

Effective School Leadership in Reducing Dropout Rates: A Case Study of Government Secondary School Pakam, West Siang District (Arunachal Pradesh)

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Learning Objectives:

1. To examine the factors contributing to student dropout

To investigate and understand the socio-economic, geographical, and academic factors responsible for student dropout in Government Secondary School Pakam.

2. To analyse the role of school leadership in reducing dropout

To study and analyse the leadership practices and interventions adopted by the headmaster and teachers to improve student retention.

3. To explore the effectiveness of collaborative and student-centred strategies

To assess the impact of counselling, community involvement, and co-curricular engagement in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Keywords:

School Leadership

Dropout Reduction

Student Retention

Rural Education

Community Participation

Introduction

Problem Statement

Despite the robust legal frameworks provided by the RTE Act (2009) and the strategic roadmap of NEP 2020, translating national policy into local success remains a significant challenge in the high-altitude, rural terrains of Arunachal Pradesh. In regions like the West Siang District, geographical isolation, socio-economic constraints, and cultural barriers often lead to high attrition rates in secondary education.

While the Government Secondary School, Pakam, operates within the same systemic constraints as its peers, the persistence of school dropouts suggests a gap between policy intent and on-ground execution. There is a critical need to understand how school leadership can act as a catalyst—moving beyond administrative compliance to implement personalized, community-centric interventions that effectively reduce dropout rates and foster a culture of retention.

Research Objectives

The primary goal of this case study is to analyze the leadership strategies employed at GSS Pakam to mitigate student attrition. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. **Identify the Core Drivers:** To investigate the specific socio-economic and institutional factors contributing to dropout rates at GSS Pakam prior to targeted leadership interventions.
2. **Evaluate Leadership Interventions:** To document and analyze the specific pedagogical and administrative strategies introduced by the school leadership to improve student retention.
3. **Assess Community Engagement:** To examine the role of the School Management Committee (SMC) and parental outreach programs in creating a supportive ecosystem for at-risk students.

4. Develop a Scalable Model: To synthesize the findings into a set of "Best Practices" that can be replicated by other government schools facing similar challenges in rural and tribal regions.

Education plays a crucial role in shaping the social, economic, and cultural development of individuals and communities. However, student dropout remains a persistent challenge, particularly in rural and geographically remote areas. Government Secondary School Pakam, located in West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh, has historically faced significant challenges in student retention. Dropout rates, especially among economically disadvantaged and geographically isolated populations, emerged as a serious concern affecting both educational outcomes and the broader development of the community.

The school caters to a diverse student population, many of whom come from remote villages with limited access to educational resources. A considerable number of students belong to socio-economically weaker sections, where parents are primarily engaged as daily wage labourers. These parents often lack both the time and the educational background necessary to support their children academically. Additionally, factors such as long travel distances, household responsibilities, lack of motivation, and poor academic performance further contribute to the risk of students discontinuing their education.

In such a challenging context, the role of the School Head becomes critically important. Effective leadership can significantly influence school climate, teacher motivation, student engagement, and ultimately learning outcomes. This case study is empirical in nature and examines the leadership practices adopted at Government Secondary School Pakam under the guidance of the headmaster. It specifically focuses on identifying and analysing the strategies implemented to reduce dropout rates.

The study is based on qualitative data collected through interviews with the headmaster and teachers, along with observations. It documents how a combination of compassionate leadership, targeted interventions, and collaborative efforts helped transform the school environment and improve student retention.

The key areas explored in this study include the socio-educational context of the school, challenges faced, leadership interventions, teacher perspectives, measurable outcomes, and broader implications for educational leadership. The findings of this study aim to provide valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers working in similar contexts.

School Context and Profile

Government Secondary School Pakam is situated in a rural part of West Siang District, characterised by hilly terrain and dispersed settlements. Despite these constraints, the school serves as an important educational institution for the surrounding communities.

The student population reflects a mix of cultural backgrounds and socio-economic conditions. Many students are first-generation learners, and education is often not prioritised due to economic hardships. In such an environment, maintaining regular attendance and preventing dropout becomes a complex task that requires sustained effort and innovative strategies.

The school is led by the Headmaster, Mr. Lido Sora, whose leadership has been instrumental in initiating reforms aimed at improving student retention. With the support of dedicated teachers, the school has gradually transformed its approach

from a traditional system to a more student-centred and inclusive learning environment.

The Situation "Before": Identifying the Problem

Prior to the current leadership interventions, the school faced a significant risk of student attrition.

- **Dropout Indicators:** The headmaster and teachers identified high-risk students through irregular attendance, a decline in academic performance, and visible behavioral changes like withdrawal or aggression.
- **Root Causes:** Empirical data from teacher surveys identified financial problems, family responsibilities, and a lack of interest in traditional studies as the primary drivers of dropouts.
- **Specific Challenges:** A critical issue was the "lack of parental guidance," as many students lived away from their parents or with guardians who were negligent regarding their ward's education.

