Student models documented weather and community life. These surfaces were not decoration alone. They showed which messages were repeated, which languages carried authority, and whose work occupied public space.



A school exterior and a local-language classroom wall made institutional messages visible across two sites.

When the plan entered the room

The second week of immersion changed character. The first visits had taught the Changemakers to look closely. Now they had to make their emerging ideas answerable to other people. Repositories needed users. Questions needed respondents. Checklists needed real buildings. Workshops needed schools willing to make room for them.

Institutions did not respond with a simple yes or no. They responded with examinations, permissions, crowded timetables, inaccessible rooms, unexpected age groups and people already carrying more responsibilities than their job titles suggested. Each response altered the work. The plan was no longer something the Changemakers could perfect among themselves. It had entered the room.

Tools prepared to travel

On 10 July, Saarika proposed adding a structured survey to the educational-games repository. Her reasoning looked beyond the programme deadline: "Since the repository could keep evolving, this way we will be able to collect feedback post the project timeline as well."

The next day, she, Daksh and Mahin began developing separate forms for teachers and students. Their questions moved beyond whether games were enjoyable. Did teachers have institutional support for using them? At what point in a lesson might a game be useful: when introducing a concept, demonstrating it or applying it? How much classroom time could realistically be given to play? Could rewards, levels and competition motivate some students while excluding others? What training would teachers need?

The repository was becoming more than a collection of interesting resources. It was beginning to ask whether those resources could live inside an actual classroom. The people expected to use it were being invited to change it.

On the same day, Pavitra followed the route by which a student might receive disability-related support in a school. What she encountered resisted an easy verdict. Across a three-storey campus, there was only one entrance ramp, no lift and no accessible washroom. Yet the school had sensory spaces, soft seating and classroom corners where students could withdraw when they felt overwhelmed. Its support office was commonly called the "support room," and its work extended beyond children with formal diagnoses to those experiencing learning or socio-emotional difficulties.

Referrals could begin with a teacher, parent or student. A child might be observed across

different settings before the school approached the family. Where parents consented, the process could move towards diagnosis, certification and formal benefits. Where they did not, some classroom scaffolding could still begin. Privacy was treated carefully because a label intended to secure support could also expose a child and family to stigma.

Beyond the school, however, the route became longer. Diagnosis, government assessment, certification and the UDID process could require several appointments and institutions. Services described as free still carried costs in travel, lost work, disrupted routines and emotional strain. Pavitra was struck by how much the internal system depended upon one particularly experienced and committed coordinator. "The whole process of recognising, referring, supporting and officialising," she wrote, "would be very, very difficult without such people in the system."

The visit complicated the meaning of inclusion. A school could be relationally thoughtful and physically inaccessible at the same time. It could have a well-functioning support process without having a system strong enough to survive the departure of the person holding it together.

Elsewhere, access was shaping the mental health inquiry before many interviews had begun. By 12 July, Maitrei had contacted several coaching centres without receiving a positive response. She turned to friends and personal networks and secured a conversation with a Grade 10 government-school teacher. Nikhila had spoken with one trainer using the group's common questionnaire. Keya was travelling to Jharkhand, where she hoped to begin through coaching institutes she could access locally.

The unanswered messages were not empty results. They showed that a prepared questionnaire did not automatically create entry. In many settings, proximity and trust were part of the method.

By 13 July, several projects were ready to travel beyond their Initiators. Priyasha shared the disability-inclusion team's accessibility checklist, interview guide and participant-information sheet, inviting other Changemakers to use them during their visits and contribute to a shared exploratory database. Rashika and Sidharth circulated three teacher-education surveys: one for current B.Ed. and ITEP trainees, one for practising teachers and one for teacher educators. Shreejita undertook a visit connected with gaps in teacher preparation, while Sidharth visited a B.Ed. college.



Local coaching centres in Jharkhand, photo by Keya

The teacher-toolkit group also divided its work. Rashika and Prasannaa took responsibility for templates and design; Prasannaa, Lakshmi and Abu worked on lesson plans; Ravya contributed diagnostic and experimental material; and pilots and source checks were distributed among several members. An Initiator could give the work direction without having to own every part of it. Contributors could strengthen an idea, test it somewhere else or make it useful to a wider group.

Anjana's preliminary field notes brought a different kind of detail into the shared record. Teachers and counsellors she spoke with in low-fee CBSE schools described salaries beginning as low as ₹8,500, promised increments that did not always materialise, work that extended into evenings and weekends, and responsibilities ranging from competitions to skill-based activities. Some taught across several grades without clear role differentiation. They were expected to notice students who needed support while receiving limited preparation for recognising less visible emotional, developmental or neurodivergent needs.



Lakshmi discovered that not all learning begins with following the rules.

One counsellor also managed a kindergarten section. Another provided counselling, substitution classes, skill-development sessions and value education while working from a small space beneath a staircase. The image stayed with the group. The school had created the position, but the space and workload conveyed how much room the role had actually been given.

That evening, returning Changemaker Aryaa Praseed offered another way of reading the field. She described an early camp that had been planned for months and became chaotic as soon as the children arrived. Her eventual response had not been to impose tighter adult control. Her team divided the children into smaller groups, created student-leader roles and distributed responsibility.

When the 2026 cohort was asked to design activities for a similarly energetic group, Falguni's group treated the energy as material to work with rather than behaviour to suppress. Arya M.'s group proposed rotating, mixed-ability groups and role reversal, asking children how they would solve the facilitator's problem. Pavitra distinguished discipline as restriction from discipline as interest, participation and reciprocal respect. Isha suggested brief "silence bells"; Pavitra offered the complementary possibility of deliberately structured noise. Anjana proposed a confidence-building fashion show in which coordination and participation mattered more than clothing.

Aryaa's final caution was practical. Even a familiar game could contain assumptions. ***Simon Says*** only works if the children understand who Simon is and what "says" instructs them to do. A carefully selected activity could still fail if the facilitator mistook their own familiarity for shared context.

Permission is part of the design

By 14 July, Maitrei had designed three one-hour workshops on social and emotional learning. She then visited three low-fee private schools to ask whether she could conduct them.

At the first school, unit tests were under way. The principal asked her to return the following week and indicated that, if permission was granted, she would have to conduct the workshop alone. While waiting, Maitrei noticed a student standing awkwardly in the office for approximately fifteen minutes while missing answer sheets were printed. She also noticed the pressure of the timetable: teachers appeared to be taking five or six periods a day, even as the school accommodated examinations and a routine POCSO-related review.

The second school was already hosting several mandated workshops. From the

reception desk, another session, even one concerned with wellbeing, looked like further time taken away from completing the syllabus. Maitrei began to see how an initiative described from the outside as holistic development could arrive inside a school as one more obligation. "Made me really question," she wrote, "whether intervention workshops usually help students or not."

The question did not make her abandon the work. It made her more cautious about assuming that a worthwhile subject automatically justified another workshop.

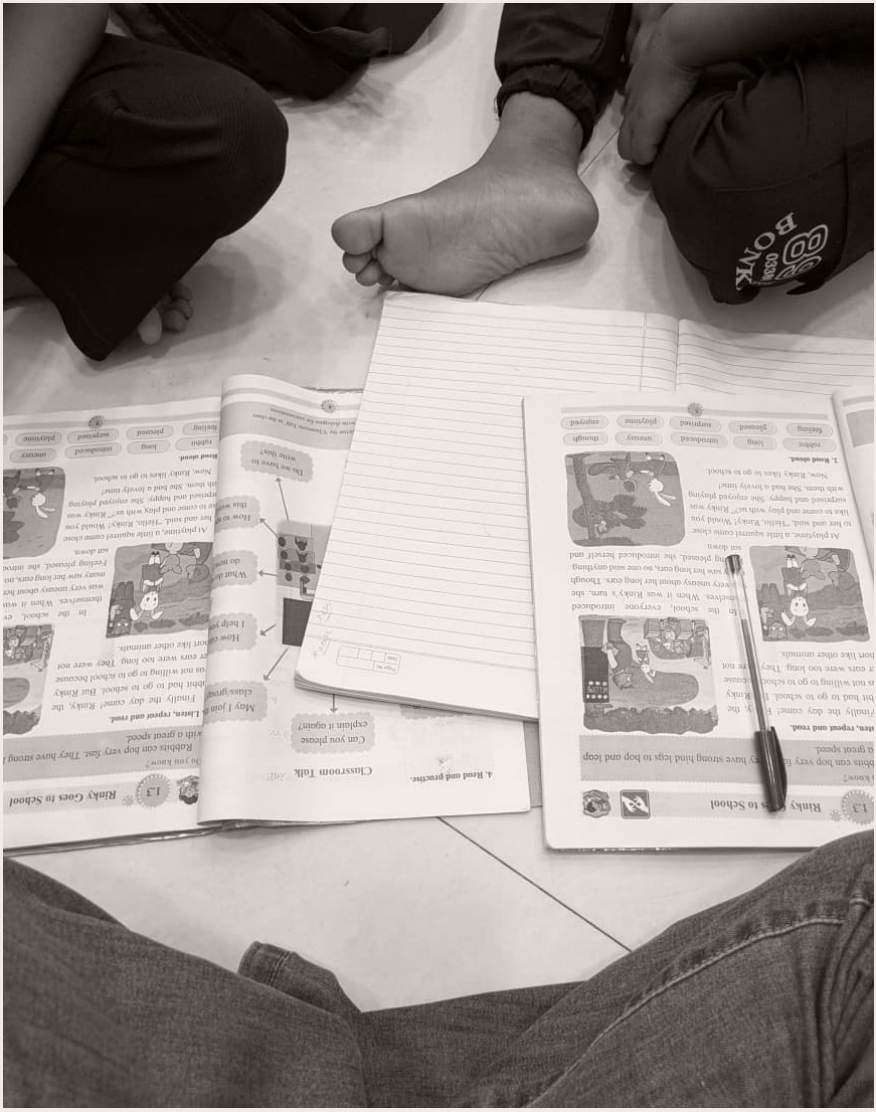
The third school agreed to host the sessions. Maitrei was told that approximately sixty children might attend the following day. Her next move was to ask the cohort who could join her. The permission had been secured by one Changemaker; the workshop would be carried by several.

Ravya was encountering a different tension at a community learning centre. The centre had moved away from rigid grades and grouped children according to age and learning level, allowing those with gaps in formal schooling to rebuild their foundations. A teacher described the atmosphere simply: "We have a lot of fun here."

That flexibility became harder to protect during examinations. Families wanted visible improvement on report cards, and teachers sometimes had to suspend level-based learning in favour of class-specific drilling. The centre was continually negotiating between long-term understanding and the next examination.

When Ravya later looked back on her return visit, the moment she remembered was not a formal teaching strategy. A difficult passage described rabbits with unusually long ears. The children began laughing, and soon everyone was holding their hands above their heads to make rabbit ears. For a few minutes, the lesson stopped feeling like a drill and became shared play. The moment reminded her that joy was not separate from learning; sometimes it was what allowed learning to begin.

That evening, Suraj Bansal, a Changemaker from the 2024 cohort, described a related principle from his community mental health work: support has to become reachable before it can become useful. His organisation trained young people from within their own communities to recognise warning signs, build trust and connect someone to appropriate care. These youth leaders were not substitutes for counsellors or clinicians. They were bridges into services that might otherwise feel distant, unfamiliar or stigmatising.



Learners' notes and classroom materials at the community centre gave the playbook inquiry a record of actual use.

Pavitra asked whether support worked better when situated inside a school or community rather than requiring people to travel to a central hospital. Suraj agreed that proximity affected whether people sought help at all. Manya asked how the work could remain aligned when so much was uncertain. His answer was not the certainty of one founder, but a chain of youth leaders, mentors, counsellors and team members.

For the Changemakers conducting their own outreach, the connection was immediate. An intervention did not begin when a workshop opened or a referral was made. It began with the relationships that made either of those actions possible.



The first social and emotional learning workshop in progress.

The Changemakers revise the plan

On 15 July, Maitrei conducted the first social and emotional learning workshop with Saarika, Manya, Pakhi and Vidhi. The workshop centred on rapport and self-awareness. One activity, Museum of Emotions, invited children in small groups to choose an emotion from a set of emotion cards, act it out, and encourage the rest of the class to guess what they were expressing. Through the activity, children explored recognising emotions, noticing how feelings appeared in the body, and understanding that people in the same room could experience the same moment differently.

The documentation does not turn the session into a tidy story of impact. What it does show is the shift from individual preparation to collective facilitation. A plan that had begun with Maitrei had become a shared effort, with five facilitators working together in a room full of children.

Smooth completion was not treated as proof that the session had been pitched

correctly. Feedback became part of the recalibration for the next workshop, alongside changes to age group, duration, pacing and activity design.



Maitrei, Saarika, Manya, Pakhi and Vidhi together during the first workshop.

That evening, Maitrei shared the proposed design for the following day. The activity separated an emotional reaction into three layers: the factual trigger, the interpretation attached to it and the deeper belief that might shape that interpretation. Students would then consider an alternative explanation before responding.

Jaina noticed a risk within the design. "When we talk about feelings," she wrote, "it is also helpful to mention grounding exercises, because talking about feelings can bring up trauma as well." It was a small intervention in the intervention, but an important one. A workshop could be engaging and still require a plan for what happened if the conversation became emotionally difficult. Contribution sometimes meant identifying the responsibility hidden inside another person's idea.

During this same period, Puspalata returned to her own Anganwadi centre with a changed purpose. She was not entering as an outside researcher. She was revisiting a place in which she worked every day and asking what familiarity might have prevented her from noticing.



Puspalata returned to her own Anganwadi centre with the observer's lens turned towards her everyday practice.

Former Anganwadi children asked her to repeat the action songs they remembered. Some told her, "Didi, we still remember the way you explained things." Others said they sometimes wanted to return because learning there had felt joyful and safe. Their memories helped Puspalata see early education differently. It began before reading and writing, in trust, play, safety, curiosity and the feeling of belonging.

She also began to recognise the hidden curriculum of her own work: how adults listen, whose voices receive attention, whether mistakes are met with kindness and how conflict is handled. She no longer described herself only as an Anganwadi worker delivering services. She began to see herself as a reflective practitioner learning alongside children, families and the community.

Not every effort produced an encounter. Shreya reported that a long journey to a university the previous day had ended without access to either students or teachers. She was trying government colleges next. Nothing had yet been collected, but the message recorded a part of research that a final report can easily erase: the travel, waiting and repeated attempts that precede a single usable conversation.

The evening discussion with previous Changemaker Kirti Advani gave these field notes a structural frame. Maitrei described good education as something larger than marks, memorisation or English fluency. Naisha added self-awareness, confidence and curiosity. Pavitra brought the disability-support visit into the conversation, asking what it meant for a right to depend upon the presence of one unusually committed person. Puspalata spoke about child-centred spaces and the distance she had observed between funds allocated to projects and what eventually appeared on the ground.

The conversation returned repeatedly to the people closest to children: teachers, counsellors and Anganwadi workers whose responsibilities expanded without equivalent time, space, recognition or security. The counsellor beneath the staircase and the overloaded teacher no longer looked like isolated details. They belonged to a larger question about systems that depend upon care while often failing to support the people expected to provide it.

On 16 July, the field revised Maitrei's plan again. The activity had been prepared for Grade 7. Instead, Maitrei and Daksh were given a new group of Grade 5 students and forty-five minutes. They began again with introductions and adapted the session around a ***Museum of Emotions*** activity.

The children were active and loud. Small disagreements appeared among them, and sometimes their words disappeared when the facilitators asked what had happened. Daksh admired the precision of Maitrei's preparation, but the value of that preparation lay in its ability to bend. The plan did not become a script the children were required to

obey. A different age group, a shorter period and the responses of the room changed what was possible.



Children's responses became material for revising the workshop's pacing and level of challenge.

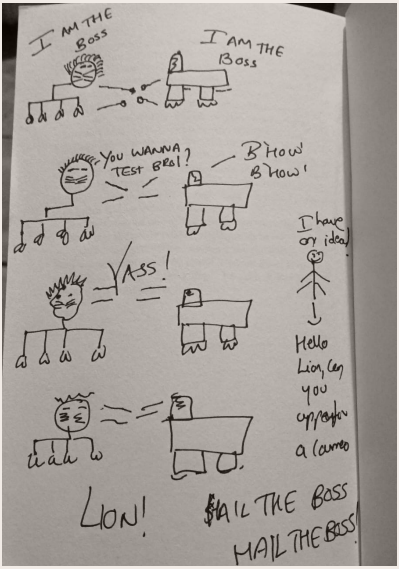
Elsewhere, the mental health group placed its field notes in a shared document and planned to compare them for recurring patterns before developing a paper. The disability inquiry had moved from one detailed visit to instruments that others could deploy. The teacher-education project had moved from questions to surveys and institutional visits.

The projects had not progressed at the same speed, nor had they produced the same kind of evidence. What they shared was a growing willingness to work together and support each other's efforts.

Did we ask why before solving?

The conversation on 16 July made that lesson visible through a deceptively simple exercise. Returning Changemaker Yatharth Garg and Khushi Garg asked the cohort to draw a way to stop a cat and dog from fighting.

Solutions arrived quickly. There was food, music, water, physical separation and distraction. Nikhila proposed lighting a small fire between the animals, then considered water, a blanket and a car as other forms of separation. Arya M. introduced a lion whose greater authority would end the argument. Manan summoned Batman. Daksh imagined several stages of intervention, from allowing the animals to become familiar with one another to introducing a shared distraction.



Arya's solution to a cat-dog fight? Add a lion.

Only after the answers had been presented did Yatharth ask whether the group had first tried to understand why the animals were fighting.

