

# Reframing Educational Practice through Indian Knowledge Systems: Relational Communication and Ethical Leadership

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## ABSTRACT:

The rapid technologization of education has significantly changed how educational practices are conducted, how institutions communicate, and how they are led in contemporary educational systems. Assistive technologies, adaptive learning platforms, and environments enabled by artificial intelligence have opened new possibilities for accessibility, differentiation, and personalisation in a disability-inclusive and learner-diverse context. These changes have also, however, raised critical issues regarding depersonalisation, emotional discontinuity, and the eventual fading of the relational aspects of education. This paper suggests that Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer an interesting ethical and epistemological context for reflecting on relational communication and educational leadership in today's education. The paper, inspired by the relationality of guru and śiṣya, dharma responsibility, dialogic inquiry, and Buddhist notions of karuṇā (compassion), theorises education as more than a process of procedures or technocracy, seeing it as an inherently relational and ethically grounded activity. The study contributes to the understanding of IKS, relational communication, inclusive pedagogy, and educational leadership through a conceptual synthesis of research from these fields, resulting in an alternative leadership orientation termed relational stewardship that emphasises empathy, communicative trust, collaborative participation, and ethical accountability. The paper also reflects on the implications of this framework for institutional culture, teacher training, school–family relationships, and an AI-enabled educational environment. The paper engages with contemporary discussions on communication and leadership, dialogues with Indian Knowledge Systems. It adds to the growing scholarship on decolonial pedagogy, relational teaching, and educational transformation towards humanness in today's technologized learning environments.

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## 1. Introduction

Issues of learner participation, educational equity, and the experiences of learners with disabilities have become major concerns in current educational discourse and have been linked to inclusive education. In recent years, the use of assistive technologies, adaptive learning systems, pedagogies with an AI component, and digitally facilitated communication practices in education has gained momentum globally, driven by a desire to create more accessible learning environments and deliver personalised learning experiences. The changes have opened up new opportunities for differentiated teaching and institutionalisation. However, they have also voiced serious concerns over the progressive undermining of the relational and ethical bases of education. In many current contexts, inclusion can become a mere 'process' quantified by the number of accommodations, the use of technology, and compliance procedures, while the emotional, communicative, and human aspects of participation are insufficiently taken into account.

In a diverse learning environment, this is especially important, as participation is influenced not only by access to instructional resources but also by the quality of learning relationships. Inclusion happens in everyday communicative encounters: the amount of listening that takes place, institutions' responses to vulnerability, the extent to which families are authentically involved, and whether learners are considered active participants in educational settings. Williamson et al. (2025) thus propose that inclusion needs to be considered in relational rather than structural terms. In this sense, inclusion is not just about being physically present, but about being able to communicate, be recognised by others, and engage collaboratively.

This view is significant to the current educational paradigm. There has been growing questioning of models of inclusion based on the dominant practices of administrative integration and institutional practice. Rather than focusing on the relational approach in education, trust, emotional safety, learner voice and dialogic participation are considered fundamental aspects of a meaningful

educational experience. For example, Flannery (2026) defines relational competence as attentiveness, emotional presence, communication, and ethical responsiveness in education. This focus is particularly relevant in educational contexts where communication is transactional and depersonalised, the institutional culture is performance-driven, behavioural surveillance systems are in place, and algorithmic assessment practices are used.

Managerial and technocratic approaches to educational leadership also reflect the same institutional and measurable performance, accountability, and efficiency values found in other aspects of educational leadership. These measures have helped enhance policy implementation and administrative coordination, but they fail to fully account for the emotional and communication-intensive work involved in education. It is particularly apparent in learner-diversity contexts, where empathetic engagement, collaborative participation, and responsive institutions are key to meaningful participation. Similarly, Trivedi and Singh (2025) note that leadership has a significant impact on emotional health, sociocultural involvement, and institutional integration in educational institutions. Leadership is not just about the governance of procedures, it is about the creation of educational cultures which foster dignity, trust and belonging.

In this context, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) take on a new meaning. In the past few years, the concept of IKS has gained a new understanding beyond being merely a civilisational or revivalist effort; it has come to be seen as a comprehensive intellectual paradigm that can also shape current thinking on education (Pandit, 2025). As per the Ministry of Education, Government of India (n.d.), the concept of IKS is considered to be an integrated approach of *jñāna* (knowledge), *viññāna* (scientific understanding), and *jīvana darśana* (philosophy of life), highlighting the linkage between cognition, ethics, lived experiences, and social responsibility. While the Western educational paradigm has been divided into intellectual learning, emotional and ethical development, the Indian educational

traditions have historically been relational, dialogic, and socially embedded.

This orientation is reflected in various aspects of Indian philosophies. Reflective inquiry and dialogical engagement are emphasised as pedagogies in the Upanishad rather than unidirectional instruction. In the Katha Upanishad, the discussion between Nachiketa and Yama is a learning process of asking questions, reflecting and discriminating right from wrong. In the same way, the Bhagavad Gita uses the term "svadharma" to describe the "ethical duty" or "ethical responsibility" that is in harmony with the welfare of the people rather than with one's personal interests (Bhagavad Gita 3.19; 18.47). Buddhist traditions also carry on this ethical emphasis through the concept of *karuṇā*, or compassion, which emphasises recognising vulnerability and responsibility in relationships. All of these traditions place empathy, reflective participation and humane engagement as core values of learning.

Today's educational systems have important implications in these viewpoints. However, as learners, they do not just 'perform' in educational environments, but also through relationships that need to foster a sense of confidence, communication, emotional security and institutional belonging. This is especially important for students who experience communicative, sensory, emotional, and/or cognitive differences. Inclusive education can be achieved at the expense of standardisation and with insufficient attention, leading to unintended consequences such as exclusion. Indian Knowledge Systems provide a valuable perspective by highlighting contextual awareness, a relational approach to teaching and learning, and ethical engagement.

Given the volume of literature on educational inclusion and educational leadership in general, little attention has been paid to how the Indian Knowledge Systems can contribute to ongoing debates and discussions on education, relationship communication, and educational leadership. The literature on IKS tends to be curricular, philosophical, and/or policy-based, with less attention paid to communication studies,

institutional culture, or relational pedagogy. Likewise, the dominant scholarship on inclusion remains largely influenced by Eurocentric theoretical perspectives, which are not adequately connected with indigenous epistemologies and perspectives on education.

To fill this void, the present paper proposes a conceptual framework that brings together Indian Knowledge Systems, relational communication, and ethical leadership within the current educational landscape. The paper proposes that IKS offers a way to rethink educational participation beyond procedural inclusion and technocratic governance, providing an ethically grounded and culturally resonant approach. The study draws on interdisciplinary scholarship in education, communication, leadership, and Indian philosophical thought. It offers a new leadership paradigm, namely relational stewardship, characterised by empathy, communicative trust, collaborative participation, and ethical stewardship.

