

## ‘We Need to Provide Education’: A Phenomenological Study of Female School Leaders During the COVID-19 Lockdown

**Renu Vinod**

### **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to map experiences of leadership of three principals and two vice principals, all women, of private Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)-affiliated schools during the disruptive phase of the COVID-19 lockdowns. This was a period of heightened anxiety within the education community, especially for parents and students who were highly skeptical about the functionality and effectiveness of online education. This paper examines the leadership of these principals and vice principals in the face of this worldwide challenge compelling urgent responses on their part, the strategies that they used to meet this challenge head-on which conformed to dominant perceptions of female leadership as empathetic and collaborative, and the specific focus of these leaders on the strengthening of social cohesion within the education community by drawing upon the internal and external ties of solidarity which they had built over the years with the teachers and the students (internal ties), and the parents (external ties).

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### **Introduction**

Important questions have been raised during the last two years about the general efficacy of the education system in enhancing students' life skills to prepare them for disruptive events such as the pandemic, its ability to support students on the path to emotional and psychological recovery, and the disparate access to and impact of education across different caste and class groupings. The main concern underlying the outcry against an apparently imperceptive system was the futility of carrying on as if nothing had changed, as if the pandemic had not exposed how inadequate our education system was. Despite their pertinence, these questions overlook the immensely demanding circumstances under which leaders of schools have taken up the challenge to redesign, even if temporarily, long-established patterns of the task of imparting education that the wider community had taken for granted. The objective of this paper is to map the experiences of three female principals and two female vice-principals of private Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)-affiliated schools during the disruptive phase of the COVID-19 lockdowns. These leaders drew upon the internal and external ties of solidarity that they had built over the years, with the teachers and the students (internal ties), on the one hand, and the parents (external ties), on the other. They could tap into these internal and external ties to reinvigorate social cohesion because of their role in building a community of like-minded teachers and parents, through their multidimensional role within the school, including overlooking teacher recruitment and determining the vision for their students' holistic development.

In this paper, social cohesion is defined as the stability and strength of connections within the community due to a shared sense of identity and the common values of members pertaining to the goals of education, whereas education community is defined as the network comprising school leaders such as principals, vice principals, and school coordinators, as well as teachers, students, and parents. Unprepared for changes, both in terms of the varying levels of tech savviness amongst teachers when it came to knowledge of the tools required to conduct online classes successfully, and the constant unpredictability that was characteristic of the period between 2020 and 2022, these leaders still managed to deliver with minimal disruptions to parents and students. Social cohesiveness was constantly threatened by the actions of rebellious parents, on the one hand, who did not see the point in paying fees for online teaching, for example, and gadget-addicted students, on the other, who could not focus on classes, and whose lack of online etiquette constantly challenged the teachers.

In the words of one of the principals interviewed for this study,

School principal 1: Female leaders are a little more empathetic.... I have not felt that kind of empathy in male heads because I do feel that they are wired a bit differently. A goal is

seen very clearly.... But this dimension of looking at what others are going through in such a situation; I don't know if the male group has it as much as the female. ...when you deal with education, back-end staff of hospitality and healthcare, all of this has to come in.

Another principal echoed these views,

School principal 2: Generally, men are not empathetic... for women, we try to make a family of our team. In case someone has a need, we go out of our way to help. For instance, during COVID, I sent food to one of the teachers who worked in my previous school when I came to know about the difficulties that she was going through. If it was a man in the same situation, the response may have been very different. They are wary of being close to the staff. Women are not. We build strong relationships in the workplace.

The remainder of the paper describes the ways in which the school leaders strengthened existing solidarities in the education community, by reinforcing the sense of social cohesiveness, both within and outside the school, in order to fulfil their responsibilities to the wider community and reinstate trust in the value of the education system. It shows that the strategies used by these leaders to meet the challenges that the pandemic wrought clearly align with the dominant perceptions of women leaders as collaborative, empathetic, and sensitive.