The room had demonstrated the very habit the week had been challenging: the confidence of moving from a visible problem to a solution before examining what lay beneath it. When Khushi changed the scenario from two animals to two friends, and then to two strangers, the responsible response changed as well. Context was not an

additional detail. It determined what intervention meant.

Khushi offered another distinction. Ask someone to redesign a chair and they will usually produce another chair. Ask them to design something to sit on, and the possibilities reopen.

By 16 July, the Changemakers had begun reopening their own questions. Action no longer meant arriving with an answer. It meant allowing a school to refuse, a timetable to shorten, a class to change, a colleague to identify a risk and a participant to respond in a way the plan had not anticipated.

The surveys, checklists, toolkits and workshops had left the shared board. None of them were finished. That was precisely what the week had taught: an intervention is not proof that a problem has been understood. It is a prototype through which the understanding must be tested again.

What the immersion had become

By the end of the second week, ***fieldwork*** no longer described one kind of activity. It meant waiting in a school office for permission, returning to a childhood classroom, watching a government website consume a teacher's morning, speaking with a security guard who understood an office differently from its officers, testing a simulation with children, revising a questionnaire, travelling to an institution and meeting no one, or entering a Grade 5 classroom with a workshop designed for Grade 7.

The Changemakers were geographically scattered, but the work was not solitary. Photographs, incomplete questions, unsuccessful visits and early interpretations travelled through the WhatsApp groups and evening calls. Some initiatives had reached classrooms. Some had produced research tools. Others were still trying to find the right institution, respondent or question.

This checkpoint was not a ranking of progress. It was a record of everything the cohort had put in motion.



Nikhila proved that design thinking can get a little too creative.

School life and the hidden curriculum

Falguni, Puspalata, Manan, Reeya, Urbi and Umar had come together around the invisible rules through which schools communicate power, success and belonging. Falguni's inquiry concentrated on authority, participation, gender and citizenship: who is allowed to speak, what counts as legitimate knowledge and what students learn from the assumption that the teacher is always right.

During visits with Daksh, these questions entered school corridors, assemblies and classrooms. The group observed how appearance and language were regulated, how English could be treated as evidence of intelligence, how syllabus pressure shaped teachers' definitions of a successful class and how classroom participation depended upon who was invited or expected to speak. One teacher supplemented a prescribed political-science textbook with an older edition because she felt the current examples did not adequately represent India's diversity. Another deliberately asked confident students to wait so that quieter classmates could respond, leaving the Changemakers to wonder whether this felt encouraging or exposing to those students.

Puspalata's successive visits added a different scale to the inquiry. She observed a primary school operating with one available teacher, several classes sharing a room and an older building left unusable after Cyclone Fani. At a Sanskrit Vidyapith, an underused learning corner and the language used around a child who learned differently. At the government school she had attended as a child, she found improved pathways, handwashing facilities and colourful classrooms, but also underused libraries and a largely textbook-led lesson. A child who claimed not to enjoy studying produced a detailed sketch of a bus, disrupting the easy connection between academic interest and ability.

Urbi shared examples of projects created by school children. Pavitra returned to her former school in Indore and documented the familiarity of its lunch, green spaces and support systems. Together, these visits showed that the hidden curriculum was not hidden because no one could see it. It was hidden because familiar arrangements had stopped looking like choices.



Dining-hall messages at Pavitra's former school connected nutrition advice to the ordinary environment of lunch.

The requirements that manage learning

Daksh followed a connected but distinct question: what happens when the devices intended to organise education begin consuming time that could have been used for it?

He examined notebook submissions, files, signatures, lesson trackers, approved textbooks and administrative checkpoints whose educational purpose was not always clear. At his former school, he found a system in which teachers recorded what they had taught for later review and an art teacher was expected to undertake graphic-design and other work beyond his stated role. In a government-school setting, he watched teachers wait for slow portals, complete forms through several stages and rely on independently produced YouTube tutorials to understand official systems.

Sidharth joined this inquiry, while Pavitra and Isha added layers to it. Attendance, for example, could become bureaucratic counting, but it could also help a teacher notice when a child was working, unsafe or otherwise absent for a reason requiring attention. A science journal could become copied paperwork, but careful observation and drawing could still serve a genuine learning purpose. The emerging question was therefore not simply which requirements should be removed. It was which purposes had been lost, which still mattered and whether a less burdensome design could preserve them.

A teacher toolkit becoming a playbook

Lakshmi, Prasannaa, Arya, Ravya, Priyasha, Rashika, Saarika and Abu contributed at different stages to a practical resource for teachers. Templates, lesson plans, diagnostic material, research, asynchronous tools and possible pilots were divided according to people's experience and access.

Lakshmi grounded the work in her tutoring conversations. One student performed well in structured grammar exercises and enjoyed reading but struggled to express his own thoughts in writing. Her response was not a generic activity: she considered reading around a topic, untimed journalling and gradual self-correction as a sequence through which he might develop confidence and independence.

Prasannaa began from research and his experience at Bhumi. Rashika supported templates and source verification. Arya explored tools students might use independently. Ravya considered how interactive approaches could be compared with conventional instruction, then entered a community learning centre where children were grouped by level rather than formal grade.



A familiar school meal became part of Pavitra's return to her former school in Indore.

That visit complicated the toolkit. The centre wanted to repair foundational gaps, but examination pressure and family expectations repeatedly pulled its teachers towards grade-specific drilling. A useful playbook would therefore have to serve teachers working inside that contradiction, not an imagined classroom free from examinations, limited time or parental pressure.

Educational games tested against use

Urbi, Saarika, Pakhi, Mahin, Lakshmi, Daksh and Jaina helped move the educational-games project beyond the accumulation of attractive resources.

Saarika and Pakhi discussed criteria through which the repository could distinguish itself: curriculum relevance, civic and social learning, research support and disability inclusion. Saarika approached former teachers for their perspectives. Lakshmi contributed games with learning value, while Daksh continued questioning whether games solved engagement or merely added another demand to an already crowded curriculum.

Mahin tested PhET simulations with children from government and private schools. His first attempt at open, self-directed exploration did not produce the same response from every learner. When topics were assigned and some children received an initial explanation, they returned with questions and presented concepts including buoyancy, light, projectile motion and cell structures. The experience challenged both the assumption that access to an interactive tool was enough and the assumption that one group of students would inevitably outperform another.

By 11 July, Saarika, Daksh and Mahin were developing teacher and student surveys about familiarity, institutional support, preparation time, subjects, rewards and possible exclusion. The repository was being designed to remain open to revision after the programme rather than becoming a finished collection that no user had tested.



Mahin's experiment with children from government and private schools.

Teacher wellbeing and mental health support

Pavitra, Anjana, Iqra, Maitrei, Pakhi, Nikhila, Jaina, Naisha and Keya were connected at different stages to the inquiry into wellbeing in coaching centres and schools.

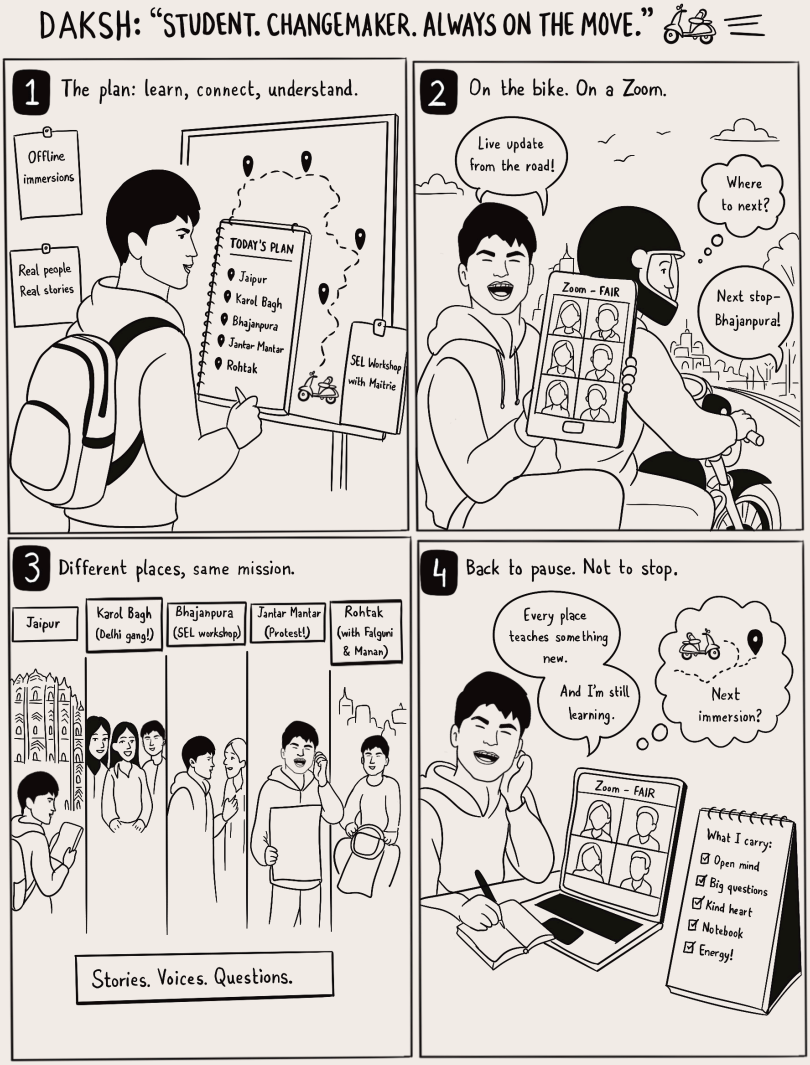
The original focus on coaching centres widened when formal access proved difficult. Pavitra continued outreach, refined questions and visited a coaching centre. Maitrei contacted several centres before reaching a government-school teacher through personal connections. Nikhila spoke with a trainer. Keya planned to work through institutes accessible to her in Jharkhand. The group was learning that the route to an honest conversation often ran through relationships rather than official permission.



Coaching centre classrooms in Jharkhand, photo by Keya.

Anjana's preliminary interviews with teachers and counsellors surfaced low pay, unfulfilled increments, weekend work, responsibilities across several grades and limited preparation for identifying emotional or developmental needs. Counsellors described substitution classes and other duties alongside their support role; one worked from a small space beneath a staircase.

These were early accounts rather than representative findings. By 16 July, the group had brought its field notes into a shared document and planned to compare them for patterns before developing a paper. Individual conversations were beginning to become collective evidence.



Daksh somehow showed up everywhere, from Jaipur to Delhi, and across almost every intervention.

Social and emotional learning inside a real timetable

Maitrei designed three workshops and approached three low-fee private schools. Two could not accommodate the work at that point: one was conducting examinations, while another already had several mandated programmes competing with academic time. A third school agreed.

On 15 July, Maitrei conducted the first workshop with Saarika, Manya, Pakhi and Vidhi. The design centred on rapport, self-awareness, emotions and the physical clues through which feelings can be recognised.

When Maitrei shared the next workshop plan, Jaina observed that inviting children to discuss emotions could surface trauma and suggested including grounding practices. Her contribution changed the ethical design of the session without taking ownership away from its Initiator.

On 16 July, Maitrei and Daksh arrived expecting Grade Seven and were given a new group of Grade Five students. They adjusted the session to forty-five minutes and conducted the ***Museum of Emotions***. The workshop became a test not only of its activities but of whether a carefully prepared facilitator could remain responsive when the age group, time and context changed.

Disability inclusion beyond the presence of a ramp

Priyasha's project developed an adapted accessibility checklist, an interview guide and a participant-information sheet. These were intended to help compare what institutions provided, understand the route through which a learner requested and received support and bring stakeholder experience into the assessment.

Pavitra's school visit showed why these different forms of evidence were necessary. The school had only one entrance ramp, no lift and no accessible washroom across three floors. It also had sensory spaces, soft classroom corners, confidential referral practices and a support room serving students with a range of learning and socio-emotional needs.

PAKHI: "GLAD YOU CAME."



Pakhi showed up for her fellow Changemaker; even illness could not keep her away from the SEL workshop.

The internal process could begin with a teacher, parent or student and could provide some scaffolding even where a family did not pursue formal diagnosis. The route to government certification and benefits, however, involved additional assessments, appointments and administrative steps. The visit demonstrated that physical access, relational care and procedural access could differ sharply within the same institution.

Priyasha invited other Changemakers, including Pavitra, Urbi, Falguni, Shreejita, Shreya and Jaina, to use the shared tools during their visits. A framework developed by one group could therefore turn several geographically separate encounters into comparable material.

Teacher preparation examined from three positions

Shreya, Naisha, Sidharth, Abu, Rashika, Keya, Manya and Shreejita worked on the question of whether teacher-education programmes prepared trainees for the classrooms they would eventually enter.

Sidharth drafted separate bilingual questionnaires for current B.Ed. and ITEP trainees, practising teachers and those who taught in teacher-education programmes. Rashika helped refine and circulate the three forms. Abu contributed experience from completing a B.Ed., while Naisha helped identify institutions and possible respondents.

Shreejita completed a school visit connected with gaps in teacher preparation, and Sidharth visited a B.Ed. college. Shreya's experience preserved another part of the process: travelling a long distance to a university and being unable to meet students or teachers, then trying government colleges instead. Access was not administrative background to the research. It determined whose experience could enter it.

Following admission, money and grievance through the system

Manan's investigation into school admissions and informal payments took him to zonal education offices and towards the Ministry. When senior officials were unavailable, an extended conversation with a security guard helped him understand the office's daily hierarchy, complaint diary and escalation process. He also witnessed one parent grievance being addressed quickly through a call to a school principal.

MAITREI BHARDWAJ: "MUSEUM OF EMOTIONS"



Maitrei, along with her fellow Changemakers, conducted SEL sessions for students at a local school.

Other conversations raised allegations about informal payments and inconsistent treatment across school categories. These remained leads rather than established findings. The evening calls continued to be avenues of reflection, collaboration and collation of information and experiences.

Sidharth, Falguni and Daksh connected the inquiry to experiences of admission fees, designated vendors and opaque institutional practices. Manan's next questions concerned fee categories, receipts, financial disclosure and what an RTI request could realistically establish. The work remained an investigation, not a verdict.

Connections to evening learning support

Kushala and Sasidhar began exploring how government and low-fee private schools might be connected to existing evening tutoring programmes, with Lakshmi contributing to the initiative and Mahin's ongoing learning centre providing a practical reference.

The group considered a peer-support model and a shareable directory through which students, families and schools could find community tutoring in their area. By 16 July, this remained an early-stage mapping effort. Its progress could not be measured by the standards of a workshop already delivered; it required understanding what support already existed before creating another programme beside it.

Early-childhood practice viewed again

During her fourth immersion visit, Puspalata returned to the Anganwadi centre where she worked, not as someone completing daily duties, but as a learner asking what children experienced there.

Former Anganwadi children requested the action songs they remembered and told her they still recalled the way she had explained things. Some said they missed the centre because it had felt joyful and safe. Puspalata began to recognise how much early education occurred through relationships, play, listening and the way adults responded to mistakes.

The visit changed how she described her work. She was not only an Anganwadi worker delivering services. She was a reflective practitioner capable of observing, documenting and changing her own practice.

Other questions still finding their form

Not every inquiry had become a formal group or field intervention. Arya intended to approach differentiation by first understanding a school's stakeholders rather than arriving with a fixed solution. Nikhila explored education for older people and raised the possibility of comparing approaches to educational quality auditing across different national systems. Jaina began examining questions around school sanitation and how infrastructure data might be interpreted. These strands remained open, awaiting the access, collaboration or narrower question that would make them workable.

Alongside the fieldwork, four conversations with returning Changemakers supplied further lenses. Aryaa Praseed asked the cohort to reconsider chaos and discipline through shared responsibility and adaptable activities. Suraj Bansal showed how trusted community youth could create bridges into mental health care without pretending to replace clinicians. Kirti Advani asked whether interventions supported frontline workers or added another task to their burden. Khushi Garg and Yatharth brought the sequence back to design: empathise, define, generate, prototype and test; before solving anything, ask whether the problem had been understood correctly.

Seen together, the initiatives were uneven in the most honest sense. Some Changemakers had conducted workshops. Some had completed visits or interviews. Some had constructed shared tools. Some had been refused access. Others were still locating the institution, relationship or question from which responsible work could begin.

The checkpoint did not convert those differences into a hierarchy. It showed what the immersion had become: many people entering different parts of the educational system, returning with partial evidence and allowing the collective to change what each person did next.

Field Notes from Many Indias

The preceding sections have already traced the immersion chronologically: where the Changemakers went, what they encountered and how their plans changed. To tell that sequence again would make the fieldwork feel more orderly than it was.

What remained in the shared archive was different. It was the detail that did not fit the chronology: a requirement whose purpose was disputed, a method abandoned at the school gate, an image that raised a question without answering it, a visit conducted while classes were closed, and work that continued after the apparent end of the week. These fragments matter because they complicate the larger story without repeating it.

What a requirement is for

Daksh's concern with institutional requirements began with a familiar object: the school notebook.

In his account of Grade Twelve humanities, many students maintained notebooks for much of the year but stopped using them for revision around November, turning instead to consolidated guides. Twenty-mark practical files could become exercises in stationery, decoration and presentation rather than inquiry. In Economics, he observed that privately published guides often displaced the prescribed NCERT text. Margins, stamps and signatures made compliance visible even when learning was harder to locate.

A photograph of a class tracker made the density of this accountability visible. The sheet recorded the content taught, resources used, pupils present or absent, homework assigned and signatures from the class teacher, coordinator and school leadership. One page was expected to serve several audiences at once.