Theoretically, the paper is conceptual and interpretive in nature, and methodologically, it is based on the synthesis of theories from various disciplines. The discussion is based on the current scholarship on relational inclusion, educational communication, leadership, and Indian Knowledge Systems, as well as an interpretation of philosophical texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishadic dialogic approach, and Buddhist ethical thinking. It is not to glorify indigenous practices or to see them as being opposed to technological development. Instead, the paper calls for maintaining the relational and ethical aspects of education in increasingly technologized contexts.

This paper brings Indian Knowledge Systems into the current dialogue on communication and leadership to foster emerging scholarship in decolonial pedagogy, relational educational practice, and humane educational transformation. More fundamentally, it suggests that educational inclusion has a future not because of institutional change or technological sophistication, but because of the ability of educational systems to maintain meaningful human relationships.

## 2. Indian Knowledge Systems and Relationality in Education

### 2.1 Relational Epistemologies in Indian Educational Thought

Indian Knowledge Systems offer a very relational approach to learning. Indian educational traditions have always regarded knowledge as integral to moral awareness, social engagement, critical inquiry, and the all-round development of the human person, rather than the mere accumulation of information or expertise. The Ministry of Education, Government of India (n.d.) defines IKS as a unification of *jñāna* (knowledge), *viññāna* (scientific understanding), and *jīvana darśana* (philosophy of life), in contrast to the disintegration of cognition, ethics, and lived experience prevalent in many contemporary educational systems.

In recent years, IKS has emerged as a valuable intellectual tool for addressing the challenges of the present educational context related to mechanisation, standardisation, and over-technologisation (Pandit, 2025). Indian educational thinking is not only about the efficiency of educational institutions, measurable performance, or procedural outcomes, but also about the development of reflective, ethically aware, and socially responsible human beings. Learning, in this context, is not only about teaching and learning but also relational, formative, and transformative.

One of the key tenets of Indian epistemological traditions is interconnectedness. The human being is not seen as an individual and isolated person, but as a person situated in relation to others within a broader social, moral, ecological, and spiritual context. The notions of *ātma* (self), *samāḥ* (society) and *parivaar* (family/community) emphasise the importance of interdependence as a key aspect of personal development and social well-being. Educational development, thus, is not only intellectual but also encompasses the development of empathy, responsibility, attentiveness, and social participation.

This relational approach is especially significant in today's educational context, which is increasingly governed by data, performance measures, and

algorithm-based pedagogies. Technology systems have increased access to and flexibility in teaching and learning, but they have also facilitated more transactional forms of engagement in educational interactions. Learners may be seen as more than just performance indicators, behavioural categories, or assessment outcomes, but as socially and emotionally situated learners. Indian Knowledge Systems call into question this reductive view by reasserting that education is still about human relationships and ethical participation.

In a learner-diverse educational setting, communicative responsiveness, emotional reassurance, and contextual understanding are more important than standardised instructional approaches for participation to occur. Exclusion from education does not always happen in an explicit or formal institutional way, but can be more subtle, such as when educators are communicatively neglectful, emotionally invisible, have pedagogical expectations that are too high or too low, or make deficit assumptions about learners' capabilities. Educational systems that emphasise uniformity over attentiveness, therefore, offer a valuable conceptual foil to relational epistemologies in IKS.

Most importantly, relationality in Indian educational thinking does not only exist in interpersonal interactions. It also raises many ethical issues. The concept of responsibility is continually associated with knowledge, self-reflection and social well-being. Educational practice, therefore, is not only seen as the transfer of skills but also as part of a wider moral and social framework. This moral outlook assumes greater significance in the current educational context, where efficiency and measurable results are the main concerns of the institution rather than reflective and humanistic interaction.

### 2.2 Guru–Śiṣya and Dialogic Pedagogy

The most important pedagogical model in the Indian pedagogical tradition is that of the guru and the *śiṣya*. While some modern versions of this model of teaching and learning are limited to a hierarchy of instruction, its richer pedagogical meaning lies in ongoing mentoring, dialogic

engagement, ethical accompaniment, and contextual attentiveness. The guru is not just an authority figure who provides information but a reflective guide involved in the learner's intellectual, ethical, and emotional development. Likewise, the learner is not a mere object of instruction, but a subject of a joint exploration, reflection and comprehension.

Dialogue has been the main focus of the pedagogy in India throughout. Knowledge was not seen as a given to be imparted once and for all, but as an emerging insight that comes from reflecting, questioning, and communicating. It is found in some of the most explicit ways in the Upanishadic tradition. The dialogues between Yājñavalkya and Maitreyi in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad are not instructional but rather questions, answers, and philosophical discussions. In the same way, in the Katha Upanishad, Nachiketa asks Yama questions, demonstrating inquiry and patience, and shows him the way to transformation through inquiry, patience, and discernment.

The dialogic approach has significant implications for current teaching and learning. When learners feel recognised as communicators rather than instructed, their educational participation is enhanced. Trust, emotional safety, and adaptability are important factors in participation, especially in educational contexts with diverse learners. Children with communicative, cognitive, sensory, or emotional differences may need to be educated in settings that are more attentive to and responsive to their needs than to the uniformity of teaching.

Relational pedagogy is also a current body of scholarship that highlights the importance of communicative participation and social recognition as the basis for inclusion, rather than just institutional placement (Williamson et al., 2025). Flannery (2026) also states that relational competence requires listening, being emotionally present and communicating adaptively to maintain meaningful learning relationships. The views are similar to those that are already part of the Indian educational tradition and are dialogic.

Another aspect of the guru–śiṣya model is pedagogical attentiveness. The learner's individuality, emotional rhythms, developmental pace, and contextual realities must all be taken into consideration if the learner is to be engaged effectively. This orientation challenges education systems that are often based on a standardised approach to teaching and learning, which may not be responsive to students' needs. In this context, educational relations become areas of trust, reflection, and joint participation rather than information transfer.

The moral aspect of dialogic pedagogy is also of great importance. The Indian educational traditions have always emphasised learning as a process of inner refinement and self-development, rather than merely as preparation for a profession or the accumulation of knowledge. Dialogue was thus used not only for teaching but also for moralising and introspection. The knowledge remains highly relevant in today's educational setting, as the focus on measurable learning outcomes often comes at the expense of the emotional and relational aspects of learning.

### 2.3 Dharma, Compassion, and Ethical Participation

Another important perspective for rethinking participation in education and institutional culture is the ethical principles of Indian Knowledge Systems. Dharma, a philosophical concept in India that broadly means ethical responsibility, moral alignment, and commitment to collective well-being, is central to Indian philosophical thought. In the Bhagavad Gita, action is always described in terms of *svadharma*, action performed without attachment to the self or to institutional rewards (Bhagavad Gita 3.19; 18.47). This orientation has a profound impact on how educational practice and leadership could be considered.