### **A Note on Methodology**

Keohane (2020) notes that women have historically been largely absent from positions of formal authority, which, 'with a few exceptions, were routinely held by men' (237). As a result, there has been a tendency for leadership to be 'closely associated with masculinity' (Keohane 2020, 238). This has led to dominant perceptions that women are incapable of leading from the front. According to Chin (2011), there are studies that demonstrate the existence of,

...strong evidence to support the tendency for women to adopt a more collaborative, cooperative, or democratic leadership style and for men to adopt a more directive, competitive, or autocratic style... Even though selection criteria for leadership positions may even out the gender differences, women seem to be intentionally different and more collaborative based on differences in personality and social interpersonal skills. (2-3).

According to de la Rey (2005), there are two schools of thought corresponding to women and men's leadership styles. One school advocated that women who become leaders reject traditional roles and characteristics that are linked to their gender. Women selected as leaders undergo the training and socialisation within their organisation that would act as a deterrent to gender-related characteristics that perhaps come in the way of formal (masculine) leadership. On the other hand, there is another school of thought that clearly delineates between male and female leadership styles, which also happens to be the more dominant view in society:

This perspective points to a distinctive leadership style associated with women, with characteristics that include being more participatory, democratic, more sensitive, nurturing and caring. Other characteristics associated with women's leadership include good conflict

management and interpersonal skills, being excellent listeners and showing tolerance and empathy. Women are also described as more likely to lead from behind, compared to men who lead from the front, and to be encouraging of participation, sharing power and information. (de la Rey 2005, 5)

Through an empirical phenomenological understanding (Neisser 1959), this paper examines the leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of five female school leaders. These leaders, from higher and senior secondary schools in Pune, Chennai and Kochi, include three principals, and two vice-principals. Social phenomenology on which the technique of empirical phenomenology owes its origins, is described by its founder, the Austrian philosopher Alfred Schütz, as the study of the ego, who lives in a social world with other human beings, in various modes of communication with them. It is through these interactions and the ego's perceptions of them that she experiences and makes sense of the social world (Neisser 1959).

...The effect of the exposure to phenomenology was to shift interest from external, extra-subjective structural constraints to the interpretation of the subjective experience of actors; and from the determination to arbitrate between objective truth and prejudiced opinion to the effort to reveal the conditions of knowledge rooted in communally transmitted traditions... (Bauman 1996, 825-26 cited in Psathas 2004, 2)

The ego's (here the female school principals and vice principals) experiences of the disruption caused to their taken-for-granted social world, i.e., the lifeworld of the education community and their responses are the central focus of this paper. Reality, in the social phenomenological framework, is made up of the meanings that people make of the actions of others. They respond to these actions based on their interpretations and this process continues in various modes of reciprocity across numerous social interactions and relationships. The nature of social reality is constructed from the personal experiences and interpretations of the school leaders of their social interactions within the education community. The social interactions between school leaders and the teachers, students, and parents are understood as the school leaders' perceptions of the expectations that the wider community has placed upon them as leaders who can preserve the contract between educator and the community.

The social phenomenological approach is useful in shedding light on the coping and adapting mechanisms that the school leaders used to adjust to the 'new normal', which included making up for technological skill gaps, enlisting the support of teachers and parents for online learning, and convincing students that they were on the right track. While not generalizable, capturing the experiences of school leaders in the private education sector could have an impact beyond their education communities, to those who are seeking to build social cohesion across more heterogeneous education spaces.

The school leaders were selected using purposive sampling as it is the most efficient means to 'select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information' (Kelly 2010, 317 cited in Campbell et. al. 2020, 3). Since the objective is to capture school leaders' experiences, their responses to the pandemic can offer some insights about the tenacity of female leaders in the private education sector to manage disruptions by deploying specific strategies of solidarity building. Therefore, it consciously chose participants who had experience dealing with the two

years of the lockdown. Through semi-structured interviews conducted while the pandemic was still ongoing but with less intensity, these participants narrated their experiences of the lockdowns, school closures and transition to online learning.