The discussion prevented the cohort from treating every record as pointless. Isha distinguished between a science journal used for genuine observation and one reduced to copying a model entry. Moving a requirement online would not repair it if the underlying purpose had already been lost.

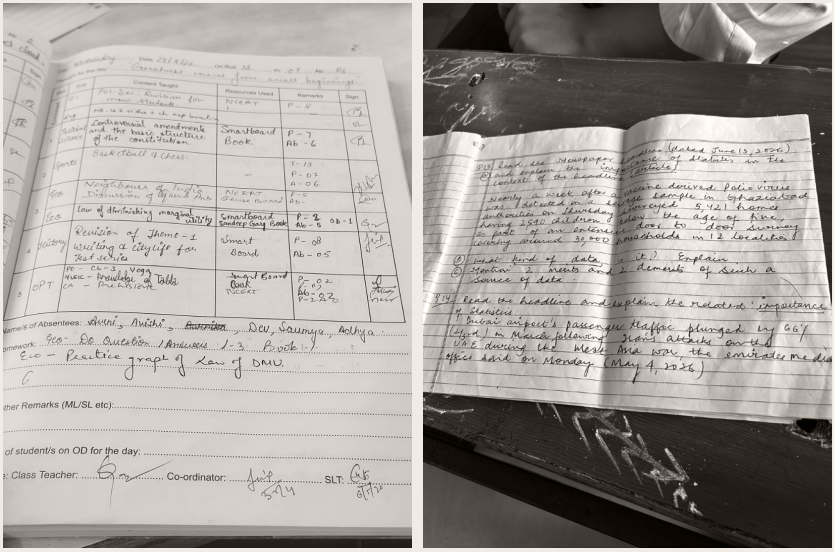
The question therefore became more precise: what action does this record make

possible, and who uses the information once it has been collected?

A brief visit to another school offered a counterexample to writing as empty compliance. An Economics teacher told Falguni and Daksh that she wanted notebooks, assignments and examinations to reflect students' own thinking rather than copied or AI-generated responses. She introduced newspaper reports into lessons and assessments. The photographed material included questions about vaccine-derived poliovirus, international passenger traffic, the 2026–27 Union Budget and a report on the transmission of Reserve Bank of India rate cuts.

The photographs do not establish how students experienced the work or what they learned from it. They show that a notebook or examination can be connected to the world beyond the textbook when a teacher chooses to use it that way.

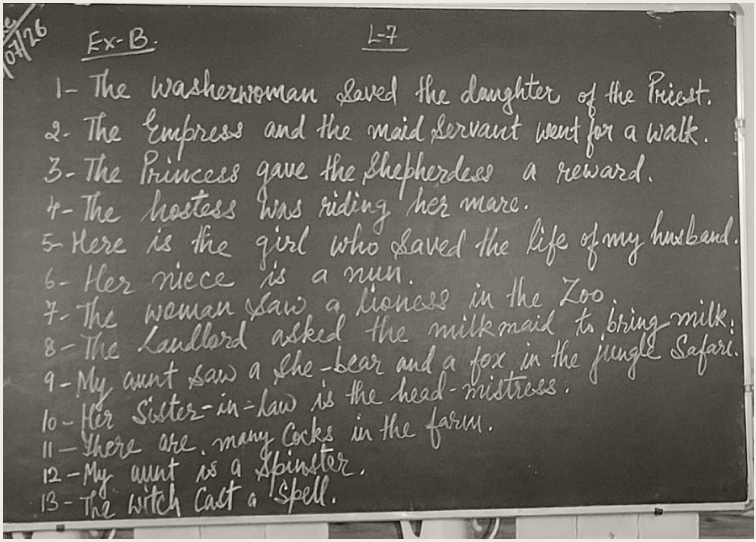
Student responses to Economics assessment documented during Falguni and Daksh's visit showed how current news became material for statistical and economic reasoning within the formal curriculum.



An examination paper and a learner's response, documented later during immersion, made assessment's institutional consequences concrete.

Another photograph held a smaller but revealing detail. An English grammar exercise on a blackboard used words such as ***washerwoman***, ***priest's daughter***, ***empress***, ***maid***

servant, ***princess***, ***shepherdess***, ***hostess***, ***husband*** and ***headmistress***. Without the lesson or teacher's explanation, the image cannot support a judgement about pedagogy. It can only show how gender and social roles may enter an apparently neutral language exercise.



A grammar exercise showed how gender and social roles can enter apparently neutral language work.

Requirements also operated above the classroom. Daksh described a school in which proposals passed through several layers of local and central leadership. A plan involving an outside food vendor stalled because no level wanted to carry responsibility for a possible food-safety incident. The decision was not irrational, but the chain distributed responsibility so widely that it also made action difficult.

Access changes the method

Falguni initially hoped to shadow two pupils across a school day, one before lunch and another afterwards, and deliberately did not want the school to select only its most visible or highest-performing students. Concerns about parental permission made that approach difficult. She therefore relied more heavily on observation and conversations with adults.

Her choice of Social Studies came partly from her own experience of memorising the subject. She wanted to understand whether discussion might create a different relationship with it. Her inquiry also widened the meaning of language access. English could affect not only who sounded articulate in class but who entered projects, science fairs, competitions and other spaces in which talent became publicly visible.

When several Changemakers encountered similar barriers, the F.A.I.R. team prepared a common permission letter that could be adapted for different institutions and returned on official letterhead. It was a modest administrative response, but an important one. Research design was being shaped not only by the question but by what an institution required before allowing the question to be asked.

The mental health inquiry encountered access as a form of evidence. Early conversations suggested that teachers in coaching settings were expected to motivate attendance as well as teach. Scholarship students could receive additional monitoring of grades and participation. "Academic counselling" sometimes referred primarily to group guidance and motivation rather than confidential, individual support.

These were preliminary accounts, not findings about an entire sector. What became clearer was why candid access was difficult. Mental health language could provoke defensiveness, while commercial institutions had reputational reasons to control what outsiders heard. The team discussed widening the inquiry to schoolteachers, using personal introductions, approaching teachers informally near coaching centres, seeking connections through older pupils and adding scaled questions to help compare qualitative responses. Trust was not separate from the method. It determined whose experience could enter the evidence.

Maitrei encountered another version of this distinction at a school she remembered visiting in Grade Six. She was surprised by how substantially the infrastructure had improved. During her later attempt to secure permission, however, she saw a routine POCSO-related review being conducted largely through documents and conversations with staff. It left her with a methodological question: if something were wrong in a child's lived experience, would a paper-based review be capable of finding it?

Manan's notes from the education offices contained similar limits. He visited two zonal offices, heard that dozens of complaints could arrive in a day and found that posted hours did not always describe when the relevant officials were actually available. He was refused entry to the Ministry and was told that it dealt with policy rather than individual school grievances. The volume of complaints showed activity; it did not reveal the quality of resolution.

The calls also contained serious personal accounts and allegations involving admissions, vendors, payments and institutional wrongdoing. They were important as leads, but they were not independently established. Exhaustive fieldwork does not require converting everything heard into a finding. Sometimes the responsible record is that a claim was made and remained unverified.

Care travels through people and procedures

The fuller notes from Pavitra's disability-inclusion visit added details that the chronological account could not hold.

The campus contained three schools and a teaching hospital. The school buildings had three floors, while one support office coordinated work across the schools. Anonymous feedback boxes were placed around the campus. At the same time, pupils were encouraged not to become "complaint boxes" themselves: they were asked to offer solutions and support one another's learning. The phrase carried both possibility and tension. It invited agency, but it could also make the institution responsible for ensuring that a legitimate complaint was not mistaken for unhelpful behaviour.

Confidentiality was treated as a practice rather than a general promise. Teachers were asked to recognise concerns and make referrals, but not to discuss pupils in staff rooms or student spaces. The coordinator described privacy as especially important for families in joint households and for girls whose diagnoses could expose them to wider social judgement.

Identification was not intended to depend on one classroom incident. Shadow teachers could observe a pupil for approximately a month across the spaces in which the child participated before presenting their observations to the family. Recommendations were then tested and adjusted because an accommodation suggested in a clinical report did not automatically work in a classroom.

The formal route to recognition introduced another threshold. A private diagnosis could guide support but was insufficient for official disability certification. Benchmark disability is defined at forty per cent or above; the UDID process could involve government assessment and review by a medical panel. A service described as free could therefore carry significant costs in travel, missed work, repeated examinations and disruption.

Pavitra thought specifically about families for whom these costs would accumulate differently: single parents, daily-wage workers, parents who were themselves disabled and families supporting more than one disabled child. Procedural access was not achieved merely because a form existed.

Anjana's preliminary conversations exposed a related problem within staffing. Some teachers associated their expanding responsibilities with the implementation of the National Education Policy but did not feel that equivalent structural support had followed. Secondary teachers described unclear Trained Graduate Teacher (TGT) and Post Graduate Teacher (PGT) boundaries and difficulty moving across grades and academic levels while retaining subject specialisation. Visible behavioural or academic concerns were more likely to generate a referral than less familiar emotional or neurodevelopmental needs.

Isha recalled municipal-school teachers spending substantial time telephoning families and, in some cases, making home visits. Some absent children were helping in family shops or roadside tea stalls. Teachers sometimes interpreted families' response to free schooling as evidence that it was valued less, even where the campus had received substantial scheme-funded resources. Isha offered this as an account of what teachers believed, not as a general verdict on migrant or low-income families. Attendance contained a social history that the register alone could not explain.

Details that resist a simple verdict

Puspalata's complete reports preserved the kind of detail that prevents an institution from being reduced to a single description.

During her first school visit, several children were absent because of a wedding in the village. The absence was contextual, not automatic evidence of disinterest. Two cooks were preparing the midday meal. Practical science activities were reportedly rare because one available teacher was carrying the academic and administrative work of the school. Before taking photographs or speaking with children, Puspalata explicitly asked permission.

At the Sanskrit Vidyapith, a child who struggled during her interaction had recently spent approximately a month in hospital. That context did not resolve his learning needs, but it made the speed with which he had been publicly labelled more troubling. Puspalata connected the encounter not only to academic support but to the emotional wellbeing of children, teachers and non-teaching staff.

The children spent nearly an hour drawing. Their sustained attention contrasted with quick conclusions about academic interest. An official noticeboard stood on an outside wall and displayed little of the children's own work. Puspalata was told that enrolment had been declining, although the available record did not provide the figures needed to explain why.



A welcome display at the learning centre formed part of the environment Ravya was learning to read.

At her former school, eighty-six pupils were enrolled and seventy-six were present on the day of her visit. A teacher described children as uninterested in studying. Puspalata's response was to ask whether relationships and teaching methods helped produce what adults subsequently called a lack of interest. In a science lesson, the children answered "Yes, Ma'am" when asked if they understood, while several appeared distracted. The chorus satisfied the immediate question without necessarily revealing comprehension.

She also noticed missing toilet signage and library spaces. As she prepared to leave, pupils asked, "Ma'am, when will you come again?" The question offered no academic metric. It suggested that attention itself had been experienced as meaningful.

Her return to the Anganwadi supplied a practical response to different learning speeds. She described using songs, stories, games, movement, conversation and repeated practice so that children could participate without being made to feel deficient. Documentation, she realised, was useful when it preserved these adjustments, exposed patterns and helped her revise her own practice. It was paperwork only when separated from reflection.

Seeing School without its Students

Umar's visit to Budgam, Kashmir, requires its limitation to be stated first. It took place during the summer vacation. Regular classes were not in session. His notes were based on an infrastructure walkthrough, one teacher interview and brief conversations with a few pupils who were present. They cannot describe the ordinary life of a functioning school day.

Within those boundaries, the visit recorded several concerns. The teacher reported declining enrolment but could not provide annual figures; Umar therefore marked the registers as a necessary follow-up rather than presenting an unverified number. The school had no library, quiet reading corner, dedicated art space or computer laboratory. Computers had not entered the curriculum, and the subjects taught in practice appeared concentrated around English, Mathematics, Urdu, Science and Social Sciences.

A few pupils had drawing books purchased privately. Umar noticed that the drawings were similar in style and subject. The teacher interpreted this as a question of access rather than ability: without art instruction or varied reference material, children had fewer visual possibilities from which to work. Where additional books were available, teachers sometimes bought them themselves.



Student art was present but not always given an active place in the school's daily learning.

Government textbooks were present and current. Some material intended for younger children, however, appeared physically poor and less inviting to use. Umar also noticed a mathematics activity designed for group work being completed individually. The curriculum had included collaboration in its design, but the collaborative structure had disappeared in delivery.

A nearby private school offered art support and a wider range of subjects. It also lacked a reading room. The comparison therefore did not produce a clean division between a deficient government school and a complete private one. Different provisions appeared in different combinations.



A public display of student work complicated any simple division between government and private school environments.

Umar's own report called for a return during the academic term, examination of three to five years of enrolment registers and a wider sample of schools. Its strongest quality was not certainty. It was its record of what this particular visit could not establish.

After the novelty of a game

The educational-games inquiry kept returning to the difference between curiosity, enjoyment and learning.

Daksh observed that entertainment could lead someone voluntarily towards knowledge: ***Percy Jackson*** might provoke an interest in Greek mythology, while a historical game such as ***Kingdom Come: Deliverance*** might lead a player towards medieval history. Saarika distinguished this incidental learning from games intentionally designed around educational outcomes, including adaptations such as ***Minecraft Education*** and ***Assassin's Creed Discovery Tour***. Mahin noticed that even children with very limited direct access to phones recognised Minecraft and Roblox.

Recognition did not mean that a resource belonged in a classroom. A B.Ed. trainee interviewed by Jaina argued that games could be integrated into History and Geography through role-play, stories and local enactment, and into moral or life-skills education without becoming preachy. The trainee did not regard time as the central problem if play formed part of the curriculum rather than an additional activity. Jaina retained the harder questions: what incentive did a teacher have to prepare the activity, and where would experimentation time come from?

The implication was selective. A repository became useful only when a teacher could connect a game to a specific learning purpose. Quantity was not quality.

Mahin's later reflection added texture to his simulation trial. Once learners received an intelligible starting point, some returned with written questions and presented ideas involving buoyancy, light, projectile motion, cells and membranes. The important change was not simply that they had been given a digital resource. They had been given enough structure to begin questioning it.

Sasidhar's notes record a similarly early moment at a U&I centre: children responded with excitement to the introduction of gamification, and centre leaders were open to continuing the experiment with him. The record stops before any outcome is documented. Willingness to try was the beginning of evidence, not its conclusion.

The field returned to the evening room



Arya Praseed, 2025
Changemaker, Founder of
The Maitri Arha Foundation



Suraj Bansal, 2024
Changemaker, Founder of
Voice of Youth



Kirti Advani, 2022
Changemaker



Yatharth Garg, 2022
Changemaker

The evening conversations did more than collect updates. They gave the fieldwork additional lenses through which to be read.

Isha returned to an experience from her own early teaching. Pupils had complained about her because they missed a popular history teacher. In the staff room, the complaints were initially interpreted through stories of rivalry between adults. Only later did she understand the children's response differently. Pupils were reading the relationships around them, including tone, consistency, dress, favouritism and staff alliances, and learning whether authority could be questioned safely. The hidden curriculum was not confined to formal rules. It included the stories adults told about one another.

Returning Changemaker Aryaa Praseed described education as a process of self-

discovery supported through facilitation and mentorship. Her earlier work in a Udupi community had grown from a small camp to a much larger group supported by only a few volunteers. Children eventually took responsibility for parts of field trips and group life. A three-year mentoring model for pupils in Grades Seven to Nine combined monthly sessions, individual mentors, workbooks and youth-designed community projects, with some former Changemakers later returning as volunteers.

Aryaa also recalled children from the community being seated separately during a meal at a temple, which she understood as caste discrimination. On a later occasion, some of those children volunteered to serve the meal, arriving early and continuing even when it reduced their own time to eat. The story did not turn service into a simple answer to discrimination. It showed young people choosing a public role in a space that had previously placed them at its edge.

Suraj Bansal's account of community mental health work added another distinction: a safe space did not always need to announce itself in clinical language. His organisation used school sessions addressing gender, bullying, harassment, examination pressure, suicide prevention and parental expectations, and employed mixed-gender sport as another route into relationships and wellbeing.

He described the difference between a community mental health centre registered on paper and one functioning in practice. Policy change, in his account, depended upon incremental evidence, witnesses and repeated engagement rather than one dramatic intervention. Funding restrictions could limit what a grant was allowed to support, while schools hesitated to surrender a scheduled period for mental health work.

Previous Changemaker Diksha challenged gaps in the work, including its early emphasis on men and limited expertise around disability and neurodivergence. She also asked what sustained the frontline workers expected to hold other people's distress. Suraj spoke about boundaries around his weekends and his own relationship with a counsellor. Care required infrastructure for the caregiver too.

Kirti Advani's conversation widened the meaning of educational infrastructure. A playground could affect attendance. Sanitation could determine whether a child enrolled or remained in school. Data systems, teacher preparation and retention were no less infrastructural than a building. A December examination in a place where children were too cold to write revealed that a uniform calendar was itself a material decision.

The discussion moved towards whose aspirations education legitimised. English-medium education could function as family status; an activity such as horse-riding could supply elite social capital. Pavitra asked whether success had to mean leaving one's community, or whether building a worthwhile life and contribution within it could be

enough. Naisha questioned an education that produced credentials and human capital while leaving little time for independent thought.

Kirti spoke of children from migrant sugarcane-working families repeatedly losing continuity because schooling had to move around the labour upon which the household depended. She described schools in which damaged classrooms existed beside a carefully maintained head teacher's office. She also named the "performance of poverty" sometimes demanded by funders: institutions could feel pressure to produce the expected visual evidence of deprivation before receiving support.