Inclusion is often addressed in contemporary educational institutions through regulatory measures, compliance structures, and policy procedures. While they are still required, they might not be sufficient to address the ethical aspects of involvement in education. Issues of accessibility,



communication, assessment, behaviour intervention, and learner support are not just administrative but also ethical, as they affect learners' dignity, participation, and sense of belonging.

An IKS-based knowledge of dharma brings a new perspective to education, which is not only an institutional function, but also a relational and moral one. Educational involvement is seen not only in personal achievement but also in responsibility towards others and in the development of the collective good. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of a growing competitive, performative and institutional ranking culture in educational systems.

This moral attitude is carried forward in the Buddhist educational traditions, which are based on the principle of *karuṇā*, or compassion. In Buddhist philosophy, compassion is not a feeling of sympathy but rather an attentive, ethical response to vulnerability and suffering. It has deep pedagogical implications for such an orientation. Educational settings often have anxious students who face communication difficulties, feel socially excluded, emotionally distressed or alienated by the institution. Compassionate approaches to education that focus on relationships foster attention, patience, emotional regulation, and nonjudgmental engagement.

These ethical orientations also call into question deficit notions of learner difference. Labels, diagnostic classifications or performance expectations are common ways of categorising learners in an educational system, which can lead to a de-institutionalisation of the learner. Indian philosophy, on the contrary, emphasises dignity, the value of relationships, and moral responsibility towards all stakeholders in educational communities. Learners are thus not seen as a problem to be managed but rather as people who need to be recognised, responded to and included.

More essentially, dharma and *karuṇā* move education away from its position as an ethical practice. Learning is not just about measurable outcomes or career progression; it is also about

building relationships with others, engaging in reflection, and participating in socially responsible ways. They provide a valuable moral perspective in a world of ever-more technologized and performance-oriented education.

## 2.4 Collective Learning and Community Participation

The Indian educational tradition has always understood learning as a social and collective process rather than an individual one. Educational participation was viewed as a process that engaged the family, community, teacher, and social networks in shared responsibility and collaboration. The notions of *sabhā* highlight collective dialogue, reflective deliberation and participatory exchange as key aspects of the process of knowledge production.

This orientation remains highly relevant in today's educational environment, where educational institutions are often fragmented and professional isolation is prevalent. Collaboration between educators, caregivers, counsellors, administrators and support professionals often is a key component of learner support. However, there can be a lack of communication between educational institutions, which can be procedural, hierarchical and compartmentalised. This fragmentation reduces institutional responsiveness and reduces educational engagement.

An IKS-informed framework, on the other hand, views participation in education relationally sustained. The term *parivaar* offers a new perspective on the concepts of family and community, viewing them as integral to educational life rather than as peripheral stakeholders in the institution. In contexts with diverse learners, it is particularly crucial to consider caregivers' perspectives, as they may have valuable experiential knowledge of how learners communicate, how they feel, what their behaviours are, and what their realities are.

Similarly, Kalyanpur (2018) notes that the sociocultural context, community organisation, and family involvement play a significant role in educational involvement in India. Inclusive education cannot, then, be considered only in terms

of policy or institutional control. It should also take into consideration the relational and cultural aspects that influence learners' and families' experience of educational systems.

Collective learning orientations are also conducive to collaborative pedagogical and organisational cultures. The teaching, therapeutic, counselling, and support professions are no longer operating in professional silos within educational institutions but are increasingly engaged in interdisciplinary work. Dialogue, empathy and shared responsibility in relational communication foster trust within the institution and more responsive educational settings.

In all these traditions, an education that is clearly relational emerges. Knowledge is socially located, learning is dialogic, participation is ethical and educational growth is intertwined with collective well-being. Indian Knowledge Systems thus offer not just philosophical profundity, but also an alternative educational imagination that does not rely on depersonalised and mechanistic modes of learning, but instead focuses on attentiveness, responsibility and human connection as the core of educational life.

### 3. Relational Communication and Educational Participation

Learning is communicative, and relational communication plays a vital role in the current educational practice. The quality of experiences of recognition, trust, responsiveness and belonging within interactions are as much a part of educational participation as are curriculum, institutional policy, or instructional delivery. Communication is not just a means of conveying information; it is a process for creating, negotiating, and maintaining educational relationships, institutional cultures, and identities.

It is especially important in the context of learning diversity, where the ability to participate may rely on communicative sensitivity and emotional responsiveness. Cognitive, sensory, linguistic, emotional, and social differences are common among learners who are likely to encounter learning environments that are based on normative assumptions about behaviour, communication, and

participation in the classroom. Inclusion is not only about inclusion within the institution or in policy. Students can be formally present in educational environments yet still feel marginalised or emotionally and/or communicatively invisible.

This distinction has come to the fore in recent years in scholarship. Educational inclusion is not only physical, but also social, communicative and relational, as put forward by Williamson et al. (2025). This perspective expands the traditional theories of educational participation by highlighting the relational conditions in which learners come to understand themselves as valued contributors in educational communities. Communication, in this way, is not a secondary issue to inclusion but an integral part of it.

This viewpoint also defies very procedural methods of teaching and learning. Modern institutions tend to favour evaluation, quantifiable results, conformity to behaviour and a uniform pedagogical organisation. These mechanisms can help to coordinate institutions, but they can also limit communicative opportunities in educational settings. While there may be explicit statements of inclusion, learners who communicate differently, emotionally, at a different tempo, or in a different way may feel subtly excluded.

Relational communication is an important alternative to such mechanistic models of education. Relational approaches focus on attentiveness, listening, emotional presence, and recognising one another, rather than on efficiency. Flannery (2026) defines relational competence as the ability to maintain positive learning relationships by listening actively, interacting adaptively, building trust and communicating emotionally. Therefore, participation in education is enhanced not only by access to learning materials but also by communicative environments that affirm learners' dignity and agency.

Indian Knowledge Systems play a significant role in this discussion, as the Indian pedagogical tradition has always conceptualised communication as dialogic, ethical, and transformative. Educational interaction was not just equated with the process of teaching; it was seen as a relational process that led

to the emergence of knowledge, reflection and self-development in a collective manner. Inquiry and dialogue, for example, were the focus of learning in the Upanishadic traditions. Knowledge was revealed through asking questions, thinking and reflecting, and communicating with others, not through one-way transmission.

The guru-śiṣya relationship also emphasised the communicative bond between teacher and student. Importantly, this was not a one-way relationship, but one that was attentive, reciprocal and contextually responsive. The role of the educator was not just about teaching but also about mentoring, ethically guiding, and accompanying in a relational way. The pedagogical orientations remain highly pertinent in today's educational environment, where learning is increasingly emotionally dislocated and technologically mediated.