S. No.	Designation	Number of Years as Female School Leader*
1.	Dean and Principal	Twenty-four
2.	Principal	Fifteen
3.	Principal	Fifteen
4.	Vice Principal	Twenty-five
5.	Vice Principal	Twelve

\* This includes current and previous positions as Principal, Vice Principal, Coordinator, and Head of the Department.

Box 1: The Sample of Female School Leaders

### Female School Leaders: Seeking External Solidarity with Parents

The colonial legacy of English-medium education, introduced in India in the nineteenth century, created the first major chasm in Indian education, by ranking urban, English-medium education as superior to its rural or vernacular counterparts. After 1991, another major transformation in education shifted the policy on education to a neoliberal framework. The government rolled back its involvement in the education sector, focusing mainly on achieving its development targets such as hastening the universalization of elementary education (Kumar 2010). In this new scenario, education was no longer the privilege of a few but universalized so that everyone had access to and opportunity for a better quality of life. The neoliberal framework resulted in the mushrooming of private schools, which transformed the character of education in the country. Parental expectations upon school leaders to consistently prove the quality and mettle of their schools, usually measured in terms of student performance in various national-level examinations, mounted pressure on these schools. The five school leaders interviewed in this study lead private schools, three of which emerged subsequent to the 1991 reforms. The other two schools are well established in the private education sector in their respective states, with more than fifty years of service each.

Despite its focus on student performance (and consequently, teacher productivity), private education in the neoliberal set up has a contradictory nature. On the one hand, the neoliberal framework encourages individualistic aspirations through, ‘competition – between children, schools, employers, parents, and (especially private) education providers – (which) also becomes the central driver of the system in order to deliver not only efficiencies and profits, but also organization reputation and parental influence’ (Robertson and Dale 2013, 435). On the other hand, the education community is collectivistic to the extent that there is a social cohesiveness based on common class and predominantly ‘upper’ caste identities and shared norms and goals pertaining to the school’s quality and performance. The vision these schools have for their students is one area where the individualistic and collectivistic dimensions are apparent. Schools try to stand apart in the highly competitive space of private sector education, by catering to parental demands for the holistic development of their children (collectivistic, community-oriented) for successful careers (individualistic) in the neoliberal economy. Take for instance the response of

one of the school principals regarding the expectations she has of her students’ role in the wider society:

School principal 3: I need children who are responsible not just for academics but in their life. I see to it that they behave well, they take care of small things. I know that children may not find this very fascinating. ...They should match and compete with the world. Not just values of honesty and integrity, but academic discipline is also underlined.

Both societal values and individual ambition therefore compete for attention in private education because the school cannot escape the public’s expectation of social responsibility that still pervades the popular imagination relating to the purpose of education. This is something that the school and parents take seriously. A school principal commented on the need to balance competitiveness with student well-being:

School principal 1: When we ask parents what they want, they say that they want their children to be good human beings, not to be pressurized. ... I want holistic, well-balanced individuals. At the end of the day, when the child is happy, they will reach their potential or better it. When the child feels good, safe, happy, satisfied, their potential will bloom.

The insistence on ‘holistic’ development of students is driven home to the education community at every point, right from teacher recruitment to selection of student community outreach activities and the proactive responses to parental feedback. One of the schools whose principal was interviewed won the district prize during the lockdown for environment conservation organized by a prominent newspaper. The conservation project is an example of how individualistic and collectivistic goals were combined, whether there was a pandemic or not. It pitted schools against one another for the award for environmental consciousness, which was, at the same time, a socially responsible endeavor. This specific activity was aimed at protecting the environment through student-led initiatives. By involving students, the school principals and vice-principals conveyed to the education community that their schools were attuned to current social and economic developments, in which the entire community and not just individual parents and students, was an active stakeholder. Both student employability and a consciously cultivated sensitivity to their physical and social environment are perceived to be equally critical to the continuity of the social order. Activities, which combine both, are the foundation on which these schools receive their social legitimation. Moreover, that such character-building, community-oriented activities had not stopped even during the lockdown helped these schools gain the goodwill of parents.