This had consequences for photographs. Ramit explained why 8one resisted staging an exaggerated before-and-after story. Kirti described how cost-per-beneficiary funding could reward visible reach over slower institutional work. In her account of Rocket Learning, unbranded activities travelled through government WhatsApp groups; advance prompts, photographs from peers, district recognition and changes in message timing were used to support participation without placing an NGO's identity at the centre.

The conversation also returned to the ***poshan–padhai*** divide in Anganwadi work: nutrition and preschool learning were spoken of as separate responsibilities even though one worker held both. Delayed honoraria and inadequate rent support could leave workers contributing their own money to keep a centre functioning. Puspalata described gaps between what a contracted project appeared to promise and what was visible locally. Kirti cautioned against locating the failure only in an individual worker; overload and weak implementation travelled through the system.

Khushi Garg and Yatharth supplied the final design lens. Khushi began from the principle that every child was already whole and that the adult's role was to witness and support development, not continually direct it. Her examples showed children using jamun stain in a self-portrait, wondering whether aerial roots grew downward from the sky, and negotiating for ingredients during a "cooking without fire" exercise.

She organised the process as Explore, Create, Evolve and Celebrate. Yatharth connected it to the wider design sequence of empathising, defining, generating, prototyping and testing, with particular emphasis on restating a problem through "How might we…?" He criticised environments that claimed to teach design thinking while imposing rigid checklists and compressed deadlines that left no time to think.

His closing defence of drawing by hand was also a caution about artificial intelligence. Early thinking should not be outsourced before a person has struggled with the blank page. Isha connected this to the difference between directed and open play: the amount of adult control changes the collaboration, negotiation and social learning children have room to develop.

What a photograph can and cannot say

The photographs extended the field record, but only within their frames.

At Pavitra's former school, dining-hall messages encouraged whole grains, several kinds of fruit and vegetables, and reconsideration of sugary drinks. Other images showed planted grounds and substantial space for sport. These surfaces communicated institutional priorities, but they could not establish how consistently the messages shaped daily practice.

Daksh's humorous WhatsApp correction was smaller: there were sneakers and Crocs in a government school, "if only Bollywood knew." The remark punctured the tendency to picture an entire sector through one visual stereotype.



Shreejita's school visit complicated any simple account of deficient institutions.

Standalone photographs documented further institutional thresholds: St Joseph's Training College in Mannanam, a government high school in Hooghly, Birla school campuses and Preston International Academy. Iqra's photographs from Preston also showed Hindi books bearing the portrait of a public figure laid on a table. Shreejita described her teacher-education-related school visit as insightful.



The community learning centre where Ravya explored level-based learning.

The same restraint applies to images from Ravya's return to the learning centre. They show children seated on the floor in small groups, facilitators among them, and printed reading materials and notebooks in use. They give the level-based model a physical setting. They do not independently demonstrate its effectiveness.

After Shreya's earlier journey had ended without access, Shreya reached a government school in Suddhowala. This time, she was able to meet and interact with children and came away with memories she valued.



Shreya's government-school visit carried the shared disability-inclusion questions into another classroom context.

Beginnings, not findings

Several strands remained deliberately unfinished.

Nikhila was developing a protocol for conversations with young people about their educational experiences, mapping government initiatives concerned with education for older adults and considering a comparison of educational quality-auditing systems in India and Georgia. These were directions under exploration, not completed studies.

Naisha discovered that her own college department's focus on elementary education might not suit the teacher-education inquiry. Sidharth, Abu and Iqra identified possible respondents and distribution networks. Changemakers undertaking unrelated visits were asked to notice potential respondents and make introductions. The network was becoming part of the research infrastructure.

Kushala and Sasidhar were considering how schools might connect with existing evening-tutoring programmes and whether a public directory could help families locate

nearby support. Ravya had proposed comparing conventional and interactive English instruction, but the available record does not show that the proposed comparison was completed.

Jaina began examining UDISE+ data on functional toilets for girls and boys. Time allowed only preliminary exploration, and she recorded no defensible pattern. The absence of a conclusion should remain visible.

Iqra and Umar's work on education in conflict-affected Kashmir also remained at the research-design stage. The material proposes three to five qualitative interviews and explicitly refuses representativeness. Participants could skip questions, pause or stop, decline recording and request the removal of material after the interview. If distress surfaced, wellbeing took priority over completing the conversation. The order of questions was to follow the participant rather than force a prepared sequence.

Umar also drafted a set of "Climate Corners" connecting climate learning with listening, recall, communication, teamwork and systems thinking. The design allowed bilingual peer support, low-pressure participation and the option not to speak. Errors were treated as material for reflection rather than embarrassment. The draft shows fieldwork beginning to turn into design, and was proof that this is just the beginning.

The observer remains in the frame

The immersion changed not only what the Changemakers saw but the position from which they saw it.

Umar regularly visited schools through his professional work. This time, he wrote, he entered as a Changemaker rather than as a programme manager. Summer vacation limited what he could observe, but the change of role altered the questions he carried. He also valued reading what others were doing across distant settings; their work became part of his own field experience.

For Falguni, the observer's position became painful during visits to a private school in Delhi and a school described as "affordable" in Rohtak. Both leaders said corporal punishment was prohibited; at the latter, she also heard the view that adults sometimes "just have to" hit children to make them listen. She witnessed children being slapped, ridiculed and having their arms twisted. Unable to intervene in the moment, she wrote that she felt "incredibly powerless."

She had entered immersion to understand how power was exercised and success interpreted. The experience made both questions painfully concrete and exposed the

emotional tension in being told that a short field visit was not a mission to "change lives." "I realised a part of me desperately wanted to," she wrote. "That was probably the biggest reality check of the week for me."

In Tamenglong, Manipur, Arya M. met the founders of a private school and remembered the conversation as "real" and "raw." She also remembered being welcomed into their home and offered roti and paneer after a journey during which both had become unexpectedly difficult to find. The food was not decoration around the serious encounter. Hospitality was part of the relationship through which the conversation became possible.

Prasannaa recognised that he had often relied upon generic ideas gathered from articles and online research when his own classroom experience could offer more grounded evidence. He began questioning whose voices he listened to most closely: frequent speakers, rare speakers, people with higher status or those he assumed had greater expertise.

For his longer-term work, he imagined a small weekend learning space near a school community in Guindy, with digital resources, art materials and room for children to "be the Child" for anything from a few minutes to several hours. The idea joined two lessons from the immersion: proximity to a community and a wider range of possibilities from which to design.

Puspalata's reflection revealed another form of access. She had entered F.A.I.R. unsure whether her experience as an Anganwadi worker was "qualified enough" to share. Gradually, she began to understand her daily work as knowledge rather than background.

Participation itself required support. When poor connectivity interrupted her sessions, Manya and Vidhi checked on her. Recordings allowed her to return to missed material, while her family adjusted responsibilities at home and she continued through her own health difficulties. These details belong in a field chapter because access to the programme shaped who could enter the collective record.

Her conclusion was not that the difficulties disappeared. It was that growth did not wait for perfect conditions. The immersion gave her greater permission to observe, document and speak from where she stood.

PUSPALATA: "OUR FAMILY, MY SUPPORT TEAM!"



When the network disappeared, Puspalata's family showed up.

The complex reality

The field notes do not produce a national portrait. They do something more defensible.

They show a written requirement that can preserve observation or reward copying; a support office that can practise care inside a physically inaccessible building; a current textbook that can coexist with poor material quality; a government school and a private school sharing the same absence of a reading room; a photograph that can document a threshold without explaining the institution beyond it; a failed visit that can become a later encounter; a game that can provoke curiosity without yet supporting learning; and a free service whose costs are carried in travel, time and emotional strain.

The distinctions matter: presence is not use; access is not participation; provision is not support; completion is not resolution; and an observation is not yet an explanation.

The field did not give the cohort one answer about better schools. It taught them to become more accurate about what they had seen, more honest about what they had not, and more careful about the distance between the two.

Where the Map Led

Thirty-one routes through one immersion

The preceding sections have followed the immersion as it happened: visits made, permissions refused, questions revised, photographs shared and workshops attempted. This section has a different purpose. It returns to the original Initiator–Contributor sheet and traces the route taken by every Changemaker, from the place where they entered the map to the place where the immersion eventually left them. You may end up encountering observations and conversations mentioned earlier, but what the aim of this reiterations is to unveil the intended and unintended crossovers of collaboration and mutual support that is collective experience enabled.

The eight priorities identified during Reason and Rationalise had initially been translated into six working clusters. Shreya, Naisha, Sidharth, Abu, Rashika, Keya, Manya and Shreejita began with teacher education. Daksh, Saarika, Jaina and Mahin began with educational games. Lakshmi, Prasannaa, Arya, Ravya and Priyasha were grouped around a teacher toolkit. Pavitra, Anjana, Iqra, Maitrei, Pakhi and Nikhila began with mental health in schools and coaching centres. Falguni, Puspalata, Manan, Reeya, Urbi and Umar were examining hidden curriculum. Kushala and Sasidhar were considering connections with evening-tutoring programmes.

These were starting positions, not assignments. On the Canva sheet, ***initiator*** meant that someone was holding a question and helping it move. ***Contributor*** meant that someone had access, experience, information or a skill that could strengthen it. Neither word established ownership or rank. People could initiate one project, support several others and leave immersion carrying a question that had not appeared on the first map at all.

That is what happened.

The teacher-education route

The teacher-education group began with a broad concern about the relationship between professional qualifications and classroom preparedness. Its most important early decision was to avoid treating "the B.Ed." as one uniform experience.

Rashika brought the perspective of an integrated teacher-education programme and helped give the inquiry its research sequence. She mapped the movement from survey

design to circulation, interviews, compilation and a possible report. She conducted calls, helped distribute three separate forms and contributed to the interpretation of responses. At the same time, she crossed into the teacher-playbook project, working with Prasannaa on the template, research and citation checks. Her role connected the preparation of teachers with the practical resources available once they entered a classroom.

Sidharth gave the group its survey architecture. Drawing on earlier research experience, including a dissertation involving substantial primary data from teachers and students, he drafted three bilingual questionnaires: one for current trainees, one for practising teachers and one for teacher educators. He asked the group to review them through comments so that the structure would remain intact while the questions were improved collectively. He later visited a B.Ed. college himself.

His participation was also constrained by work. On one occasion, he emerged from a meeting to find a call from Daksh and twenty-five unread messages asking him to join the Delhi fieldwork. The resulting fear of missing out became a running joke.

Sidharth's work soon travelled beyond teacher education. He joined Daksh's inquiry into requirements that overmanaged student performance. He also told the cohort about organised admission networks in Agra, the "school mafia", as the story was described, and warned Manan about the risks of investigating them. His contribution was not only information. It was a reminder that institutional inquiry could have consequences for the people asking the questions.

Naisha helped sharpen the inquiry's central question: did teacher education prepare people for the classrooms in which they would eventually work? She and Sidharth initially hoped to reach a school in Noida, but permission and distance made the route impractical. Naisha therefore turned towards colleges she could access locally and interviewed B.Ed. students there.

The answers began to sound strikingly similar. A distance appeared between the promises made in course descriptions and the degree as students experienced it. For some respondents, the qualification seemed less like professional formation and more like a compulsory credential, a "necessary evil" they needed in order to enter or remain in teaching. Naisha did not treat these conversations as a verdict on every programme. They became a reason to compare what trainees, teachers and faculty said about the same course. She also contributed to the mental health inquiry, carrying questions about teacher preparedness into questions about whether educators were equipped to recognise and respond to distress.

RASHIKA: THE BEST TEACHERS STAY CURIOUS



Rashika proved that lived experience can become a powerful intervention.

Their study engaged 56 stakeholders, comprising 30 teacher trainees, 22 practising teachers, and 4 teacher educators. In addition, the team conducted 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews with practising teachers and a headmaster to better understand their lived experiences and recommendations. Across all 56 survey respondents, the prevailing view was that teacher education equips educators with strong foundational pedagogical knowledge but does not adequately prepare them for the practical, emotional, and systemic challenges of contemporary classrooms.

The study surfaced several compelling insights. Across all stakeholder groups, participants described a clear gap between teacher preparation and classroom realities. Teaching was seen as far more than delivering content. It requires classroom management, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and the ability to respond to diverse student needs. As one trainee reflected, "Teaching is much more than explaining the content." School observations, internships, and mentor guidance were consistently identified as the most valuable components of teacher education, while many respondents felt that the curriculum remains overly theoretical. As one practising teacher observed, "No textbook prepares you for handling real-world crisis situations, student emotional turmoil, or administrative machinery in real time."

Participants also noted that teacher education often assumes ideal school conditions that differ from those in many Indian classrooms. Overcrowded classes, limited infrastructure, inconsistent parental engagement, and inadequate preparation for inclusive education, mental health support, and technology integration emerged as recurring concerns. While child psychology was widely appreciated, respondents called for greater emphasis on sustained field experience, inclusive pedagogy, counselling skills, and practical classroom readiness.

Manya's separate interviews with three practising teachers added another classroom view. One said her B.Ed. had not prepared her for technology, psychological pressure, large classes or the need for individual attention. Another felt her undergraduate experience had prepared her more than the professional qualification for conversations about bullying, substance use and sexual harassment and argued that basic counselling and psychology should form part of teacher preparation. A third called for regular syllabus review, input from recent graduates, varied pedagogies and continuing training after deployment. These were three accounts, together they showed why preparedness had to include trust, judgement and continuing learning as well as coursework.

Shreya pursued access through government institutions and schools she knew, after other attempts produced long journeys without conversations. Returning to familiar settings allowed her to speak with teachers and students rather than remaining at the level of the survey. She also contributed to Priyasha's disability-inclusion work, carrying questions from classrooms into the developing framework. Her immersion eventually included sustained teaching rather than a single visit. The children's reluctance to let her

leave at the end, described elsewhere in the manuscript, showed that her final learning about teacher preparation was also relational: readiness cannot be understood only through course content because teaching becomes real inside repeated encounters with learners.



Returning to a familiar school allowed Shreya to deepen her engagement with pupils and teachers.

Shreejita likewise used school visits to examine gaps between teacher training and classroom reality. She entered the inquiry with an awareness of government-school conditions through her father, a government teacher in West Bengal. Her field conversations then crossed into disability inclusion. Some teachers spoke of the support available to disabled learners largely through sympathy and empathy. The care behind those words mattered, but it was not the same as specialist support, accessible infrastructure or a dependable route to accommodation. Shreejita helped make that distinction visible and fed it into Priyasha's project.

The warmth that Shreya and Shreejita encountered in government-school settings prevented the inquiry from becoming another account of deficient institutions. Affection, humour and committed teachers could coexist with serious gaps in training and support. Their task was to hold both realities together.



Shreejita's visit uncovered glaring gaps in disability support in government schools.

Manya moved furthest from the group's original question. She began with documentation, teacher education and a possible comparison between education students and school students. Her efforts to reach universities and colleges were tiring and did not always produce access. The project moved through aspiration mapping before becoming an inquiry into career awareness.

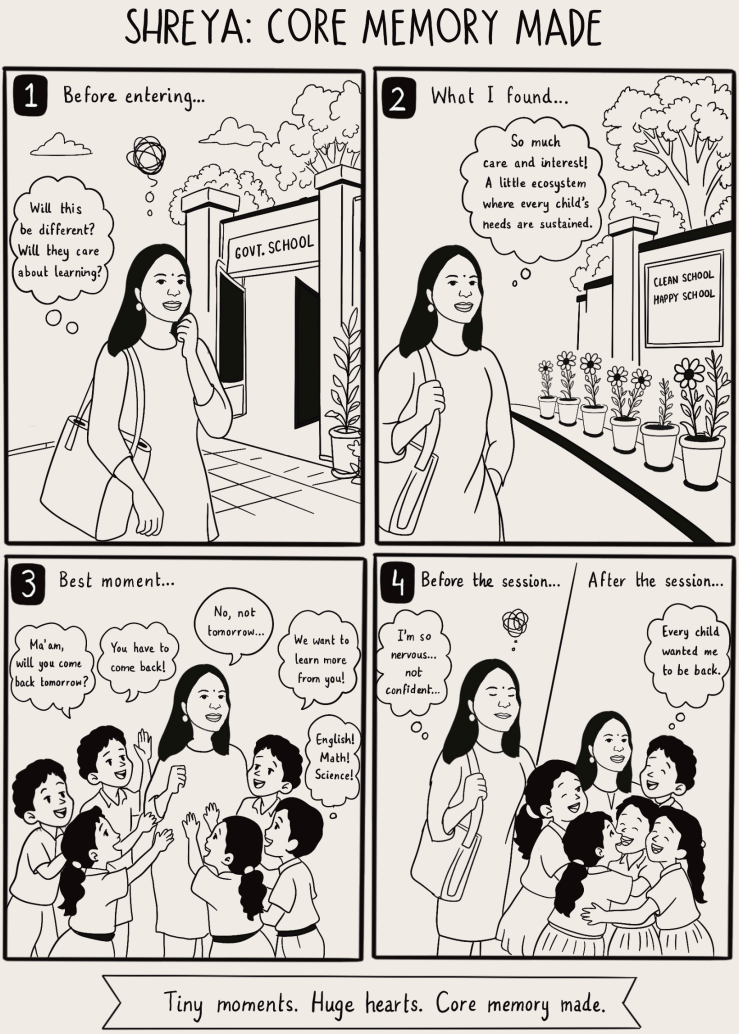
Visits to an all-girls school and an all-boys school sharpened the question. In the institutions she encountered, the girls' school offered only humanities while the boys' school offered STEM options. One comparison could not establish a national pattern, but it showed that career awareness was not simply about telling students that more professions existed. A young person's choices were already shaped by the subjects an institution offered and the futures adults made visible.