Classroom communication thus has an impact beyond just the effectiveness of instruction. It affects emotional security, learner confidence, participation, and educational identity. A context of excessive correction, excessive surveillance of behaviour, too little emotional response, or a too-strict set of communicative demands can exacerbate learner withdrawal and institutional alienation. On the other hand, empathetic, reflective listening, patient, and adaptive engagement cultures encourage participation and trust.

This is important, especially in the context of AI-driven education. Today, predictive analytics, automated feedback, adaptive communication, and digitally mediated learning environments are becoming commonplace tools in contemporary institutions for personalising learning and streamlining educational processes. These technologies offer valuable opportunities for access and teaching, but they also have the potential to de-emotionalise and de-relationalise communication to the point of mere information transfer.

Such tendencies have to be balanced by the thought of India in the field of education. In IKS traditions, learning is always an interaction with other people and an ethical participation. While technology can help provide access and instructional flexibility, it

cannot, on its own, build empathy, attentiveness, or communicative trust. Ultimately, the educational participation relies on relationships that can support and maintain recognition and emotional reassurance.

The emotional architecture of educational environments is thus the teacher-student communication. Educational institutions are often experienced by learners in the context of everyday communicative experiences – being listened to, having one's anxieties acknowledged, being able to question, and being able to be different without being corrected. These interactions influence participation as well as learners' sense of self-worth and sense of belonging to the institution.

Family-institution relationships are also important. Schools and parents/carers may only communicate on a procedural basis, such as reporting on assessments, discipline issues or administrative matters. This model can place families in a passive role, where they are not involved in education but are instead recipients of expertise from institutions. However, the Indian tradition of education always emphasises the collective responsibility and socially embedded learning. The idea of *parivaar* is about being connected and involved with one another in the educational process.

This is also noted by Kalyanpur (2018), who states that the sociocultural context, family structures, and community involvement significantly impact educational participation in India. Communicating with caregivers in a way that acknowledges their role as partners with valuable context-specific knowledge about how learners behave, communicate, and feel, as well as their experiences, benefits educational institutions. Dialogic engagement with families enhances collaboration, continuity and trust in educational support.

Relational communication also influences the cooperation between teachers, counsellors, therapists and support staff. In the modern educational system, communication often takes place in a hierarchical manner, and there is a tendency towards professional compartmentalisation in its organisational structure. Fragmentation negatively impacts institutional



responsiveness and the ability to provide learners with comprehensive support. Relationship-based learning cultures, on the other hand, foster interdisciplinary conversations, thinking, and problem-solving.

More fundamentally, relational communication is a transformation of the understanding of educational participation itself. Participation is not just about behaviour and attendance in class; it is about being communicated with and recognised in educational life. Learners are meaningfully engaged when they are in an environment that maintains their attention, empathy and respect.

Indian Knowledge Systems add to this understanding by foregrounding dialogue, ethical responsibility and relational attentiveness as core values of education. In this context, communication is not only a means to an end but also an integral part of the educational relationship and the institution's culture. These viewpoints provide a valuable reminder that education is fundamentally a human and relational experience amid increasingly technologized, performance-based educational contexts.

#### **4. Ethical Leadership and Relational Stewardship**

The nature of leadership in today's educational institutions is becoming increasingly complex due to conflicting pressures from accountability, technology, performance, policy, and efficiency. These priorities have helped improve administrative coordination and increase access to educational resources, but have also led to more managerial forms of educational governance. Measurable outcomes, institutional efficiency, institutional ranking, and policy implementation are the main criteria for evaluating leadership in many institutions. However, education is not just a system of administration, it is a relational space that is emotional, communicative, vulnerable and interdependent with humans. Leadership is not just about procedure and management.

This tension is more pronounced in learning environments with diverse learners, where participation often requires trust, empathy,

collaborative engagement, and institutional adaptability. People who face communicative, emotional, cognitive, or social differences in their learning often learn from the quality of the relationships around them within their educational system. Leadership, therefore, affects the organisation's functioning, as well as the emotional climate, communication culture, and learners' sense of belonging. The same can be said by Trivedi and Singh (2025), who state that leadership plays a significant role in influencing participation, emotional well-being, and sociocultural inclusion in educational settings.

Nonetheless, prevailing leadership models in education remain technocratic and transactional, prioritising standardisation, accountability, surveillance, and performance maximisation. Such frameworks tend to focus on the institutional control, administrative management and procedural coordination of leadership. Such strategies might help reinforce the organisation, but they do not necessarily do so in an appropriate ethical and relational manner in education.

This constraint is becoming increasingly evident in the context of AI-driven learning environments. Predictive analytics, automated assessment, behavioural monitoring, adaptive learning and algorithmic governance structures are now used in educational institutions to monitor educational processes. The developments provide significant opportunities for accessibility, flexibility in teaching and learning, and personalised learning. However, they also run the danger of further de-personalising and turning education into "data-driven management". Learners can increasingly be understood in behavioural, performance, and algorithmic terms, rather than as emotionally and socially located persons.

Indian Knowledge Systems provide a significant counterpoint to this conversation by challenging the notion of leadership as stewardship over institutions and redefining it as stewardship over relationships and ethics. In Indian philosophies, leadership is not only a moral responsibility towards collective well-being but is also a moral accountability, known as dharma. The Bhagavad Gita repeatedly discusses

action in terms of *svadharma*, meaning action performed in accordance with moral duty rather than for self-interest or to gain others' approval (Bhagavad Gita 3.19; 18.47). This orientation is a complete paradigm shift in the concept of leadership.

From this perspective, educational leadership is not just the authority a leader has over institutional systems. It is a relational practice based on responsibility towards learners, educators, caregivers, and communities. Educational leaders are responsible for ensuring that the organisation is efficient and for building a culture that upholds dignity, participation, trust, and emotional safety. Leadership, thus, precedes managerialism and is ethical.

This change is particularly significant in the educational cultures that are becoming more performative and competitive in today's society. School leaders are often faced with the challenges of rankings, accreditation, measurable outcomes and policy requirements. In such circumstances, the relational aspects of educational life can shift over time into second place to the administrative goals. In Indian philosophy, however, there is a valuable counterbalance: institutional responsibility cannot be divorced from ethical awareness and a caring relationship.

This ethical perspective leads to the idea of relational stewardship that is put forward in this paper. Relational stewardship is leadership based on the principles of communicative trust, collaborative participation, empathy, attentiveness, and shared responsibility. Relational stewardship focuses on building educational cultures in which people feel recognised and have a sense of belonging, rather than transactional leadership models that rely on regulation and compliance.