### **Female School Principals and Teachers: Building Internal Solidarities**

A structural functionalist description of the positive role that schools play in society emphasizes how they are constitutive of its prosperity and sustainability:

The society we have, including the identity and cohesion within that society and its understanding and acceptance of other societies, is seen to be largely created in our schools. Schools are one of the few remaining institutions to offer partnerships to families in socialisation and investment through learning. School education helps people make sense of

the changes as well as fostering sustainability, including through lifelong learning. The creation, acquisition, communication and wise use of knowledge are of particular importance. In brief, society's most important investment is increasingly seen to be in the education of its people – we suffer in the absence of good education: we prosper in its presence. (Mulford 2003, 5)

To meet the expectations of high fee-paying parents, private schools demand accountability from their teachers measured in terms of overall student performance. In order to maintain the high expected standard, these schools may increase the monitoring of teachers to improve their productivity, while reducing the degree of autonomy and creativity they have in the performance of their tasks (Addi-Racah 2012). In their recruitment of teachers, school leaders look not just for content and qualifications, but also for overall personality, at someone capable of broadening the student's mind, in addition to strengthening her academic knowledge. For teachers to flourish in the school, they are expected to be temperamentally passionate about the work that they do, keeping sight of two complementary notions: that the school is their family, and that students are future citizens that they are to mold. School leaders take the lead in creating an atmosphere of mutual professional and personal respect, which can have a positive effect on the school's performance (Mulford 2003; Ledesma 2014). Mutual respect amongst faculty, going beyond the call of duty when the need arises, and a general concern for the student's wellbeing, are what a school leader's multidimensional definition of a teacher can translate into.

As mentioned earlier, with the rolling back of the state under neoliberalism, school leaders have had to take the lead in decision-making on multiple fronts, including teacher recruitment, syllabus setting, assuaging parental concerns, finances, dealing with the government, school expansion, and so on. Consequently, they are critical to the successful functioning of private educational institutions. When it comes to teacher recruitment, for example, hiring the 'right fit' for the job is only half the problem solved. Once inside the school, these school leaders work towards building solidarities and inculcating in them a pedagogical style through a more instinctively collaborative and empathetic leadership style with the teachers. While these school leaders have the autonomy to manage the day-to-day functioning of the school, they have focused on developing a personalized leadership style and working relationship with their peers and subordinates (Mulford 2003).

As a principal pointed out:

School principal 1: We look at content and knowledge. A teacher is the first role model. She has to show patience, perseverance and good communication skills. ... Even if she falls short on content, there is scope for growth. But behavior with students, colleagues, the idea that my school is my family, are all important.

A vice-principal noted:

School vice principal 1: Teaching is an art, not a project or mission. We need to handle human beings. Teachers need to have passion. They should not join the profession because they did not get any other job. They will not be able to shape human beings and create a community.

To drive these points home consistently, the school leaders interviewed in this study have consciously cultivated a more inclusive rather than hierarchical leadership style. In the words of one of the school principals interviewed, 'My leadership mantra is: ask me anything, I will give you. But you have to do your work'. There are common styles of leadership across the five school leaders such as, maintaining open and transparent channels of communication, having an empathetic approach towards teachers as working mothers, possessing an eye for detail, overtly showing respect for teachers in the presence of students and parents, following up consistently once work is delegated, and leading by doing. These five school leaders work consciously towards building internal or bonding solidarities amongst teaching staff. Take, for instance, a school principal's views on how her own career trajectory and the balancing act that she had to perform as a career woman and mother, have influenced her approach towards her staff:

School principal 1: Maybe because I started out as a teacher with young children of my own, managing my family and career, I was sensitive to the difficulties of working parents, of working mothers. Of the different roles that my teachers need to juggle. Being mothers, they have a lot more things that they need to look into. If there is good support, it is good for them.

Another principal pointed out:

School principal 3: If I tell my teachers to come at seven in the morning, I am at school five minutes before seven. I am always here before they arrive. Even now, my teachers leave by noon, but I am still at school. When it comes to my expectations, I put my requirements across to them, I listen to them, and we come to a consensus. There are some matters, however, which are within my purview solely to take decisions.