The all-girls and all-boys schools Manya visited offered different subject pathways, sharpening her career-awareness question.

By the checkpoint, Manya had obtained permission at three schools but had not yet administered the questionnaire. Preliminary conversations were already changing its design. One principal said students knew the familiar routes of NEET, JEE, CUET and UPSC, but acknowledged not knowing institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science or the National Institute of Design, and reported that the school had no counsellor. At an aided all-girls school, a teacher described sections of 120 pupils, uneven access to devices and internet, and parents asking why daughters needed career information if they were expected to marry. An online survey in one language would not reach everyone the inquiry concerned.

Saarika's experience gave the information gap a personal scale. She had bought preparation books for a design institute after the application window had closed because no one at school had explained the route or deadline. A college student from a smaller city described arriving in a larger one underconfident after a school life with few competitions, projects or extracurricular activities. Manya's inquiry was therefore not only about naming careers. It was about whether young people received timely information, relevant experiences and the confidence to act on them.



Shreya's immersion challenged myths about government schools and created bonds she would cherish for life.

Manya consequently moved towards interviewing teachers and students about their knowledge of different career paths. She also helped gather material from coaching environments, joined Maitrei's SEL fieldwork and supported the wider cohort in less formal ways. When Puspalata's connectivity difficulties affected her participation, Manya noticed her absence and reached out, allowing the programme team to respond. Her contribution to the collective was therefore methodological, practical and personal.

Keya began inside teacher education but moved across two more sensitive lines of inquiry. She contributed to the mental health work through coaching institutes and through a conversation with a retired professor teaching inside the coaching system. He did not deny its competitive pressures. He described trying to relieve some of that pressure and restore curiosity within his own classroom. The encounter allowed Keya to distinguish criticism of an institution from judgement of every person working inside it.

Keya also travelled to Jharkhand and investigated the question of locally organised coaching centre networks on the ground. While Sidharth had supplied the cohort with the story and warning from Agra, Keya pursued the issue through direct field inquiry. She did not return with a simple allegation to publish. Her work became part of a wider effort to understand how opaque admission practices, institutional influence and informal networks could be investigated without placing Changemakers or researchers at unnecessary risk.

The teacher-education group therefore did not produce one collective verdict on teacher preparation. It produced surveys, interviews, school encounters, classroom relationships, a career-awareness project and contributions to disability, mental health, administrative burden and institutional accountability.

The educational-games route

Saarika entered the immersion with experience of game-based learning research and an idea for a student-led game jam. The initial project was a repository: collect educational games and make them easier for teachers to find. She began assembling resources, drafting questions for teachers and students, speaking with former teachers and imagining a collection that could continue growing after the formal programme ended.

Growth, however, became the problem. Almost any game could be described as educational, and an unrestricted repository risked becoming another overwhelming list. Saarika moved the group towards criteria: curriculum relevance, research support, disability inclusion, social or civic learning, practical access and clarity about what part of learning a game was meant to support. She proposed structured surveys so that teachers and students could continue shaping the resource. She also crossed into

the teacher playbook and later joined Maitrei's SEL workshop team. What began as her repository became a shared inquiry into curation, use and facilitation.

Mahin supplied the project with a place to test its assumptions. Through the Akanksha Trust and its learning network, he could work directly with children. His experiments seemed to confirm a difference in self-directed learning. The private-school students responded more readily, while several government-school students struggled. Mahin first wondered whether they lacked curiosity or questioning ability. He then changed the task. Topics were assigned, initial explanations were provided where needed, and learners were given a clearer route into the activity. They returned with written questions and presented concepts including buoyancy, light, cells, membranes and projectile motion.

The children had not suddenly acquired ability. The task had stopped assuming that everyone already knew how to navigate an open-ended learning experience. Mahin carried that correction into the repository surveys, adding questions about institutional support, teacher training and the possibility that gamification might disadvantage some learners. His work changed the project from a celebration of educational games into an investigation of the conditions that make them useful.

Jaina worked across research questions rather than restricting herself to a single output. Within the games project, she helped develop the survey, interviewed a B.Ed. trainee and documented the argument that games should be integrated with curricular goals rather than added merely for novelty. She asked what incentive a teacher had to adopt a game, how much preparation and experimentation it demanded, and whether selective use mattered more than the size of a repository.

Alongside this, Jaina began a preliminary analysis of school-sanitation data, examining the distribution of functional toilets for boys and girls. Time did not allow a full study, but the attempt opened a distinct infrastructure question. She also contributed questions to Manan's institutional visits, joined the disability and mental health strands, and reminded Maitrei's SEL team that activities involving emotion could surface trauma and therefore required grounding and safeguarding. Her work demonstrated that contribution could mean improving the questions and boundaries of several projects rather than claiming a single one.



Keya became the cohort's in-house investigator, uncovering the realities of Jharkhand's education ecosystem.

Daksh began in the games group, offering questions for a professor involved in game development and helping build the teacher and student surveys. The field then drew him elsewhere. A return to his own school raised questions about railings, teacher trackers, work outside formal job descriptions and the role of examination patterns in mediating knowledge. Visits with Falguni connected those details to hidden curriculum. Observation of a slow government portal exposed the time absorbed by digital administration.

These experiences consolidated into Daksh's individual inquiry: the requirements that claim to organise student performance while sometimes constraining learning. Attendance rules, notebooks, sign-offs, projects, prescribed formats and verification processes became parts of a larger question about whose interests these tools served and what happened when their administrative function displaced their educational purpose. He decided to take that work forward through his thesis.

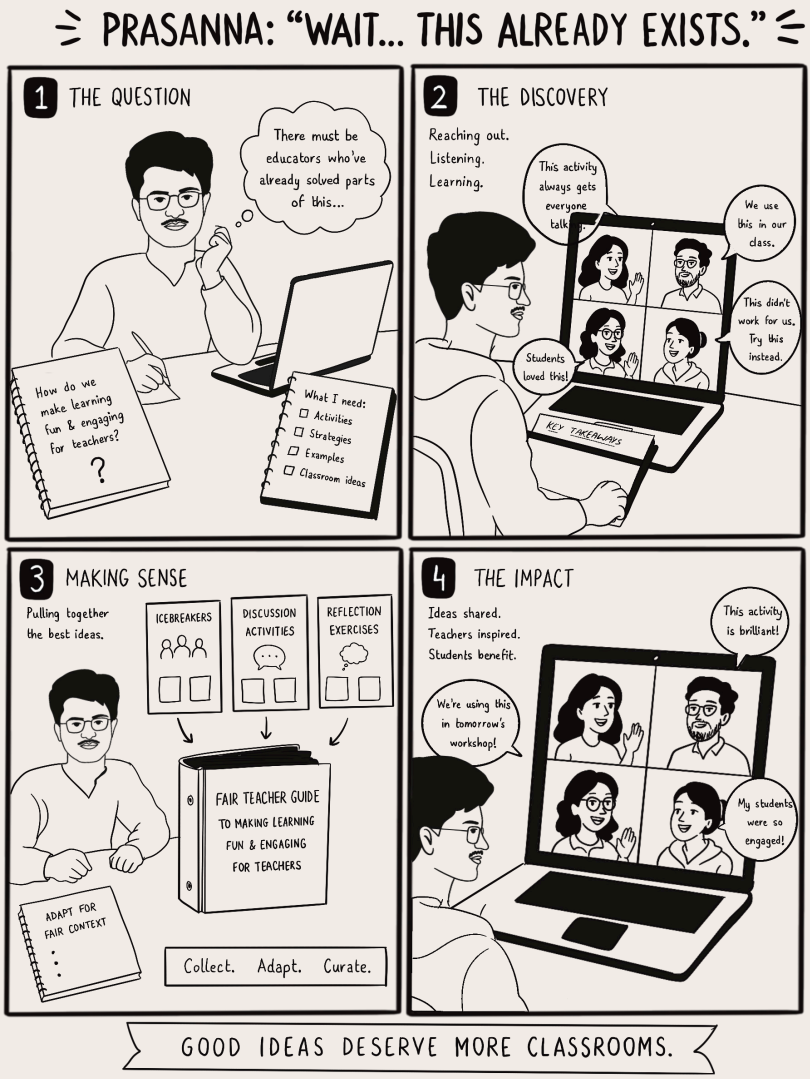
Through this observations and research he found that the decline of social science education is driven less by curriculum design and more by the incentives embedded within the education system. Stakeholders are rewarded for compliance, examination performance, and administrative outcomes rather than critical thinking and meaningful learning. This on-going inquiry went on to argue that lasting educational change depends on aligning institutional incentives with the goal of fostering critical thinking and meaningful learning.

Daksh still continued to contribute elsewhere. He joined Maitrei for the second SEL workshop, helped the games survey, supported Manan's donations inquiry and brought observations into Falguni's hidden-curriculum study. His final project was individual, but the evidence that shaped it was collective.

The teacher-playbook route

Lakshmi and Prasannaa began from experience teaching English. Lakshmi's tutoring had shown her that a learner could perform well in structured grammar exercises yet struggle to express an original thought in writing. She experimented with reading, journalling and self-correction as a route towards independent expression. Prasannaa brought classroom and fellowship experience from Bhumi, where he was involved in preparing fellows for government-school work.

Together, these experiences offered a concrete beginning for a teacher playbook. They also created a limitation. A resource intended to help teachers make learning more engaging could not quietly become only a guide to teaching English. The group recognised that its own proximity to one subject was narrowing the intervention.



Prasannaa proved that meaningful contributions don't always require being there in person.

Lakshmi continued to contribute lesson plans for Grades Five to Eight and material for

tutors, but she also moved into the games repository and evening-support project. Her examples of chess, Minecraft and independent exploration helped connect game-based learning with the playbook. Her movement across projects widened the idea of engagement beyond a particular language lesson.

Prasannaa led the plan, templates and sample lesson design. He contributed secondary research, asynchronous material and lesson plans intended to reduce the preparation demanded from a teacher. His later reflection extended beyond the immediate resource. He imagined a low-risk weekend learning kiosk in Madivinkarai where children could encounter digital resources, art materials and a space in which they were permitted to feel fully alive. It remained a future possibility rather than an announced intervention, but it showed where his thinking had landed: proximity to one community combined with a broader palette of ideas.

Arya contributed to the playbook's asynchronous resources and brought experience in differentiated instruction. From the beginning, however, she was wary of arriving with a fixed intervention before understanding the people around it. Her move from Chennai to Manipur made that caution decisive. The context for which she had imagined the work no longer existed.

Arya therefore shifted towards a stakeholder-first study of schooling in Manipur. She prepared digital forms and printed questionnaires, but prospective respondents were uncomfortable with the survey format. She adapted by holding short informal conversations with three private-school teachers, a community-development worker, two school funders, a government-school staff member, two school leaders and a parent. Because she had not yet visited a government school, she treated concerns about staffing, infrastructure and public spending as stakeholder accounts requiring further examination, not as established findings.

The conversations also showed why locally founded private schools had expanded in some villages. Some reduced the need for children to travel to distant towns or live far from home. At the privately run village school where Arya worked in Noney district, about seventy per cent of pupils were hostel residents sponsored by Sunbird Trust and received accommodation and three meals, while classroom routines remained largely traditional and rote-led. Her "almost survey" became a lesson in method: when the instrument closed the conversation, relationships reopened it, but the evidence still had to be described at the scale at which it was gathered.

Ravya was expected to pilot parts of the teacher playbook and contribute experiments and diagnostic material. Her background in economics made her cautious about presenting herself as an English-teaching expert. Securing permission was difficult, travel was interrupted by the Mumbai rains, and her initial comparative trial proved too ambitious

for the available access.

She began instead with a learning centre and children she could reach through tutoring. There, she observed a flexible, level-based programme repeatedly pulled back towards class-wise examination drilling by parental expectations. During one reading session, a difficult passage about rabbits became a room full of laughter and improvised rabbit ears. The moment did not validate an entire teaching method, but it reminded Ravya that engagement could emerge through relationship and play. Her work landed in a smaller, more honest pilot rather than the large experiment first imagined.

Priyasha was initially placed in the playbook group, but she arrived with a separate disability-inclusion inquiry connected to a larger British Council project. Her first question concerned higher education: when a disabled student requests support, what actually happens inside the institution? The cohort's access was stronger in schools, so she revised the setting rather than forcing the original design.

Priyasha, Pavitra and Iqra adapted an existing inclusion framework for the Indian context. With contributions from Urbi, Falguni, Shreejita, Shreya and Jaina, the project developed an observation checklist, an interview guide and a participant-information sheet. It also examined the route between requesting and receiving an accommodation. Priyasha's "homework", as the comic record playfully called it, made subsequent expert conversations more specific. Beyond conversations, Priyasha visited JNU to see how inclusion is practised, both formally and informally. She noticed that inclusion can be practised without being communicated, such as spaces for silence that not everyone knows about, or communicated without being meaningfully practised.

This shifted her focus from whether inclusive policies exist to whether they become usable when a student needs them. As she put it, "Accessibility lives in a pathway. An office can exist. A ramp can exist. A policy can exist. What matters is whether a student can find the right person, receive a proportionate response, and depend on the arrangement at the moment it is needed."

Disability inclusion had ceased to be merely a policy conversation. It became an inquiry into how policies interact with human needs, and whether inclusion actually works when it matters. She also contributed to the games project by asking whether games might address life skills and habit formation rather than merely gamify conventional content.

The playbook route therefore produced more than a toolkit. It produced lesson plans, research templates, a Manipur inquiry, a revised pilot, a disability framework and a future learning-space idea.



Falguni, Maitrei, Manya and Manan conducting the 'sting operation' to uncover the reality of mental health support provided in coaching centres.

The mental health route

Pavitra initiated the inquiry into mental health and teacher wellbeing in coaching centres. She wanted to move attention away from a purely student-centred account and ask what coaching-centre teachers and staff were carrying. The group developed a questionnaire combining open-ended questions with a sliding-scale component, conducted outreach, read existing work on suicide prevention and planned to identify patterns across the resulting field notes.

Formal access to coaching centres was difficult. The inquiry therefore expanded into schools and drew upon contributions from people outside the original group. Falguni, Manya, Manan and Maitrei visited or contacted centres of different sizes, including UPSC environments, while family accounts brought in experiences of JEE and Allen. The group jokingly described some of this improvised inquiry as "sting operations". The phrase captured its energy, not a covert research method. The material was shared with Pavitra around a common set of questions: Was there a counsellor? What kind of support existed? Who noticed when a student or teacher was struggling?

Pavitra also visited a coaching centre herself and returned to familiar school environments in Indore. Curiosity then carried her into Choithram's disability-support system, a visit more closely aligned with Priyasha's work than with her original assignment. She documented both the severe limits of physical accessibility and the relational care built around referral, privacy, sensory spaces and classroom support. She helped carry those observations into the adapted inclusion framework.

Keya's fieldwork eventually comprised eleven individual teacher interviews across ten coaching centres and two teacher focus groups in Dhanbad. Within that small sample, teachers described noticing distress through changes in communication, eye contact, attention, expression and participation. Most had received no formal training in mental health and relied on personal experience; multiple batches, workload and syllabus pressure restricted individual support. Practices ranged from clubs, faculty meetings and counselling arrangements to largely informal motivation, while students described discomfort and limited teacher access as reasons personal concerns went unspoken.

Pavitra's conversations with coaching teachers around Indore showed how working arrangements shaped care. Permanent teachers described long days combining teaching, material preparation, doubt-clearing and individual conversations, while contractual teachers moving between centres were less involved in those functions. Many teachers had once been aspirants themselves and drew on their own preparation stories, study advice and, at times, contact with parents to support learners. Across the wider field notes, counselling ranged from professional provision with waiting lists to informal support delivered by staff without specialist training. The word existed across institutions; the service behind it did not have one meaning.



The passion of the Choithram teachers helped Pavitra rediscover her love for teaching.

Her work crossed once more into Manan's inquiry. Pavitra asked whether institutional data distinguished socioeconomic and disability-related differences and contributed a structural analysis of why families participated in opaque admission systems. Her final route connected teacher wellbeing, coaching culture, disability support, public services and the pressures institutions passed on to families.

Anjana began by developing a brief tool through which teachers might recognise emotional, social, behavioural and learning-related concerns, including signs of self-harm that could otherwise be missed. The coaching-centre context raised questions about whether such a tool would be trusted or used. Anjana therefore moved towards school wellbeing and the lived experiences of teachers and counsellors.

Her conversations in low-fee CBSE schools documented low and sometimes uncertain salaries, work extending into weekends, responsibility across several grades, blurred professional roles and the expectation that teachers support students without adequate preparation. Counsellors could simultaneously manage kindergarten, take substitution periods, teach value education and work without a private room. Anjana's project landed in a grounded account of the conditions required for school-based support, rather than a checklist detached from the people expected to use it.

Iqra began within mental health and attempted to return to her former school for a wellbeing conversation. Permission was refused. Rather than treating one refusal as a statement about every school, she carried the question of institutional risk forward. She also helped Priyasha and Pavitra adapt the disability framework.