This framework also emphasises communication as a key part of leadership practice. Educational institutions operate in relation to one another in the everyday communicative process – through dialogue, disagreement, vulnerability, and institutional trust. Leadership is thus not just a matter of policy decisions; it is also about the communicative culture. Collaboration and

emotional well-being are often undermined in institutions where there is fear, too much surveillance, too much distance between people in the bureaucracy, or too much hierarchy. In contrast, dialogic institutional cultures foster participation, inter-disciplinary engagement and reflective problem-solving.

Such collective and dialogic orientations have been repeatedly emphasised in Indian traditions of education. The ideas of *sabhā* emphasised the reflective deliberation and participatory exchange in community life. These traditions did not involve only centralised leadership but also the facilitation of ethical and collective participation. This view is very similar to current research that focuses on collaborative and distributed leadership in schools.

Relationships are also a key aspect of leadership for educator well-being. The emotional exhaustion, institutional overload, adaptive pedagogical needs and demands of technologically mediated teaching environments are becoming commonplace for educational professionals. However, institutional leadership systems often value productivity and compliance over emotional sustainability. Relational stewardship calls into question this imbalance by acknowledging that learning care for learners is not distinct from teaching care for educators.

The teacher–student relationship is important here and is illuminated by the *guru–śiṣya* tradition. While the framework is historically located, it highlights educational relationships that are attentive, mentoring, ethical, and ongoing. In the current environment, this orientation implies that leadership needs to foster reflective pedagogical cultures rather than merely monitor instructional performance. Teachers need institutional spaces in which they can build trust, have autonomy, engage in dialogue, and be emotionally resilient.

The family–institution relationship is also given a new significance in this context. Engaging caregivers is sometimes seen as a process or an afterthought in educational governance. However, social thought in India has always centred on learning within collective and relational structures. The idea of *parivaar* emphasises the

interdependence of participation and responsibility in social life. With this perspective, families are not just external stakeholders but partners in educational processes.

Kalyanpur (2018) also emphasises the role of sociocultural and familial contexts in educational participation in India. As a result, schools have leadership models that foster dialogic relationships with caregivers and communities rather than bureaucratic distance. This engagement helps foster trust within the institutions and contributes to creating more contextually responsive learning spaces.

The concept of *karuṇā*, or compassion, is another element of Buddhist ethical thought that enriches this leadership concept. In the Buddhist context, compassion means a longing to be aware of vulnerability and suffering, and not a paternalistic sympathy. Such an orientation has significant implications for educational leadership, as institutions often work with learners and educators who are experiencing emotional stress, uncertainty, exclusion, and institutional pressure. Compassionate leadership, then, is more than just being sensitive as an administrator; it is being present with ethics and being attuned to relationships.

Importantly, relational stewardship does not mean that the organisation's structure, accountability, and technological innovation are unwelcome. The coordination, policy and institutional planning of educational systems is needed. Instead, the approach suggested in this paper maintains that these processes are subject to human relationships and ethical participation. Technology can help us to gain access to education and communicate, but it is not the one that can develop empathy, trust or moral judgment.

The result of this discussion is a more general rethinking of the nature of educational leadership. Leadership is not just about managing institutions; it is about creating educational cultures. Institutions are meaningful educational environments if they can maintain dialogue, attentiveness, collaborative participation, and ethical responsibility. Indian

Knowledge Systems play an important role in this reorientation by foregrounding relationality and humane engagement as core values in education.

In the context of increasingly technologized and performance-oriented educational contexts, relational stewardship is an alternative leadership imagination that assesses educational success not only on efficiency or institutional performance but also on the quality of relationships that educational systems can maintain.

## 5. A Conceptual Framework for Relational Educational Practice

The above discussion suggests that Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), relational communication and ethical leadership cannot be considered as three distinct conceptual fields in isolation in the context of education. Instead, they are distinct aspects of a broader educational vision grounded in dialogue, ethical engagement, attentiveness, and collective flourishing. This section brings these together in a conceptual framework that redefines education as a relational process sustained by communicative trust, ethical responsibility, and collaborative institutional culture.

This is based on a rethinking of educational participation itself at the centre. Participation is often understood in educational systems in terms of measurable outcomes such as attendance, behavioural compliance, assessment results, institutional retention, or instructional access. These dimensions remain relevant but do not adequately capture learners' learning experiences. The emotional, communicative and relational aspects of participation are also important. Learning is meaningful when learners feel recognised, heard and valued in learning spaces.

The distinction is especially significant when learners are diverse, as exclusion can occur in subtle ways: by marginalising the learner in communication, by not recognising the learner's emotions, or by holding fixed expectations about the learner within the institution. Students can sit in the classroom but not be a part of the learning. Williamson et al. (2025) therefore claim that the

relational approach, not just the structural approach, needs to be taken when thinking about educational inclusion. Access alone is not enough to make educational systems participatory, however, because they need to foster dialogue, trust, and a sense of belonging.

This concern is addressed directly in the framework proposed here by introducing relationality as the organising principle linking pedagogy, communication and leadership. This is rooted in the Indian Knowledge System, which gives the philosophical and ethical basis. The tradition of education in India has always emphasised the interconnectedness of all things, reflective enquiry, collective participation, and responsibility towards others as key elements of learning. Education, in this perspective, is not just a process of imparting knowledge; it is a process of human growth that is socially embedded and has an ethical dimension.

The first dimension of the framework can thus be seen as relational epistemology. In Indian educational thought, knowledge is not considered mere information or technical know-how. It is lived in relation, ethical reflection and in relationships. The ideas of guru–śiṣya, dharma and parivaar bring into the foreground the importance of being attentive, reciprocal, and participating with others in the life of education. Learning is not individualistic but is through continuous communicative and ethical interaction with others.

This epistemological approach is a strong critique of the current educational systems that are based on mechanisation, over-standardisation and algorithmic management. Learners have more environments in which they are required to monitor behaviour, make predictions, assess performance based on data, and be held accountable for their performance. Such systems can enhance efficiency and institutional coordination, but they can also lead to the de-emotionalisation and detachment of the educational experience from its emotional and relational aspects. Indian Knowledge Systems offer an important corrective, asserting that education is still about human development and social responsibility.

The second aspect of the framework is relational communication. Communication in educational contexts is not just about teaching and learning but also about negotiating participation, recognition, and belonging to the institution on an ongoing basis. Learners see educational institutions in their daily communicative encounters: asking questions, showing vulnerability, showing empathy towards difference, and maintaining respectful dialogue.

For Flannery (2026), relational competence is the capacity to develop meaningful learning relationships by being attuned, adaptively communicative and emotionally present. These skills are even more critical in learning environments where communication may be transactional and/or technologically mediated. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to enhance accessibility and instructional flexibility through its use of instructional systems, automated feedback, and digitally mediated learning environments. The use of AI in instructional systems, automated feedback, and digitally mediated learning environments certainly contributes to accessibility and instructional flexibility. They are unable to maintain their own empathy, attentiveness or emotional trust, however.