One of the two vice principals interviewed had this to say about her leadership style:

School vice principal 2: I am a people's person. I interact with everyone right from top to bottom. I am not scared to speak my mind. It has landed me in trouble also. People tell me that I am a very positive person, that I listen to them. ...I wouldn't throw my weight around even as a senior because I joined the school very young. .... I can see through people. I can be very firm where I need to be.

Taking from Robert Putnam's (2000) notion of bonding social capital, which is social capital amongst people who have similar backgrounds amongst whom solidarities can be mobilized, building internal solidarities within schools is enhanced by these leadership strategies which are people-centric. When school leaders demonstrate empathy for teachers as working mothers, consistently lead by doing, treat them respectfully before students and parents and resolve conflicts, where they arise between teachers, a shared sense of cooperation emerges to meet the school's goals successfully. Teachers respond to expectations from school leaders primarily as a call to duty, but also as something that serves the larger good, not just of the school, but of the students and the wider community. School leaders are keenly aware of their gender and how being women makes them view circumstances very differently from their male counterparts. As a school principal explained,



School principal 2: ...Whatever happened, we have been successful to a large extent. The whole education system did not come to a standstill. ...My teachers have given their best. They prioritised the student over their own families. They are COVID warriors.

Trust and a larger sense of purpose generated by empathetic leadership are crucial features of solidarity building within the school. By taking advantage of their strengths as female leaders, these school leaders have played a crucial role in building internal solidarities, which they can tap into in times of crisis. Empathetic leadership can lead to social interactions within the school that link teachers more strongly to them as leaders. The school leaders interviewed in this study, by demonstrating their intent to lead by collaborating, not commanding, and serving the wider community, kindle similar feelings or at least, set certain standards of expected behavior within the teaching community. Empathetic leadership creates valuable internal social capital for the school, something that is critical when disruptions arise and the taken-for-granted ways of doing things are no longer available.

### **Female School Leaders during the Pandemic: Drawing upon External and Internal Solidarities**

Literature on resilience defines it as 'the ability to bounce back from adversity, frustration, and misfortune and is essential for the effective leader' (Ledesma 2014, 1). Additionally, resilience has three other features tied to it: survival, recovery and well-being (Ledesma 2014). During the COVID lockdown, the five school principals interviewed showed a remarkable tendency to 'face significant stressors without significant negative disruption in functioning' (Ledesma 2014, 2). How does one define these school leaders' capacity for resilience? Does the existing literature that stresses 'self-esteem, hardiness, strong coping skills, a sense of coherence, self-efficacy, optimism, strong social resources, adaptability, risk-taking, low fear of failure, determination, perseverance, and a high tolerance of uncertainty' (Ledesma 2014, 1) sum up their response? While these factors permeated their individual leadership styles within the school, this section will concentrate on how these school leaders enhanced the strong external ties within the education community, especially with parents.

All the five CBSE-affiliated private schools already had community social capital (Larsen et. al. 2004; Leonard 2004; Agnitsch, Flora, and Ryan 2006), which according to Putnam (2000), works effectively when there are high levels of trust, civic and social engagement, and reciprocity of community networks. The education community, comprising the empathetic leadership styles of the school leaders, responsive and proactive teachers, and ambitious students and parents that see value in a good quality and expensive education, is an example of community social capital marked by a strong social cohesiveness. The management is an important, but, in this case, non-interfering, and supportive, but peripheral community member, as far as daily operations are concerned. The two most important values that enhance the education community's social capital are: one, the community's perception about the importance of the school as the institution which socializes and shapes future citizens, and two, the multidimensional collaborative leadership roles that school leaders within the private schools setting have donned, to build internal solidarities with teachers and external solidarities with parents.