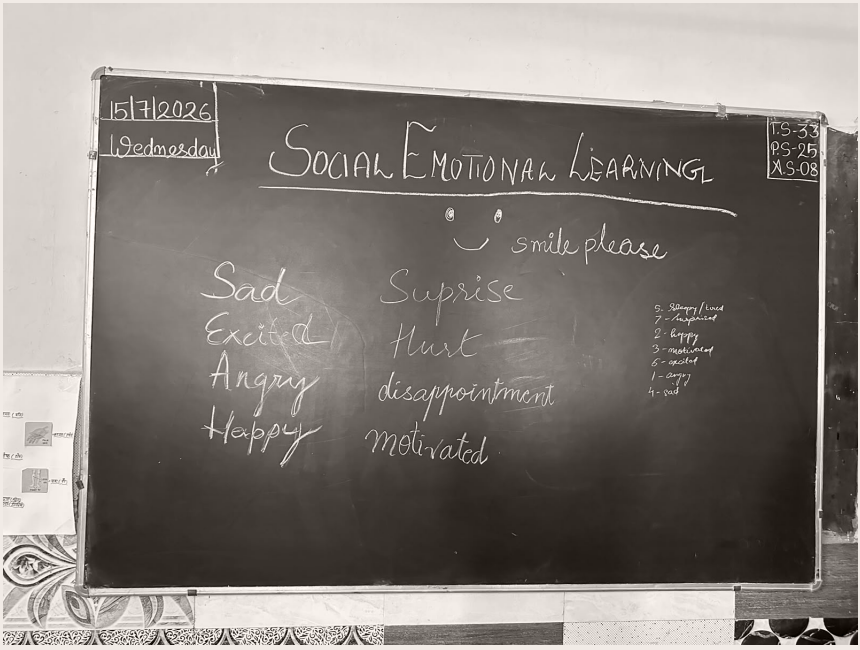
Her most substantial pivot came through collaboration with Umar. They began developing a qualitative study of education in conflict-affected Kashmir, examining disruption, power structures, instability, collective trauma and aspiration. The project included a research question, proposed paper structure, interview guide, participant-information sheet, consent provisions and safeguards around withdrawal, recording and distress.

Potential participants did not always agree to take part in the survey or interview, and logistics prevented the report from being completed within the immersion. The unfinished paper was not disguised as a finding. Iqra and Umar left with the beginnings of a longer project and a clearer understanding that a deadline could not set the pace of trust.



Iqra and Umar set out to study conflict resolution, but their first obstacle was persuading people to respond to the survey.

Maitrei initially helped contact coaching centres and reached a government-school teacher when institutional responses were limited. She then developed an individual SEL initiative consisting of three one-hour workshop designs. Seeking permission became its own field exercise. Two schools could not accommodate the work within their examinations and existing workshop schedules; a third made room.



The SEL workshop became Maitrei's individual intervention and a shared field experience for several Changemakers.

The resulting two-day sequence brought other Changemakers into the classroom. Saarika, Manya and Pakhi joined the first phase, with Vidhi. Daksh joined the next workshop. The planned age group, duration and activities changed once the team entered the room. Maitrei protected the purpose of the session while adapting its form, including the Museum of Emotions activity described earlier. Her project became an experience shared with children and a practical lesson in facilitation.

Pakhi's route was deliberately contributory. She began in mental health, supported coaching-centre discussions and then helped the games team think about how its

repository should be designed and shared. She looked for accessible presentation formats and worked with Saarika on criteria including curriculum alignment, social awareness, research support and disability inclusion. She then joined Maitrei's SEL workshop. During the donations discussion, she also contributed a personal observation about the class judgement attached to using second-hand textbooks. Her work connected wellbeing with the less visible ways status and belonging are produced in schools.

Nikhila contributed to the coaching inquiry by speaking with a trainer using the group's standard questionnaire. Her own interests, however, were already pulling towards comparison across India and Georgia. She considered older adults' relationships with contemporary education and technology, a possible exchange between students in the two countries, and the systems through which educational quality was reviewed.

Cold emails developed into an active conversation and plans for interviews between India–Georgia students. Her work consequently moved towards adult education and comparative quality systems. It was a clear departure from the mental health project, made possible by an international network that no one else in the cohort possessed.

The hidden-curriculum route

Falguni entered this group interested in the invisible rules governing participation. She narrowed her study around power and success: who held authority, what counted as legitimate knowledge, who was invited to speak and how gender, language and citizenship entered everyday school life. When direct student interviews were not permitted, she revised her method towards assemblies, noticeboards, diaries, classroom observation and conversations with teachers and leaders.

Her visits with Daksh brought these questions into focus through the correction of a student's nail paint and English, differences in assembly participation, the pressure of completing several textbooks, and teachers' attempts to make room for critical thinking. Falguni also crossed repeatedly into other work. She contributed to disability inclusion, supported Manan's investigation, offered to accompany the SEL workshops and helped gather evidence from coaching environments. Her hidden-curriculum lens became a resource other teams could borrow.



A school assembly became one of the places where participation, language and discipline could be observed.

Puspalata carried the hidden-curriculum inquiry across four days of immersion: a small primary school, a Sanskrit Vidyapith, the government school she had attended and her own Anganwadi centre. She observed staffing shortages, firewood stored in learning spaces, foundational-learning material, water infrastructure, an unused Idea Box, student art, reading difficulties and the effects of publicly labelling a child.

Her work did not reduce these schools to their shortages. She listened to teachers describe workload and scepticism about new reforms, noticed improvements made since her own childhood and recognised creativity that academic tasks did not always reveal. Returning to her Anganwadi allowed her to examine how songs, stories, movement, repetition, documentation and the treatment of mistakes formed a curriculum of their own. Her final landing was not a separate product so much as a changed identity: from a worker implementing activities to a reflective practitioner generating knowledge from everyday practice.

Manan began in hidden curriculum but soon separated out a more sensitive inquiry into school donations and admissions. He visited offices of the Deputy Director of Education and SCERT and attempted to visit the Ministry, spoke with guards and officials, studied complaint routes and began distinguishing a disposed file from a resolved grievance. Allegations about informal payments provided leads, but the field also showed him the difficulty of verifying them.



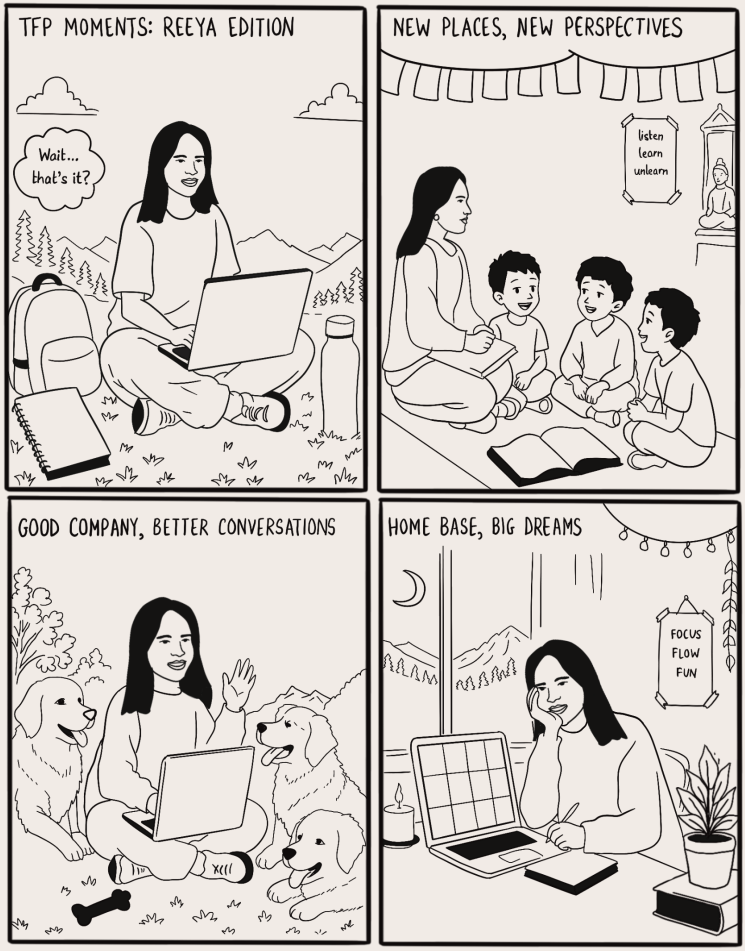
A visit to SCERT formed part of Manan's attempt to follow questions of admission, grievance and accountability through institutions.

Sidharth's Agra story and Keya's investigation in Jharkhand widened the inquiry geographically. Daksh, Falguni, Jaina and Pavitra contributed questions, experiences and structural interpretations. Manan also helped the mental health group by gathering material from coaching environments.

By the checkpoint, his project was no longer simply "investigating donations". It had become an inquiry into fee categories, receipts, admissions, grievance channels, institutional influence, possible RTI routes and the risks faced by those who challenged opaque systems. He landed with a more answerable question, not a dramatic exposé.

Reeya began without a settled intervention. She was interested in qualitative conversation and generative journalism and had possible access to remote schools in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Rather than selecting an output simply to occupy a row on the Canva sheet, she allowed her field experience, including an encounter with a Tibetan school, to become the starting material. Her landing point remained exploratory: a situated school story and a method of listening from which a more responsible question could later grow.

REEYA: LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM



Reeya experienced The F.A.I.R. Project from the tranquil valleys and insightful classrooms of Bir.

Urbi remained most consistently anchored in hidden curriculum. Her photographs of student-made models showed children explaining weather, place and community through materials. They prompted questions about which kinds of knowledge occupied public space and whether making was recognised as a serious form of expression.

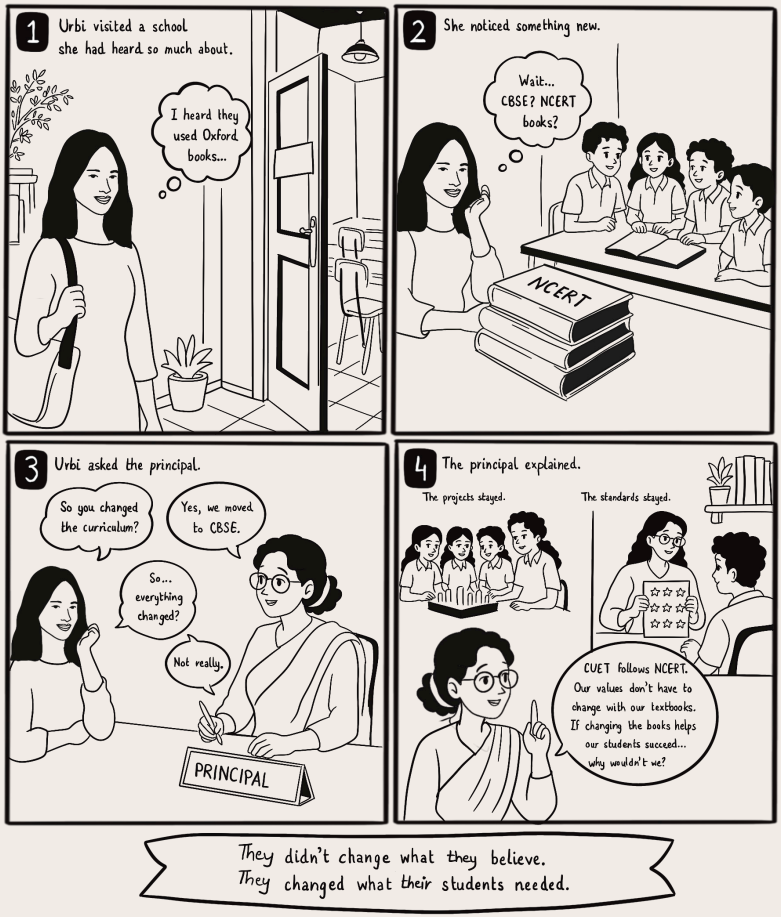
Urbi's fieldwork explored the hidden curriculum in two schools shaped by very different educational philosophies. One school drew heavily on the ideals of Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission, nurturing discipline, humility, service, and collective responsibility through everyday routines and institutional culture. The other, inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy, balanced the CBSE curriculum with a strong emphasis on creativity, intellectual freedom, arts, and holistic learning. Despite these differences, both schools viewed education as extending beyond academic achievement to include character formation and values. In both settings, students learned as much through observation, teacher role-modelling, traditions, and daily practices as they did through formal instruction, demonstrating the powerful influence of the hidden curriculum. The study also found that both schools are increasingly balancing their educational philosophies with growing parental expectations around academic achievement and career readiness, while continuing to cultivate distinct visions of what it means to be an educated individual.

The changing Canva sheet also recorded Urbi in coordinating or initiating roles around the games repository and disability inclusion. Those contributions did not replace her own field lens. They showed that remaining committed to one question did not prevent her from helping organise another.

Umar entered the field in Budgam during the summer vacation. The timing limited direct access to live classrooms, but he completed an infrastructure walkthrough, interviewed a teacher and spoke with several students. He compared a government school with a nearby private school while carefully recording what the comparison could not establish. He noted declining enrolment requiring verification, the absence of reading and art spaces, a limited subject range, uneven textbook quality and a group activity being undertaken individually. His report converted each conclusion into a proposed follow-up rather than treating a short visit as representative.

Umar also developed a Climate Corners workshop plan through Noor-ul-Kitaab, connecting climate action with the practice of listening and recognising the purpose of communication. Alongside this resource, his collaboration with Iqra on education in conflict-affected Kashmir became his longer-term project. He began in hidden curriculum, produced a school-comparison record and climate-learning design, and landed in a conflict-sensitive inquiry that joined infrastructure, access, trauma and power.

URBI: "THE BOOKS CHANGED, THE VALUES DIDN'T."



Urbi discovered that education can adapt without losing its essence.

The evening-support route

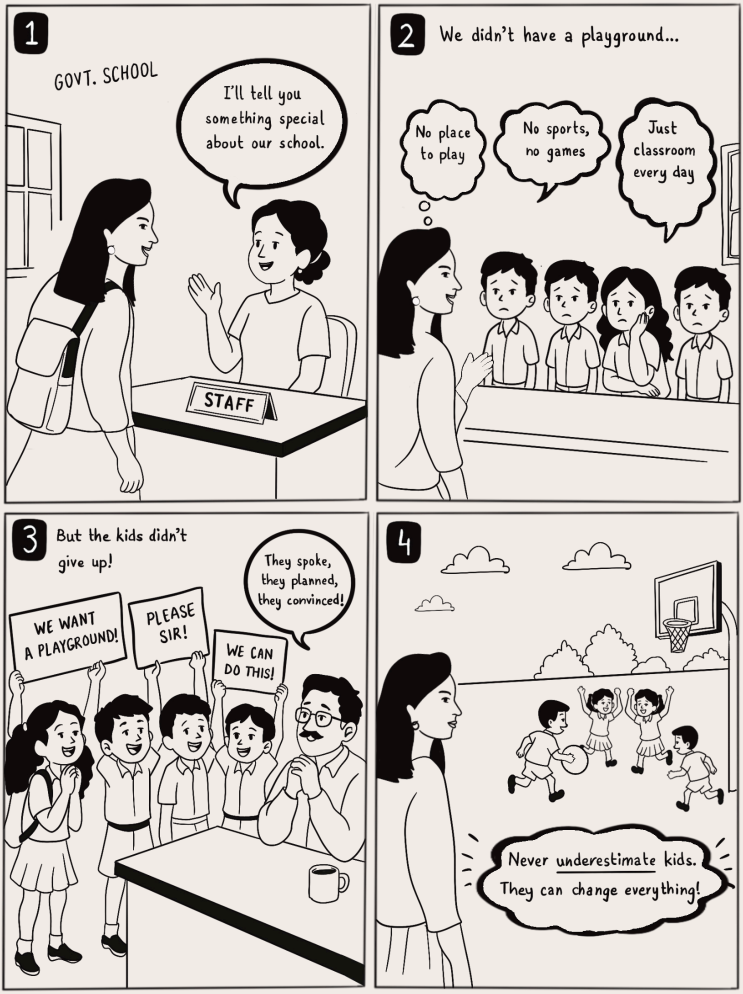
Kushala and Sasidhar began from an existing resource: evening-learning programmes already available through their networks in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Their initial idea was to connect government and low-fee private schools with these programmes rather than create another organisation.

Kushala's earlier playground story had already shown what could happen when children's requests reached an adult with the authority and willingness to respond. In the evening-support project, the same question became more practical: what did learners, families and schools actually need from an additional programme, and who would sustain the connection?

Sasidhar took the conversation to a U&I centre and introduced ideas around gamification. Children and centre leaders responded with enthusiasm and began exploring how they might work with him. The encounter connected the evening-support project with the games inquiry, but it also changed the original intervention.

By consolidation, Kushala and Sasidhar were no longer simply proposing more evening classes. They were developing a study planner with children, parents, teachers and the U&I centre. The planner was intended to help the adults already surrounding a learner coordinate support without turning the evening into another inflexible school day. Their project moved from connecting children to a programme towards designing something with the people who would have to use it.

KUSHALA: THE PLAYGROUND REVOLUTION.



Kushala's favourite offline immersion takeaway? A playground that students fought for and won!

What the map finally showed

At the checkpoint, the cohort's work existed in different forms.