Relational communication, thus, is a way of putting into practice the ethical commitments inherent in IKS. It takes the philosophical ideas into the actual practice of education. The mechanisms that are central to meaningful educational participation are dialogic classrooms, reflective listening, adaptive interaction, collaborative problem-solving, and communicative responsiveness. In this context, communication is not an addition to education but an integral part of it; it is the way educational life is experienced.

The third aspect of the framework concerns leadership in the context of relational stewardship. The concept of educational leadership is frequently defined in terms of administration, regulation, institutional planning and control of the organisation. Nevertheless, these models often fail to account for the emotional and communicative aspects of institutional culture. The leadership has the power to shape the nature of educational space

as collaborative, fragmented, dialogic, or hierarchical, responsive, or procedural.

The framework presented in this paper restates the concept of leadership as a process of ethical development of institutional relationships. The concept of dharma in the IKS is understood as responsibility for the well-being of the community, rather than as authority over it through control. Educational leaders are not just system managers, but stewards of communicative and ethical culture.

The implications for institutional life are important for this orientation. The atmosphere in the educational space, marked by excessive surveillance, bureaucracy, or performatives, can dampen trust and participation, even while it is efficient at the administrative level. Institutional relational stewardship, on the other hand, focuses on dialogue, collaborative engagement, interdisciplinary participation and emotional sustainability. In this context, leadership is the art of maintaining good and decent educational environments.

The collective aspects of educational participation are also highlighted in the framework. Learning has always been viewed as a community process rather than as a process of learning in isolation within institutional settings in Indian traditions of education. *Sabhā* and *parivaar* highlight the interrelatedness of people, the reflective deliberation and shared responsibility. Modern schools and colleges also need the multifaceted involvement of teachers, parents, counsellors, school management, and the community. These relationships are strengthened when they are dialogical (not procedural) and enhance educational participation.

According to Kalyanpur (2018), sociocultural and familial contexts play a significant role in shaping educational participation in India. This insight strengthens the argument that the education system cannot rely solely on institutional mechanisms detached from lived social realities. In relational education practice, it is essential to involve families and communities as active participants in the educational process, not just as peripheral actors.

It is important to note that the proposed framework does not dismiss technological progress or institutional accountability. Educational systems need to be organised, flexible, and accessible, with policy frameworks. Instead, it is said that these mechanisms should be subject to human relationships and ethical involvement. While technological systems can help communicate and provide access to instruction, they cannot, by themselves, develop trust, empathy, or moral responsibility.

This distinction is increasingly important in the context of educational institutions operating in an AI-driven learning environment. The question at hand in today's education is not whether technology should be used in education but how education systems can maintain a relational depth and ethical attentiveness in technologically saturated contexts. The contribution of Indian Knowledge Systems to this discussion is significant, as it brings to the fore dialogue, compassion, and human interdependence as key values of education.

This framework gives rise to a re-thinking of education. Participation in education is not just about cognition and institution; it is about the relationship. Leadership is not just managerial leadership; it is ethical leadership. Communication is not just about information; it is about being part of something and being recognised. The dimensions can be meaningfully integrated into the current educational discourse by drawing on Indian Knowledge Systems, which provide a philosophical vocabulary for these dimensions.

In this regard, the framework not only helps discuss issues of educational communication and educational leadership but also those of decolonial pedagogy and humane educational futures. In an era where the educational system around the world is increasingly faced with the challenges of technologization, institutional fragmentation and performative governance, relational educational practice provides an alternative imagination, not one that is based on efficiency, but on attentiveness, responsibility and the presence of the human being.

In Figure 1, the conceptual framework developed in this paper is synthesised, explaining how the Indian



Knowledge Systems contribute to relational epistemology, communication, and ethical leadership in the current educational scenario.

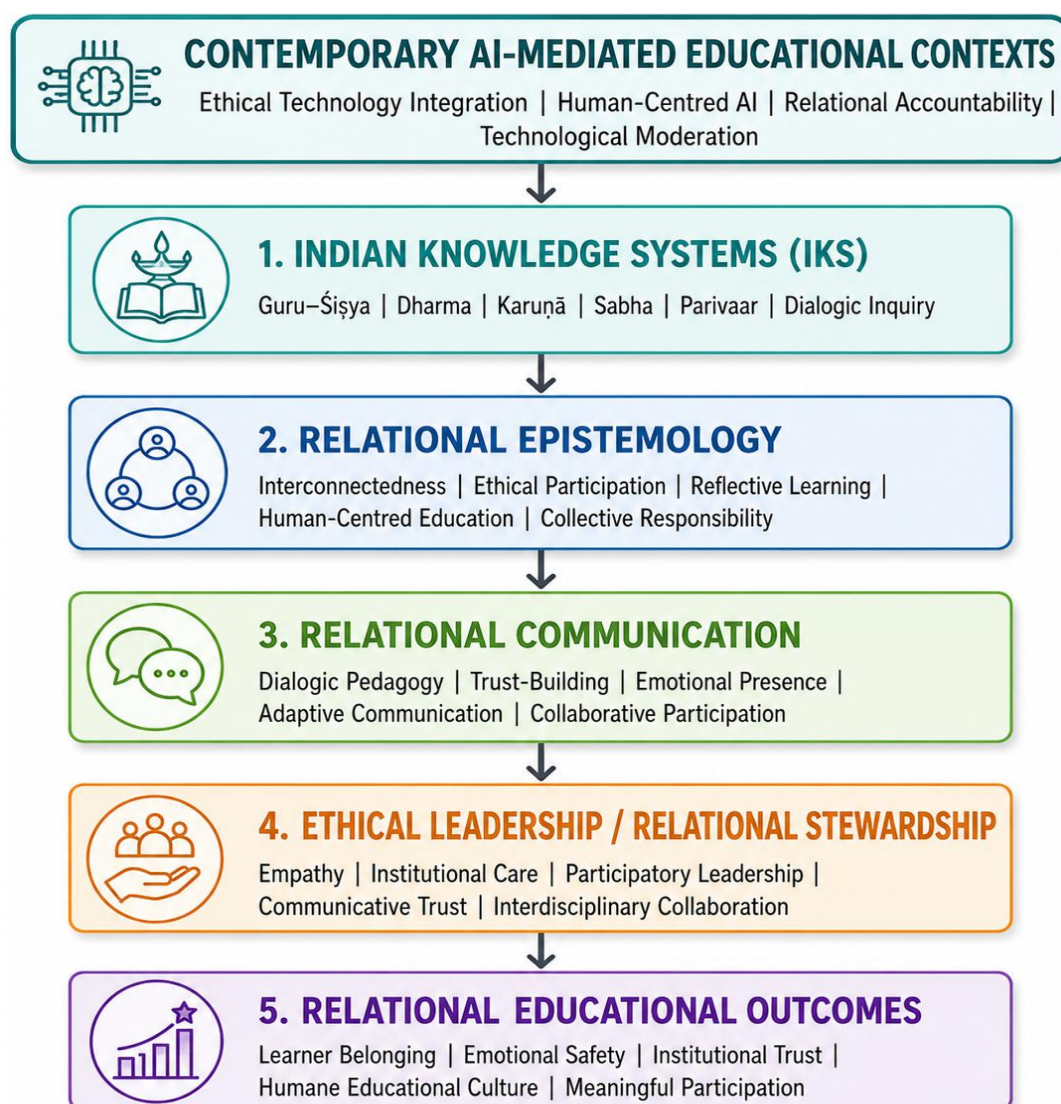


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Relational Educational Practice