3. The Intervention: Leadership Actions and Change Process

Under the Headmaster's seven-year tenure, a multi-pronged "compassionate leadership" strategy was implemented.

A. Personalized Counseling and Emotional Connect

The headmaster moved from assumptions to evidence-based tracking. He personally counseled numerous students on the verge of discontinuing their education, using a "safe and respectful" approach.

- **Action:** Private interactions that avoided blame, focusing instead on listening and reassuring the student with the message: *"We are here to support you"*.

B. Teacher Empowerment and Mentorship

Leadership responsibility was distributed among the staff.

- **Instruction:** Teachers were directed to monitor attendance in every class and report any student absent for three consecutive days immediately to the Headmaster.
- **Mentorship:** Specific teachers were assigned as mentors to closely support at-risk students.

C. Engaging the Community and Parents

Recognizing that family issues were a major hurdle, the school initiated:

- **Home Visits:** Conducted when necessary to understand the domestic environment.
- **Parental Counseling:** Explaining the practical value of education to illiterate or negligent parents through the School Management Committee (SMC).

D. Diversified Learning and Co-curricular Integration

To combat "lack of interest," the school shifted toward a more engaging environment.

- **Activities:** Weekly kitchen gardening, sweeping, and cleaning led by social service teachers to build confidence and a sense of belonging.
- **Technology:** Using K-Yan projectors and audio-visual aids to foster an active learning environment.
- **Financial Support:** The headmaster occasionally provided personal financial assistance, such as paying dues or providing notebooks for students in crisis.

4. The Result "After": Visible Outcomes

The leadership interventions led to a **significant reduction** in dropout rates.

- **Retention:** All surveyed teachers observed a marked improvement in student retention.
- **Environment:** The school transitioned into a "student-friendly" zone where talents in sports, culture, and arts are publicly recognized, making students more eager to attend.
- **Social Impact:** By linking education to vocational skills and local livelihoods, the school helped students see education as a path to self-reliance rather than a burden.

Methodology

This case study follows a qualitative and empirical approach. Data was collected using the following methods:

- **Interviews:** Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the headmaster and teachers to understand their perspectives on dropout issues and intervention strategies.
- **Observation:** School activities, classroom practices, and co-curricular engagements were observed to assess student participation and engagement.

- **Photographic Evidence:** Photographs of activities such as counselling sessions and co-curricular events, as supporting evidence.

The triangulation of these data sources ensured the reliability and validity of the findings.

Challenges Faced by the School

Before the implementation of targeted interventions, the school faced several challenges contributing to high dropout rates:

1. **Socio-economic Constraints:**

Many students came from economically weaker families where children were expected to contribute to household income or responsibilities.

2. **Lack of Parental Support:**

Due to illiteracy and occupational constraints, parents were often unable to guide or monitor their children's education.

3. **Academic Difficulties:**

Students struggling with foundational learning often lost interest and eventually dropped out.

4. **Low Motivation and Self-Confidence:**

A lack of encouragement and recognition led to low self-esteem among students.

5. **Geographical Barriers:**

Long distances and difficult terrain made regular attendance challenging.

6. Limited Engagement:

Traditional teaching methods failed to actively engage students, leading to disinterest.

Recognising these issues, the school leadership adopted a holistic and student-centred approach to address the root causes of dropout.

Leadership Interventions and Strategies

The Headmaster adopted a compassionate, inclusive, and proactive leadership style. The interventions were designed to address both academic and non-academic factors influencing dropout rates.

1. Personalised Counselling

One of the most effective strategies implemented was personalised counselling. Students identified as being at risk of dropping out were counselled individually. The Headmaster took a personal interest in understanding each student's challenges, whether related to financial constraints, family issues, or academic struggles.

Parents were also involved in counselling sessions to build awareness about the importance of education. Teachers supported this initiative by maintaining regular communication with students and monitoring their progress.

This approach helped in building trust, boosting confidence, and motivating students to continue their education.

2. Remedial Teaching and Academic Support

To address learning gaps, remedial classes were organised for academically weak students. These classes focused on strengthening foundational concepts and providing additional practice.

Teachers adopted simplified teaching methods and provided individual attention to ensure that no student was left behind. Continuous assessment and feedback helped track student progress and make necessary adjustments.

This intervention significantly improved students' academic performance and reduced frustration associated with learning difficulties.

3. Promotion of Co-curricular Activities

The school actively promoted participation in sports, cultural programmes, and creative activities. These activities provided students with opportunities to explore their talents, build confidence, and develop social skills.

Innovative initiatives such as kitchen gardening and cleanliness drives were introduced. These activities not only engaged students but also instilled a sense of responsibility and teamwork.