While building internal and external solidarities is an expected responsibility of the school principals and vice-principals interviewed in this study, as a characteristic of the self-governing, private education set-up, what happens when a pandemic strikes? In a radically new scenario, when the taken-for-granted ways of knowing and acting do not apply anymore, how were these already established solidarities re-activated to douse the community's anxieties over the shift towards online learning? The school principals were as unprepared to respond as anyone else. Unlike the corporate sector, the education sector had not really tapped into its technological infrastructure to digitalize its day-to-day functioning and administration. As a result, the first response was a feeling of helplessness at the disruption. The school leaders initially presumed that the lockdown would be but a temporary, short-term necessity. In the words of one of the principals:

School principal 1: I never thought that we would be transitioning to online learning. While this was common in colleges in the West, we had never done this. ...Even when the lockdown happened, we thought it would be a 6-week lockdown. We thought it would be shut during summer vacation. By the middle of May, the medical community said that this could go on till July or August. ...So we realized we need to do this, and it was total blankness at first.

Her response indicates how the pandemic laid bare the tenuousness of our lifeworld. It exposed the vulnerabilities of the most institutionalized behaviors, such as teaching or the school-going activities that characterize childhood and adolescence all over the world. That none of the school leaders expected the lockdown to be more than a temporary situation is suggestive of our inherent need to see order and pattern in our social world. The school leaders had an especially challenging task during the two-year lockdown period, which hurled consistent obstacles, technological, governmental, and human, which required them to frame their responses progressively, as the situation demanded. Despite the initial shock, they quickly overcame their sense of incongruousness that the lockdown brought and began to act, as we can see from the responses of the three school principals cited below:

School principal 1: When we transitioned to online, we didn't struggle as much to finish portions because I sat with the teachers, and I asked, what do students need to know to prepare for the next level. The government had put a lot of conditions - you can teach only for so many hours. We looked at what the child needed, what we can take to the next year. When it (the lockdown) happened again, we sat again to decide what we want to do in the next year. For senior kids, we could pick out certain chapters as seminars, projects, or presentations... We finished the portions we had to before starting offline classes. ...Parents were saying the child was not doing enough. You can't blame the kid for what's been happening to their lives. The adults need to find the balance. Don't push them.

School principal 2: I called up my IT team and asked the lady whether she was aware of Google Meet. She said yes. She said that training the staff would take an hour. She asked for a half an hour to prepare a presentation. She said that Google IDs for all staff would take some time but that she could do it in a day. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, we began classes online (only for the senior classes).

School principal 3: I had my core team of coordinators and HODs. We held a Zoom meeting and brainstormed. We had long meetings from home and decided to go ahead with the online class.

As these responses show, the CBSE-affiliated, private-schools' education community is rich in technological capital, at least in terms of the technological infrastructure, with computer labs, IT teams, and children who are used to working and spending leisure time on computers at home. Despite possessing such technological capital, these private schools faced multiple challenges from within the education community during the pandemic, which exposed some fault lines in what was presumed to be a highly socially cohesive unit. An important source of grouse for parents was that the online mode of learning continued to necessitate payment of the normally applicable fees to the school. A vice principal noted,

School vice principal 2: ...We have heard that many principals have had problems generating fees. Initially, when the online mode began, there was a big outcry amongst parents regarding why they should pay a full fee. A signature campaign was initiated, which lasted a whole of two days. The principal called the parents to her room and in no uncertain terms informed them that this would not work. That the whole system had to function, and it would not help anyone if staff lost their jobs. So, the signature campaign started with a bang and died with a whimper. We stood up to it and found a solution. We looked the parents in the eye and told them what we felt and what the ground reality was. That their children had to be taught, and for that to happen, all these teachers had to be employed. So, they needed to cooperate.

This example shows that one cannot take the social cohesion within the education community for granted. Even with shared norms and class and caste identities, the community's social cohesiveness was tested during this period. School leaders had to show firm and assertive leadership when the system itself was threatened in this way. The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the education community's social fabric. Parents wavered when it came to paying fees, not always because they did not see value in online education but also because some parents had lost jobs. Disruptions to normal and patterned ways of working required targeted responses from the school leaders to strengthen the system's resilience. They had to re-examine the nature of external ties of solidarity with parents, given the disparate views amongst them when it came to core issues such as teachers' salaries and transport fees, on the one hand, and whether online schooling should proceed at all during a pandemic, on the other.