## 6. Organisational and Pedagogical Implications

The framework outlined in this paper has important implications for today's schools, which are struggling with growing technologization, institutional fragmentation, and changing expectations regarding participation, communication, and leadership. However, most importantly, it requires a change in the culture of education. Understanding education as a relational process will require a shift in institutional practices, leadership, communication systems, and pedagogic

processes from compliance-based to more dialogic and ethically engaged ones.

One of the first concerns is institutional culture. While many schools formally encourage participation, accessibility, and learner-centred practice, they still have hierarchical communication systems, bureaucratic decision-making, and performative accountability systems in place. In such a context, it can be symbolic involvement instead of real involvement. Policies can be in place, but learners and educators can still feel a sense of

distance, communicative invisibility, or institutional alienation.

The proposed framework implies that educational institutions need to develop a relational culture not only for efficiency but also for other reasons. In the context of the role of structures in educational participation, Williamson et al. (2025) suggest that meaningful participation in education is achieved through communicative engagement and social recognition, rather than mere structural inclusion. Thus, the quality of relationships that institutions can maintain is as important as how well they implement their policies and fulfil measurable performance indicators in evaluating institutional culture.

This will involve many changes to organisational communication. Educational leadership teams should foster participatory dialogue, collaborative reflection, and interdisciplinary engagement, rather than one-way communication from leadership. The building of trust in institutions occurs when teachers, students, caretakers and support staff feel involved in decision-making processes, rather than receiving instructions from the institution.

A glance at the traditions of education in India will give us some clues in this context. The idea of *sabhā* emphasises the deliberative reflection and communal engagement in the life of the community. In the context of modern education, this orientation calls for educational institutions to transcend a culture of bureaucracy and adopt a more dialogic organisational form to facilitate collaborative educational engagement. These are particularly relevant in learner-diverse educational environments, where there is often a need for effective communication and collaboration between teachers, counsellors, therapists, caregivers and leaders.

The framework also has significant implications for the family–institution relationship. Communication with caregivers in education is often limited to reporting on performance, concerns about behaviours and/or institutional compliance. These strategies often position families outside the education system as stakeholders rather than as partners within it.

Indian Knowledge Systems, by contrast, emphasise collective and relational participation. *Parivaar* is a concept that emphasises the interconnectedness of responsibility and the involvement of all in learning and development. Similarly, Kalyanpur (2018) emphasises the role of the sociocultural context and family involvement in educational participation in India. Communication practices that acknowledge the role of caregivers as partners, and that understand the contexts in which learners live, learn, and experience emotions and communication patterns, as well as their developmental realities, therefore benefit educational institutions.

Dialogic family engagement enhances trust in institutions and continuity of the educational and social environment. What is more important is that it transforms the nature of education participation from a transaction to a process of cooperation and mutual respect, based on shared responsibility.

The framework proposes a pedagogical shift from excessive standardisation of instructional cultures to more adaptive, relationship-based ones. Modern education systems often focus on completing the curriculum, achieving good assessment results, controlling student behaviour and optimising teaching effectiveness. These structures can facilitate institutional coordination but can also restrict educational interaction to a routine of procedures, which can be devoid of a learner's individuality and emotional experience.

Indian pedagogical traditions have always used dialogue, reflection, attentiveness, and responsiveness to context to approach learning. In the Upanishadic tradition, for example, questioning and contemplative dialogue were central to the educational process. The knowledge was acquired not only through teaching but also through questioning and thinking. These practices have pedagogical value for today's classrooms that are inundated with information and increasingly communicate through technology.

The importance of being sensitive to the emotional and communicative nature of learners' experiences of educational environments in relationship-centred pedagogy. Learning participation is enhanced when learners are provided with spaces that allow them to

ask questions, engage in reflective conversation, interact flexibly, and communicate safely. Flannery (2026) also notes that relational competence is not just about the technical aspects of teaching, but also about being emotionally present, building trust and communicating responsively.

This view also questions deficit-based teaching and learning that sees the learner as a diagnostic category, behavioural type or a deficit. The Indian philosophies, on the other hand, emphasise the dignity, the value of relationships, and the moral obligation of all stakeholders in the educational community. Learners are seen as people living in rich emotional, social, and communicative contexts, not as problems to be addressed in an institution.

Narrative-based pedagogical approaches are especially useful in this context. Learning in India has traditionally been presented in the context of ethical reflection, context and experience, as in the Panchatantra and Jataka Tales. In terms of teaching and learning, narrative pedagogies enable students to engage reflectively and emotionally in learning processes and to express themselves and make meaning together. These methods can be particularly significant in learning contexts that are diverse in learners' needs and/or where participation may be more flexible and emotionally supportive than in structured teaching.

Another key aspect of the framework is the need for interdisciplinary collaboration within educational institutions. Increasingly, coordinated involvement of teachers, counsellors, therapists, administrators and support professionals is required in educational systems. However, institutional arrangements often are still fragmented, with a lack of communication and professional isolation. This disintegration diminishes responsiveness and adds emotional burden to educators and learners.

Institutional cultures that focus on relationships, on the other hand, foster reflective conversation, joint planning, and joint pedagogical responsibility. Communication, in this case, is not only a means of coordinating organisations but also a means of maintaining institutional trust and collective participation.

The same applies to the teacher preparation and leadership development programs. In contemporary professional training systems, the focus is primarily on technical skills, classroom management, assessment methods, and institutional compliance, with comparatively less emphasis on emotional intelligence, communicative ethics, reflective pedagogy, and relational leadership. However, capacities are becoming increasingly important in education.

Teachers in modern learning spaces face the challenges of emotional exhaustion, communication and technological complexity, institutional strain, and teaching. Dialogic pedagogy, communicative responsiveness, ethical reflection and emotional resilience, therefore, need to be incorporated into the teacher education structures. Scholarship in the field of IKS and teacher education also suggests that Indian education emphasises holistic development, reflective learning, and social learning (Gurukul Interdisciplinary Journal of Management and Research, 2024).