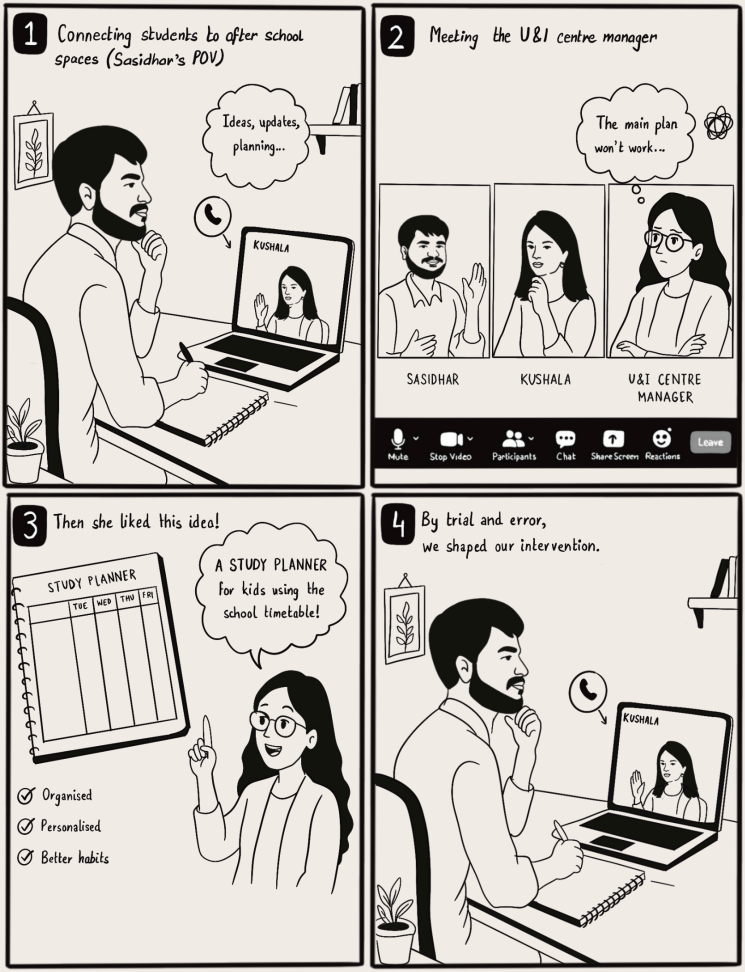
The teacher-education surveys, career interviews, sanitation analysis, school comparisons and India–Georgia conversation were inquiries intended to improve what was known. The teacher playbook, educational-games repository, disability tools, Climate Corners plan and proposed study planner were resources at different stages of development. Maitrei's SEL workshops and the learning activities conducted by Mahin, Ravya and Sasidhar were bounded experiences. Daksh's and Manan's projects examined system-level constraints without pretending that a short immersion had already changed those systems.



Adults and learners at the community centre helped turn Ravya's planned resource into a more situated inquiry.

These forms were not rungs on a ladder. A workshop was not automatically more successful than a survey because it reached a classroom. A polished checklist was not inherently more valuable than a project that changed direction after discovering a mistaken assumption. An unfinished report was not a failure when finishing it would have required ignoring consent, access or the limits of the evidence.

SASIDHAR. TRIAL. ERROR. REPEAT.



Sasidhar and Kushala found their intervention through trial and error. Turns out, detours can lead you exactly where you need to be.

That was why Isha asked the cohort to think in terms of a checkpoint rather than a final deadline. The question was not whether everyone had produced the same amount of work. It was whether each Changemaker could explain what the field had changed, what could now be claimed honestly and what the next responsible step would be.

The Initiator–Contributor sheet had made the work visible, but the immersion made its boundaries porous. A teacher-education researcher helped design a playbook. A games researcher joined an SEL workshop. A mental health initiator strengthened a disability tool. A school observation changed another person's interview guide. A story from Agra and fieldwork in Jharkhand informed an inquiry in Delhi. A connectivity problem became a moment of care within the cohort. An evening-class proposal became a planner requiring children, parents, teachers and a learning centre to work together.

No project needed to defeat another in order to matter. The most consequential contribution was sometimes a survey designed for somebody else, a contact shared across cities, a warning about risk, a question that prevented overclaiming or the decision to accompany another person into a school.

The Canva sheet had needed rows and labels so that thirty-one people could begin. The immersion needed bridges.

What emerged was not a collection of competing interventions but a shared field of effort. People could lead without enclosing the work, contribute without disappearing inside it and change direction without abandoning the collective. Better schools had begun as a set of separate priorities. By consolidation, they had become a common responsibility.

The After Parties

After the recording stopped

The formal sessions ended when the recording stopped. The conversation did not. A few Changemakers would stay behind, at first almost by accident, and the call remained open for as long as somebody still wanted to talk. There was no agenda and no official record. Some after parties lasted an hour; others stretched late into the night.

As the programme progressed, staying back became a shared custom. Mahin, Daksh, Manya, Falguni and Manan were among the regulars. Mahin was often finishing his own work late into the night, joining the conversation between tasks; his routine helped the room keep going long after a scheduled session would ordinarily have ended.

The informal space sometimes changed the formal work without leaving a record of the conversation itself. Falguni later said that an after party had helped her narrow the direction of her hidden-curriculum inquiry. The point was not what had been said in confidence; it was that unhurried conversation gave an unfinished question room to become more precise.

The group knew that an earlier cohort had kept an after party alive for more than seventeen hours, and the record became an affectionate challenge. They also discovered that Ramit would remain on the call while even one Changemaker was present. From this came the practice of "holding the fort". If someone needed dinner, a phone call or a short break, another person stayed so the room would not fall empty. Duration became a collective game rather than an individual test of endurance.

What happened inside those hours remained deliberately informal. The conversations moved from friendships, marriage, job interviews and career decisions to philosophy, law and plans to meet beyond F.A.I.R. Inside jokes accumulated. Vidhi would tease Falguni that she was "stalking" her because they lived near one another. Sidharth sometimes arrived with a horror story, changing the mood of the room and becoming one of the anticipated pleasures of the late-night calls.



Sidharth's story had the Changemakers up long past their bedtime.

The work hidden inside ordinary talk

The lack of an agenda did not make the conversations inconsequential. Puspalata spoke about Anganwadi work and menstrual health awareness. When she contacted an organisation to ask whether a nearby school could receive sanitary pads, the answer became practical support. Her lesson was simple: sometimes the distance between concern and action begins with asking.



A scrapbook memory of late-night calls, inside jokes and the people who kept the conversation going after formal sessions ended.

> "For the first time, I felt that I had truly accepted my own journey and, even more importantly, everyone else accepted it too."
>
> *Puspalata Nayak*

A conversation with Shreya, Manya and others returned to feminism: the history carried by the word, what feminist movements had made possible, and whether argument over terminology could sometimes eclipse the wider work of equality. Another began with a professor's claim, shared by Manya, that charity could create dependence. The group considered what meaningful help might look like when it was not reduced to money: using one's time, position or ability to prevent harm, make a connection or show up for somebody.

One of the longer debates separated punishment from compensation in the judicial system. Punishment could establish a public consequence, but should an affected person's compensation depend upon the sentence at all when the state also held a responsibility towards its citizens? The conversation did not close the question. It allowed several principles to remain in view at once.

Arya's decision to move to Manipur brought the future into the room in another form. The group spoke about working in a conflict-affected region, building trust with communities and learning to live inside a context that could not be understood in advance from a distant screen.

The session sparked creativity as well. Manya, caught between the structure of the formal sessions and the chaos of the informal ones, penned down a reflection on what it means when old institutions become home to new ideas. As she writes, "Coming from all the directions the new meets this old and creates the now."

The after parties became the programme's unwritten margin: a place where Changemakers met one another outside their projects, argued without having to arrive at a formal conclusion, planned meetings, shared private uncertainty and laughed until the call became quiet. Their rule was less a rule than a promise. The gathering ended only when the last person chose to leave.

Favourite Moments

What stayed with us

A pair of rabbit ears. Children calling out from a school corridor. Roti and paneer in a new acquaintance's home. A teacher saying that someone had finally listened. A survey response turning into a conversation. A refusal revealing how difficult some conversations remain.

When the Changemakers were asked to recall a favourite moment, they rarely chose a polished presentation or a completed output. They remembered the instant when the project became personal: when a learner surprised them, a stranger trusted them, an assumption gave way, or people who had first met online found themselves working side by side.

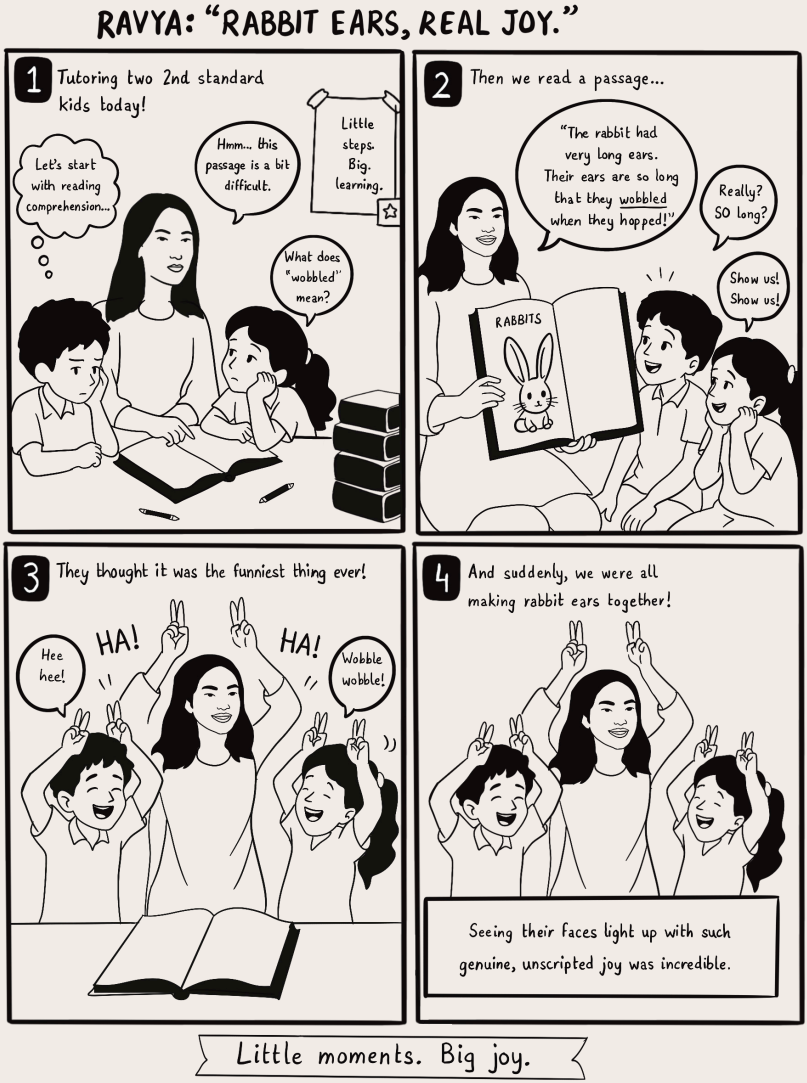
Some of these memories were joyful. Others were uncomfortable. What joined them was the presence of another person.

When learning became a relationship

Ravya's favourite moment began with a difficult reading passage. The children were struggling until they reached a description of rabbits with unusually long ears. The seriousness of the lesson dissolved. The children laughed, Ravya joined them, and soon everyone was holding their hands above their heads to make rabbit ears.

> "Seeing their faces light up with such genuine, unscripted joy was incredible."
>
> *Ravya Jain*

What Ravya remembered was not simply that the children had enjoyed themselves. It was the change in the room when learning stopped feeling like drilling and became play. The passage had not changed. The relationship around it had.



Students showed Ravya that difficult lessons don't have to feel difficult.

Maitrei's happiest memory came after the first day of her two-day social and emotional learning workshop. The work had brought several people into the same classroom: Saarika, Manya, Pakhi and Vidhi joined her on one day, while Daksh participated in the next. For Maitrei, it was also a chance to meet people from The F.A.I.R. Project face to face after weeks of seeing them through a screen.



The facilitation group after the first workshop, when online collaboration became an in-person memory.

After the first workshop, Maitrei, Manya and Vidhi were walking towards their cab when groups of students began recognising them. The children kept stopping to say hello. Maitrei was careful not to turn that affection into a claim about what the workshop had achieved. The children might not remember every activity or every idea. But, for that afternoon, they had enjoyed being together enough to remember the people who had facilitated it.

Maitrei called the encounter sweet and remembered it as her happiest moment from the programme.

Sasidhar found a similar warmth at the U&I centre. He arrived with an idea he cared about: using games, challenges and other elements of gamification to make learning more engaging.

"I wanted to introduce gamification to kids at the U&I centre."

The children's curiosity encouraged him, but so did the response from the centre's leaders. They did not treat the proposal as an outsider's finished solution. They became willing to explore it with him. Sasidhar's favourite memory was therefore not the presentation of an idea, but its reception, the moment an individual possibility became something people could begin imagining together.

Mahin's favourite moment came from the learning experiment described earlier in this book. His first invitation had been intentionally open: learners using PhET simulations could select a topic and prepare a presentation. The result was uneven. Some children knew how to begin; others did not. Mahin's initial interpretation focused on the learners. His second attempt changed the task instead.

He assigned topics, offered a structured beginning to the government-school learners, and gave them time to return with questions. They came back with doubts written down, worked through them, and presented concepts including buoyancy, projectile motion, cells and the behaviour of light.

"The presentation they gave was unreal," Mahin recalled.

His favourite moment was not effortless success. It was seeing what became possible after he revised the conditions. The children had not suddenly acquired curiosity overnight. They had been given a clearer route through which their curiosity could appear.

Shreya's memory also began with an assumption that did not survive the visit. Before entering the government schools, she had expected to find education taken less seriously than in other settings. Instead, she encountered teachers and students deeply invested in one another. She noticed the small trees and flowerpots, the clean classrooms and the interactive boards. The children knew how to connect the boards to the internet, find their favourite songs and open the digital notepad, sometimes guiding Shreya when she needed help using it herself.

She arrived anxious about whether the younger students would understand her. By the last few days, that anxiety had been replaced by attachment. When she told the children she might not return the following day, they protested. They wanted her to come back and teach them English, Hindi, mathematics: "everything."

Shreya recalled that every child wanted her to return. As she left, she found herself thinking about what a blessing it was to have such positive encounters in one's life. The favourite moment was not that the children had approved of her teaching. It was the unexpected reciprocity of the experience: she had entered hoping to offer something and left feeling

that she had received something equally lasting.

When a conversation changed the visitor

Arya's dearest memory was meeting the founders of a private school in Tamenglong and listening to the story of how they had built it. The exchange did not feel like a formal institutional interview.

> "The conversation felt very real, raw, and was absolutely fruitful, both ways."
> *Arya Mullanezhi*

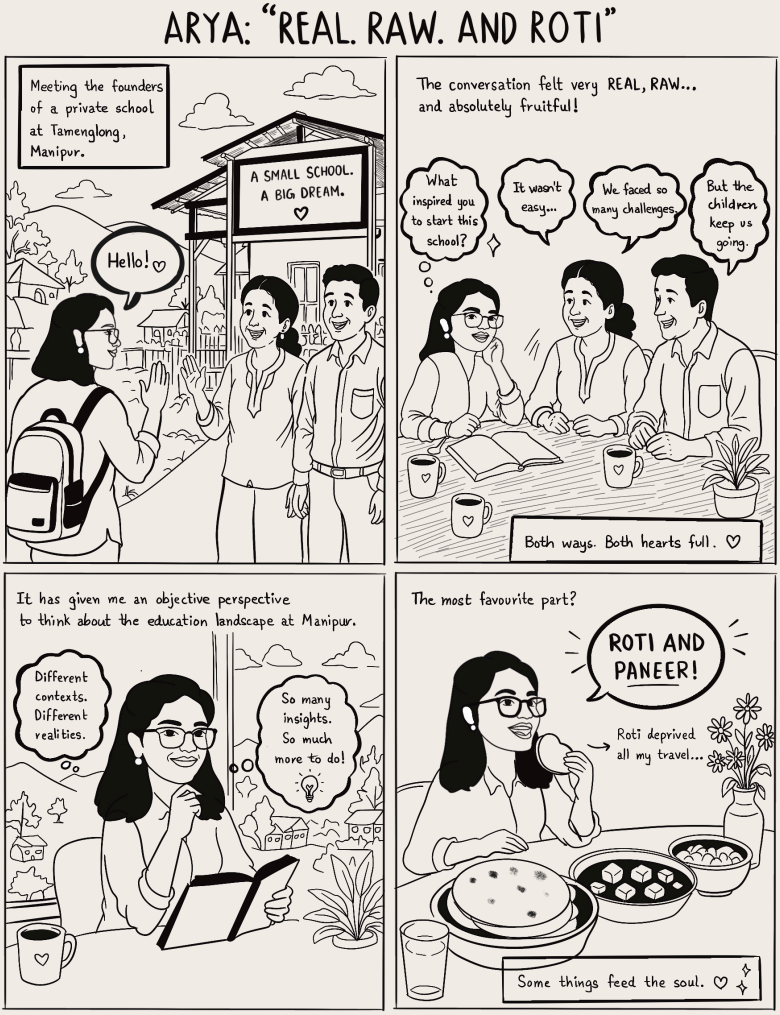
Their account gave Arya a wider perspective from which to consider Manipur's educational landscape. Yet the detail she recalled most affectionately was not part of the research at all. The founders welcomed her into their home and served her roti and paneer after a period of travelling in which she had sorely missed both.

"The most favourite part has to be roti and paneer," she wrote.

The coaching-centre encounter described earlier in the book was also Keya's favourite experience of the week. In Dhanbad, she met a retired professor who now taught in a coaching centre. She expected their conversation to focus on examination pressure and its effects on students' mental health. Instead, he complicated the picture.

He told Keya that he did not personally support coaching culture and wished students did not have to depend upon it. Yet he continued to teach within it because he wanted to relieve some of their pressure and restore their curiosity.Keya came away recognising that coaching centres could not be understood as one undifferentiated thing: the people within them could hold very different intentions and beliefs.