Teacher frustration had to be handled as well. High fees were matched by high expectations from parents. Another source of tension in the school-parent relationship arose since online school and home overlapped. The school leadership often had to draw firm boundaries to protect the well-being of the teacher. A school principal reminisced in the following manner about some parents' crossing boundaries during the lockdown period:

School principal 3: Not all parents have common sense or use good language with teachers since they feel that the school owes them everything as they have paid the fees. They call my teachers at 8 PM and 11 PM at night. ... I asked (a parent) whether this was the time to call unless it was an emergency... I told my teachers not to reply after 6 PM. The teachers

and parents were not used to this new set up. I conveyed the message to the parents that teachers too have families. When they are at home, they need to look after their families, and (parents) need to respect that.

Students were vulnerable during the lockdown period to issues ranging from gadget addiction to classroom misbehavior and depression. The school leaders tried to introduce strategies to combat the negative impacts of being clamped down at home with very little scope for social engagement beyond the family, and the gadget on for almost the entire day. The response of a school principal shown below indicates the efforts her school took to safeguard students from the sense of disconnectedness that online education brought:

School principal 1: We introduced something called 'A Fitter Me' because parents were complaining that the children were sitting in front of the screen all day. If the child did a specific number of sit-ups or jogs, we acknowledged that in some way. We added points. It didn't bring everyone in but helped quite a few. 'A Healthy Me and a Better Me' was about mental health. Is there anything you can learn on your own? So some children picked up instruments. Many picked up craft work. Some took to cooking. We had virtual cooking sessions. We realized a lot of things over these two years in terms of how to work in a way that you have the children's attention. It is easy to blame the parents immediately or pull the child up. ...It was very hard to get the children's attention. How much control do we have on children behind the screen? The teachers spoke to children one-on-one and to parents sometimes. But nothing harsh was done. If they missed classes in the offline system, they would be made to sit in the library. So we had to devise ways to get the child to do what we needed them to do.

We see here too that the leadership strategies employed by these school leaders emphasized a style that foregrounded collaboration, and the strengthening of interpersonal connections. Empathetic but firm leadership during the two-year crisis was imperative in reinforcing the original values that had created social cohesion within the education community in the first place. Social cohesion is most effective when members share a common identity and norms (Ledogar and Fleming 2008), and these had to be reinforced as social cohesion is not a given, even in the education sector, where institutions run on autopilot. In this study, the school leaders' social connections-building, interpersonal relationship-based, empathetic leadership was pivotal in providing the required direction to teachers, students, and even parents, and consolidate the social cohesiveness of the community, even when it faltered during the lockdown period.

## Conclusion

The two-year lockdown exposed the vulnerabilities of the education community. To meet the challenges of online transition, the five female school leaders drew upon the internal and external solidarities that they had cultivated with teachers and parents. Lack of technological skills, teacher frustration, parental expectations, and student anxieties tested the education community's social cohesion. In the face of these challenges, the school leaders showed a consistent tendency to keep sight of the bigger picture: that for a society to thrive, its institutions, particularly its educational institutions, need to carry on. This was the essence of their approach to draw on the solidarities

built within and outside the school. The school leaders' attitude towards their own role and their expectations from their teachers, showed their ability to utilize this valuable human capital for the common good – the education of their students. By demonstrating empathetic leadership and by conveying the message that the teachers' tasks had a larger purpose, i.e., molding a future generation, they enabled them to respond with a higher level of trust in their leadership. The maintenance of trust between teachers and school principals and vice principals, and the belief within the school that it was working towards the larger good, were crucial for internal solidarity building during this challenging time. Conveying to parents through various academic, extra-curricular, and emotional and mental well-being activities conducted during the lockdowns targeting their children, the school leaders showed that the task of providing education, shaping human beings, and molding the future generation cannot be halted by a pandemic. By consistently demonstrating empathy, such as acknowledging their teachers' contributions, putting in place measures to ensure the well-being of their students, managing the expectations of parents, and adapting their existing resources to fast-evolving scenarios, the school leaders demonstrated that maintaining the stability of the education apparatus was the most resilient means to counter uncertainty.

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