Leadership preparation needs to undergo a similar change. The role of educational leadership is not just about efficiency and governance of the institution. Leaders are increasingly influencing the emotional climate, the communicative culture, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the sense of trust within the institution. The relational stewardship model presented in this paper thus focuses on the leadership qualities of empathy, dialogue, attentiveness and ethical accountability as the essential leadership skills.

These concerns are even more pressing in the context of AI in education. Adaptive learning systems, predictive analytics, automated feedback technologies, and algorithmic decision-making processes are now being used in educational institutions to a greater extent than ever before. Such advances offer valuable opportunities for greater access and flexibility in teaching, but they also raise significant issues, including depersonalisation, surveillance, algorithmic bias, and the loss of meaningful human interaction.

This paper does not oppose the use of technology. Instead, it requires ethically regulated technological

integration grounded in education-related values centred on the human being. The capacity to be attentive and caring, to engage in dialogue and to be responsible to others in relation is repeatedly emphasised as a key aspect of learning in Indian Knowledge Systems. While technology can help to access and coordinate institutions, it cannot develop empathy, ethical judgment or emotional trust.

Thus, the challenge for educational systems is to maintain the relationality in increasingly technological environments. This is a challenge that goes beyond the technical; it is philosophical and ethical. Innovation and the efficiency of educational institutions are not the only future of education; the capability of educational cultures to keep meaningful human relationships is also the future of education.

Finally, the organisational and pedagogical implications arising from this framework lead to a more general dehumanisation of educational practice. Indian Knowledge Systems have a role to play in this project by bringing back relationality, the ethics of participation, and collective responsibility into the current discourse of education. These views provide a different educational imagination in a more performative and fragmented education, one that is not just about inclusion by process, but about listening, conversation and being together.

## 7. Conclusion

Today's education systems are undergoing significant change due to the technologization of education, institutional accountability, data-driven governance, and rapidly changing pedagogical expectations. The developments have opened up possibilities for accessibility, adaptive learning and flexibility in the teaching and learning process, but have also raised concerns about depersonalisation, communicative fragmentation, and the diminishing of relational aspects in education. Participation in education is becoming increasingly measurable through metrics, performance indicators, procedural compliance, and algorithmic efficiency, rather than through the quality of human relationships essential to meaningful learning.

This paper suggests that Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer a valuable ethical and epistemological perspective for reconsidering communication and leadership in education in such settings. The study has highlighted the relationality of education, its ethical dimensions grounded in the concept of dharma, collective engagement and the Buddhist concept of *karuṇā* (compassion), in light of traditions of dialogic inquiry, *guru-śiṣya* relationality, dharma-based responsibility, collective participation and Buddhist notions of *karuṇā* (compassion). It has thus placed education at the centre of a fundamentally relational and ethically grounded process rather than a purely administrative or technocratic enterprise.

Specifically, the paper has shown that the concepts of communication, leadership, and educational participation in contemporary debates could be enriched by the concept of education in India. Much of the current research on inclusion and institutional leadership is grounded in a procedural, managerial, or Eurocentric approach that inadequately considers indigenous epistemologies and philosophies of education. The paper introduces IKS into current debates on relational communication and ethical leadership, thereby connecting to ongoing debates on decolonial pedagogy and humane educational futures.

One of the key findings of the study is the conceptual framework of relational stewardship, which is presented and discussed throughout the study. This approach reframes leadership as a process of ethical development of communicative trust, participatory engagement, attentiveness and institutional care rather than as institutional control or administrative oversight. Leadership, from this point of view, is relational rather than managerial. Educational cultures are fostered not only by implementing policies and being efficient but also by the quality of the relationships institutions cultivate.

The paper has also suggested that communication is a part of the educational life in a constitutive manner. Being involved in school is not just about what you do in the school, but also how you feel when you are recognised, listened to and valued in



the school. Relational communication, in turn, influences the emotional safety, learner confidence, institutional trust, and collaborative engagement. Schools that fail to attend to these aspects may appear to encourage participation while simultaneously producing formal emotional and communicative exclusion.

The study does not glorify Indian Knowledge Systems, nor does it claim that they are alternatives to technological development. The argument presented here is neither "anti-modern" nor "anti-technology". Adaptive technologies, accessibility frameworks, organisational coordination and institutional planning are required in contemporary educational systems. Instead, the paper proposes that technological systems should continue to be responsible for human relationships and ethical co-involvement. Technology can help to promote learning and communication, but it cannot be a substitute for developing the ability to be empathetic, attentive, reflective, and responsible.

As schools increasingly embrace AI-powered learning systems, predictive analytics, automated assessment tools, and algorithmic governance frameworks at an unprecedented scale, this worry grows with the increasing integration of AI into education. With the growing integration of AI into education, this concern becomes increasingly pressing as educational institutions adopt AI-mediated learning systems, predictive analytics, automated assessment tools, and algorithmic governance frameworks at an unprecedented scale. The task for today's education is not only to integrate technology into education, but also to maintain the relational depth in technologically saturated environments. The question of what technologies can do is only one of the ones that educational systems must continually ask, but also what forms of human engagement might be weakened by the technologies.

However, some limitations of the present study should be noted. The paper is conceptually and interpretively focused and does not empirically investigate the use of communication and/or leadership frameworks informed by IKS in specific institutional settings. There are still significant

cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, institutional, and policy differences that continue to influence educational realities. As such, the use of relational educational approaches could vary from place to place and community to community.

The study of how dialogic pedagogy, relational leadership, and communication practices using IKS operate in today's educational institutions could be a future research direction. Empirical research on teachers' experiences, learners' involvement, family involvement, interdisciplinary working and emotionally responsive institutional cultures would greatly enrich this area of research. Comparative studies of the crossovers of indigenous pedagogies and relational pedagogies in global contexts may also make a significant contribution to decolonial educational scholarship.

On a larger scale, the research suggests a need for a new philosophical discussion on the aim of education. The educational systems are facing increasing pressures from speed, efficiency, automation and performative productivity. Education, however, is a human thing and cannot be reduced to anything else. Learners are not involved in educational life through information but through relationships that provide recognition, trust, dignity, and belonging.

This is a lesson that Indian Knowledge Systems teach. In all the philosophies of India, education was never seen as mere cognitive exercises or preparing for a profession. It was also formed through the moral, reflective inquiry, social participation and relational engagement. These views become more relevant in a historical context in which institutions are becoming more diverse, and technology is advancing rapidly.

Finally, the future of educational practice might rely less on the sophistication of the educational institutional system than on the ability of educational cultures to hold humanity within the system. Educational spaces are meaningful not only when they are used to maximise performance, but also when they allow for dialogue, attention, compassion and human presence.



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