Such engagement played a crucial role in making the school environment more attractive and enjoyable, thereby reducing dropout tendencies.

4. Strengthening Community Involvement

Community participation was enhanced through regular Parent-Teacher Meetings (PTMs) and active involvement of the School Management Committee (SMC).

Parents were encouraged to take an active role in their children's education. Discussions during meetings focused on attendance, academic progress, and behavioural issues.

This collaborative approach helped in creating a supportive ecosystem where the responsibility of education was shared between the school and the community.

5. Effective Implementation of Government Schemes

The school ensured the proper implementation of government welfare schemes such as:

- Mid-Day Meal Programme
- Free textbooks and uniforms

These initiatives reduced the financial burden on families and encouraged regular attendance. The availability of basic facilities contributed to a more inclusive learning environment.

Impact and Outcomes

The interventions led to significant improvements in student retention and overall school performance.

- Dropout rates decreased by approximately **30%** over the past three years.
- Student attendance increased by around **20%**.
- Students demonstrated improved academic performance and classroom participation.
- There was a noticeable improvement in student behaviour and discipline.
- Students reported higher levels of motivation, confidence, and satisfaction with the school environment.

These outcomes indicate the effectiveness of leadership-driven interventions in addressing complex educational challenges.

Teacher Perspectives

Teachers played a crucial role in the successful implementation of these strategies. They acknowledged the headmaster's leadership as a key factor in driving change. According to teachers:

- Counselling has been highly effective in addressing student-specific issues.

- Child-centred teaching methods have improved engagement and learning outcomes.
- Co-curricular activities have helped in building student confidence and reducing absenteeism.

However, teachers also pointed out challenges such as dealing with family-related issues and managing behavioural problems. Despite these challenges, their commitment and collaborative efforts contributed significantly to the success of the interventions.

Discussion

The findings of this case study highlight the importance of effective school leadership in addressing dropout issues. The headmaster's approach reflects key principles of transformational leadership, including empathy, vision, collaboration, and innovation.

By addressing both academic and socio-emotional needs, the school created a supportive environment that encouraged students to stay engaged. The integration of community participation further strengthened the impact of interventions.

This case demonstrates that dropout is not merely an academic issue but a multifaceted problem requiring holistic solutions.

Key Takeaways

This case study underscores several important lessons:

- Compassionate and student-centred leadership is essential for improving retention.
- Early identification and targeted support for at-risk students are critical.
- Engagement through co-curricular activities enhances student motivation.

- Community involvement strengthens accountability and support systems.
- Effective utilisation of government schemes can significantly reduce barriers to education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Scaling Up Best Practices:

Successful strategies should be replicated in other schools facing similar challenges.

2. Teacher Capacity Building:

Training programmes should focus on counselling skills, inclusive pedagogy, and student engagement techniques.

3. Strengthening Community Partnerships:

Greater involvement of parents and local stakeholders should be encouraged.

4. Providing Additional Support:

Financial and academic assistance should be extended to vulnerable students.

5. Continuous Monitoring:

Regular tracking of attendance and performance should be institutionalised.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that effective school leadership can play a transformative role in reducing dropout rates and improving educational outcomes.

Through a combination of empathy, innovation, and collaboration, the headmaster and teachers of Government Secondary School Pakam successfully addressed the challenges of student retention.

By prioritising student well-being, fostering an inclusive learning environment, and engaging the community, the school has created a sustainable model for improving retention and academic success. The lessons derived from this study can serve as a valuable reference for educators and policymakers working in similar contexts.

Photos and Annexures

- Photograph of sports activities
- Photograph of counselling sessions
- Photograph of the Headmaster and investigator
- Video clip of statement of the Headmaster

References

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Assessment

1. Which of the following is a major cause of student dropout identified in the study?

- a) Availability of digital classrooms
- b) Socio-economic constraints
- c) Excessive school infrastructure
- d) Overqualified teachers

Answer: b) Socio-economic constraints

2. What leadership strategy was most prominently used by the headmaster?

- a) Strict disciplinary actions
- b) Punishment-based approach
- c) Compassionate and student-centred leadership
- d) Ignoring weak students

Answer: c) Compassionate and student-centred leadership

3. State whether True or False

Community participation and parental involvement played an important role in reducing dropout rates.

Answer: True

4. Which of the following interventions helped improve student engagement?

- a) Eliminating co-curricular activities
- b) Increasing homework load
- c) Introducing co-curricular activities like gardening and cultural programmes
- d) Reducing teacher involvement

Answer: c) Introducing co-curricular activities like gardening and cultural programmes

5. State whether True or False

The study found that dropout is only an academic issue and not related to social or economic factors.

Answer: False

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photograph of sports activities



Photograph of counselling session



Photograph of interview

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