Keya did not leave with her concerns about coaching culture erased. She left with a more precise understanding of where those concerns should be directed. Systems can be harmful without every person inside them sharing the same intention. Her encounter added a human question to the wider coaching-centre inquiry being pursued, in different ways, by Falguni, Manya, Manan, Maitrei and others: what are people trying to protect or repair while working inside a system they may not wholly endorse?



From Tamil Nadu to Manipur, and straight to the sweetest school founders (and the best roti & paneer).

Anjana's favourite experience emerged from a conversation that was not tightly structured. Returning to her own school and reconnecting with former teachers mattered to her, but so did the opportunity to sit with teachers from different schools. She knew the subjects she wanted to explore, yet allowed the conversation to unfold rather than forcing it through a fixed sequence of questions.

For more than an hour, the teachers spoke about their work, responsibilities and strain. Anjana was already familiar with many of the challenges they described. What felt different was being present as they reflected and recognising that the act of listening had value in itself. Towards the end, one teacher told her that it was the first time someone had listened to them in that way.

Anjana described the conversation as a kind of recharging space. It strengthened her belief that support need not always begin with an elaborate intervention.

For Anjana, creating a non-judgemental, empathetic space for someone to be heard was itself a meaningful form of response.

For Rashika, the favourite moment was when research left the screen. Across the teacher-education inquiry, Sidharth's skill in building the survey instruments, Abu and Naisha's perspectives on teacher preparation, and Shreejita's institutional visit had helped transform a broad concern into questions that could be taken into the field. Rashika's experience changed when those questions reached actual people.

She had been hesitant before making the first calls. She rehearsed what she would say and wondered whether faculty members, practising teachers and teacher trainees would consider the inquiry worth their time. The responses were warmer than she had expected. Some professors did more than complete the survey: they called her, explained their experiences, suggested changes to the wording of questions, and pointed out where additional response options were needed.

Hearing those stories made Rashika see the inquiry as being about people rather than data alone.

The conversations also brought teacher preparedness and disability inclusion closer together. Educators might genuinely want to make their classrooms more inclusive while feeling that their training had not equipped them to do so. Each conversation altered the next question Rashika wanted to ask.

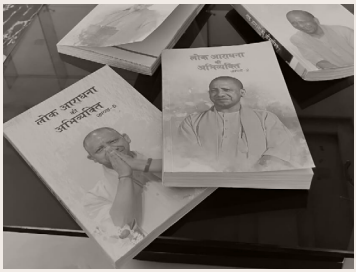
By the end of the week, Rashika could name the shift plainly: she was becoming more

curious and less concerned with proving a prior position.

Not every favourite learning experience was a happy one. Iqra reached out to friends for interviews about their educational experiences in Kashmir. Several initially appeared willing, but declined once they understood the subject and where the conversation might travel. Some feared family disapproval; others worried about the consequences of speaking about Kashmir outside the state.

Iqra was disappointed, but she did not treat refusal as a failure on the respondent's part. She respected the decision. The experience taught her that willingness cannot be presumed from familiarity. Friendship does not automatically create the safety required for someone to speak publicly about a sensitive experience.





Inside and outside Iqra's former school, a request for conversation met an institutional boundary.

She encountered another boundary when she returned to the school she had attended from Grades Four to Ten. She hoped to speak with teachers about mental health and wellbeing, but the administration did not grant permission. Together, the two experiences showed her how unready people and institutions could be for such conversations.

The memory mattered because it revealed what any future inquiry would have to build before it could gather answers: trust, clarity, consent and protection. Sometimes the most important field finding is the boundary around a question.

Umar remembered immersion from a different professional position. He frequently visited schools through his work, but this time, he explained, "I visited as a Changemaker, not a programme manager of my project." With schools on summer vacation, he could not observe ordinary classroom sessions, but he examined infrastructure and spoke with a teacher and students.

His favourite part came afterwards: seeing what other Changemakers had been doing

and reading how their questions had changed across places. That shared record led to a longer collaboration with Iqra on education in conflict-affected contexts.



Sometimes all it takes is a new lens. Umar found both fresh insights and a long-term project.

The project remained unfinished, and that was part of its significance. "We are honoured it started from The F.A.I.R. Project," Umar wrote. The favourite outcome was not a hurried report. It was finding a question, and a collaborator, with whom the work could continue.

Urbi's favourite memory came from teaching English to Grades Five, Seven and Nine. At the end of each session, the children would ask when she was coming back. For her, those simple questions became a reminder that meaningful relationships often begin long before measurable outcomes appear.

When the group itself became the memory

Priyasha recounted meeting her inspiration, Professor B. R. Alamelu, through the immersion:

"Pavitra, Iqra and I modified the Carolina Framework to the Indian context. I went and met Prof B.R. Alamelu who has been working towards providing support to students with disabilities for more than ten years. When I showed her the framework we made, she said that she is glad that someone had finally come after doing homework. I was so happy at that moment."

The sentence contains no grand claim. Its centre is the work of adapting something together. For Priyasha, a memorable contribution was not inventing a framework alone but preparing collectively: studying what already existed, questioning whether its categories travelled well, and producing something concrete enough to take into an expert conversation.

Puspalata could not choose one moment. Her favourite experience was the feeling the programme had given her. Coming from grassroots work as an Anganwadi worker, she had sometimes wondered whether her journey was sufficiently "qualified" to place beside the academic and professional experiences of others. Isha and Ramit's repeated assurance that no relevant experience was invalid gradually changed what she felt able to bring into the group.

One of her clearest memories came during an informal after-session gathering. She spoke about her journey and, for once, did not feel that she had to defend its value.

"For the first time, I felt that I had truly accepted my own journey and, even more importantly, everyone else accepted it too." That belonging was built through small, practical acts. When poor connectivity repeatedly interrupted her participation, Manya contacted her to understand what was happening. The following day, Vidhi called and recharged her mobile data. Recordings and notes allowed her to return to sessions she had missed, while her family adjusted responsibilities at home so that she could continue attending.



Priyasha's fangirl moment with her inspiration.

Her scrapbook carried the same lesson. Puspalata initially compared her page with Shreya's work and worried that she did not know how to make something creative enough. She remembered Ramit telling the group, "Whatever comes to your mind, just put it there." She stopped waiting for the page to become perfect and began making it her own.Her favourite experience was therefore not a single scene but a series of assurances: her experience counted; a difficulty could be named; help could be accepted; an unfinished piece of work could still hold meaning.

Prasannaa did not choose one scene either. What stayed with him was a change in how he participated in conversation. He had often reached first for a familiar theory or a piece of published research when discussing education. During F.A.I.R., he began to trust that a carefully observed classroom experience could also contribute legitimate knowledge. He became more conscious of what happened while other people spoke. Instead of composing his answer in advance, he tried to let their contribution change what he would say.

"Listening is an integral part of speaking."
Prasannaa Andavan

The practice also left him with a question he could not answer once and set aside: "Am I giving more value and listening better to a few people, intentionally or unintentionally, because of my personal bias?" His memorable learning was not the discovery that he had become free of bias. It was learning to notice how status, confidence and familiarity might affect whose voice he treated as important.

Placed together, these favourite moments do not form a conventional highlight reel. There is delight in them, but also hesitation, refusal, revision and unfinished work. Their common feature is another person: a child laughing, a student saying hello, a teacher speaking without being rushed, a professor improving a question, a friend choosing not to be interviewed, a teammate noticing that someone is being left behind.

The formal sessions gave the project its sequence. These were the moments that gave it a human memory.

As Puspalata wrote:

"I don't think it is the end of what it has started within me."
Puspalata Nayak

Beyond the Conversation

What the cohort learned about better schools

The 2026 journey began with the hope of coming together for better schools. It ends with a clearer sense of what that phrase requires.

A better school is not defined by one model. The four fictional schools demonstrated that coherent designs can begin from different centres of gravity. Fieldwork demonstrated that every design enters a particular institution with its own capacity, history, and relationships.

A better school protects common entitlements and responds to situated need. It does not make flexibility a privilege available only where adults have exceptional capacity. It does not make consistency an excuse to ignore the learner in front of it.

A better school recognises that teacher quality is produced through teacher conditions. Professional judgement needs preparation, time, trust, material, collegial learning, and useful accountability. Admiring individual dedication is not a staffing policy.

A better school treats student voice as consequential. It does not confuse the presence of a box, council, survey, or choice with participation. It shows learners what happened because they spoke.

A better school understands inclusion as an ordinary property of the institution. Physical access, curriculum, assessment, language, privacy, support, expectation, and belonging must be read together. A learner should not have to become a public exception in order to receive what makes participation possible.

A better school uses technology by educational purpose. It asks who gains time, who loses it, what happens when the system fails, and whether a human relationship has been supported or displaced.

A better school makes room for play, making, practical judgement, and emotional life without turning them into occasional relief from the "real" curriculum. It holds joy and rigour in the same account. A better school is capable of learning about itself.

What previous Changemakers made visible

The later sessions brought previous F.A.I.R. Changemakers back into the room, not as evidence that one programme had produced a single kind of leader, but as people carrying unfinished work through different institutions.

Aryaa Praseed, from the 2025 cohort, described an eleven-day summer camp whose careful planning dissolved into noise and refusal. Her team redesigned the next attempt around small groups, student leaders, and mutual accountability. By the following year, five volunteers were working with 120 children, and student leaders had organised large field visits without the direct management the adults had first assumed necessary. Arya M. asked the question beneath the success: did points and recognition cultivate responsibility, or teach children to act only for rewards? Aryaa's answer stayed close to experience. In one community, children who were usually seated apart at a temple meal returned early, repeatedly, to serve others even though doing so shortened their own lunch. The reward system had opened a role; the meaning of the role could exceed the reward.

Suraj Bansal, from 2024, showed another timescale. Establishing a community mental health centre through government channels required permissions, repeated institutional negotiation, and a willingness to change small parts of an existing policy architecture rather than announce a new one. His youth leaders were trusted community members trained to recognise distress and create a bridge to clinical care, not presented as substitutes for it. For the 2026 cohort, this made two principles concrete: proximity changes whether support can be used, and a policy claim needs strong evidence, strong witnesses, and strong research. Pavitra's questions about the distance to support and Manya's question about keeping a team aligned moved the account from achievement to the system that had to sustain it.

Kirti Advani, from 2022, placed Puspalata's Anganwadi experience inside a wider institutional contradiction. Early-childhood workers are asked to carry nutrition, learning, health, data, and public duties while payment, training time, and recognition remain precarious. Puspalata responded from the ground, describing projects whose sanctioned costs did not become equivalent investment in children's spaces. Kirti's challenge was not to search for a more caring individual. Rights should not depend on whether a particular official, coordinator, or practitioner happens to care. The system must make care ordinary enough that it survives the individual.

Khushi Garg and Yatharth returned design thinking to observation. A live problem about stopping a cat and dog from fighting produced a burst of solutions from the room: food, barriers, distraction, Batman, even a lion. Only afterwards did Yatharth ask whether anyone had first investigated why the animals were fighting. The playful trap resembled the cohort's earliest better-school exercise: an answer can arrive so quickly that it

hides the problem it has assumed. Khushi's follow-up questions made the context progressively more human and less solvable by distraction. Design, in this account, was not a five-step vocabulary. It was the discipline of restating a problem until the people living it could recognise what was being solved.

The returning Changemakers did not close the 2026 story. They showed what it might mean to keep a question long enough for practice, failure, policy, and other people to alter it.

Fairness as institutional attention

The strongest idea to emerge from the project is also the least spectacular: fairness lives in the quality of attention.

Attention notices the child who does not enter an open task and changes the scaffold before changing the judgement. It notices the teacher who is asked to innovate and asks what time has been protected. It notices the counsellor under the staircase and understands that a service cannot be separated from its conditions. It notices a ramp and follows the route to the next floor. It notices a portal delay and counts the person waiting.

Attention is not passive. It reorganises action.

The F.A.I.R. sequence offers one way to do this. Become familiar enough with the terrain to ask a real question. Advocate a different legitimate value until its protection becomes visible. Interrogate the position from which the problem is being seen. Reason towards a choice whose costs can be named. Then return to the facts, because action will have changed them.

Fairness is not the guarantee that every person receives the same experience. It is the discipline of explaining difference without making dignity conditional.

What remains unfinished

Several projects in this book were still moving when their records were assembled.

The conflict-and-education inquiry had a framework and a long horizon. The teacher-education surveys needed broader participation and analysis. The disability-inclusion tools were ready for exploratory use, not national conclusions. The educational-games repository required continuing curation and feedback. The teacher toolkit needed

repeated piloting with the educators expected to use it. The mental health field notes pointed towards a paper and further research. One-off workshops needed institutional follow-through.

The unfinished state is recorded deliberately.

Public-interest work often rewards the appearance of completion: a launch, toolkit, event, report, or photograph. Schools live after the project leaves. The more honest measure is whether a useful relationship, practice, question, or resource can continue without pretending that continuation is guaranteed.

The cohort's work suggests several next moves. Return findings to the people who contributed them. Track whether a resource saves time in practice. Build consent and safeguarding into every visual and research record. Include students, disabled people, teachers, counsellors, families, and support staff in design before the output hardens. Study variation rather than treating one visit as a sector. Protect long-term inquiry from the urgency of a programme calendar.

These are not appendices to action. They are how action becomes accountable.

Thirty-one departures

The thirty-one Changemakers leave with different commitments.

The (not so) final reflections returned the observer to the self. Shreejita contrasted the Project's fluidity with more rigid and hierarchical spaces she had known and concluded that "you don't need to be authoritarian to flourish." Sidharth remembered other programmes in which his point had been disregarded when he was the youngest or least formally qualified person in the room, then applauded when someone older repeated it. Here, he found himself speaking more freely. Urbi likewise said that being given space to speak and be heard helped her move through shyness and try taking classes during immersion, while Falguni said she had regained confidence in sharing her opinions after returning from the United Kingdom.

Pavitra had also returned abruptly from the United Kingdom and felt socially adrift. She remembered the warmth of the Changemakers and facilitators, and her surprise at being able to turn long-held concerns about accessibility and disability rights into an education conversation that felt personally and professionally meaningful. Nikhila's homesickness gave way to the recognition that people from different backgrounds could still feel familiar, and that empathy required learning about communities beyond her own. Naisha left more willing to trust her own ability and heartened by the kindness

she had encountered.

Others named changes in judgement. Pakhi said her view of government schools had changed and that assumptions had to be challenged. Daksh left convinced that "solutions can be simple." Prasannaa carried Ramit's observation that "true intelligence is knowing that there are multiple truths that exist at the same time," and recognised that writing helped him articulate his thoughts. These were not uniform departures. They showed what the programme had changed in the way people trusted their own voices, listened to others and chose the scale at which action could begin.

Some will remain close to classrooms and community learning. Some will carry the questions into law, policy, public health, psychology, technology, architecture, research, medicine, social work, and civil society. Some projects may grow. Some may be revised beyond recognition. Some may stop when evidence shows they should.

The common inheritance is not a programme identity. It is a habit of returning to the question.

What do I know?

What is another legitimate position protecting?

What in my experience is shaping this judgement?

What choice can I explain?

What happened when the choice met another person?

This habit is modest enough for an ordinary classroom and demanding enough for a public system.

The conversation continues

On the first days of the programme, better schools existed largely as memories, preferences, and promises. By the end, the phrase had become harder to use casually.

It held the single teacher managing several classes. The old building left unusable after a cyclone. The counsellor without a confidential room. The teacher carrying an older textbook to enlarge the lesson. The support office that protected privacy inside an inaccessible building. The portal that moved work into the night. The child who drew a bus. The students who returned with questions. The rabbit ears.

No single image explains education. Together, they resist an easy answer.

The F.A.I.R. Project does not ask the reader to inherit the cohort's conclusions. It asks for the same quality of attention. Begin with the school you think you know. Look again at what it rewards, what it asks of people, what it makes easy, and who pays for what it makes difficult. Listen to the position that unsettles your own. Follow a rule into the day of the person who must carry it. Test a hopeful idea at a scale where you can still hear a correction.

Then keep the conversation open long enough for the institution to answer.

Notes

Notes

This book captures the journey of the 2026 cohort of The F.A.I.R. Project, who came together around a shared question: How can we build better schools? Through dialogue, reflection, lived experiences, and conversations with diverse voices from across the education ecosystem, the cohort explored what it means to create learning environments that are more equitable, inclusive, and deeply human, with our partners as trusted companions along the way.

ecocivilisation

Ecocivilisation is a movement which represents a holistic approach to societal development that places the wellbeing of the planet at the core of human endeavours. It envisions a harmonious coexistence between humanity and the planet, recognising that the health and prosperity of both are intertwined. It is a purpose-driven disruptive cluster with the aim to safeguard the planet as an ecological haven by embracing inclusion, empathy, and diversity at its core, nurturing universal knowledge and wisdom.

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF HUMANITY

The International Centre of Humanity (ICH) emerged from a global gathering in Havana that united 1,500 delegates from 98 countries, bound by a shared commitment to human dignity. ICH is a collective resolve towards humanity, transcending geography, identity, and ideology. As an accelerator and think tank, ICH builds partnerships, strengthens institutions, and advances ideas that place humanity and care at the center of global action, and shared responsibility worldwide.

8one Eight Goals One Foundation

Eight Goals One Foundation (8one) is an India headquartered civil society organisation with projects across the globe. In addition to grassroots programmes, the Foundation engages with governments, inter-governmental organisations as well as various civil service organisations, universities, and development agencies in India and across the world, for policy and social sector initiatives. 8one actively seeks and builds panoptic collaborations across demographics and geographies to create synergies for meaningful dialogue and action.



8one BOOKS

8one Books
Published in New Delhi

ISBN: 978-93-6699-000-2
9 789366 990002