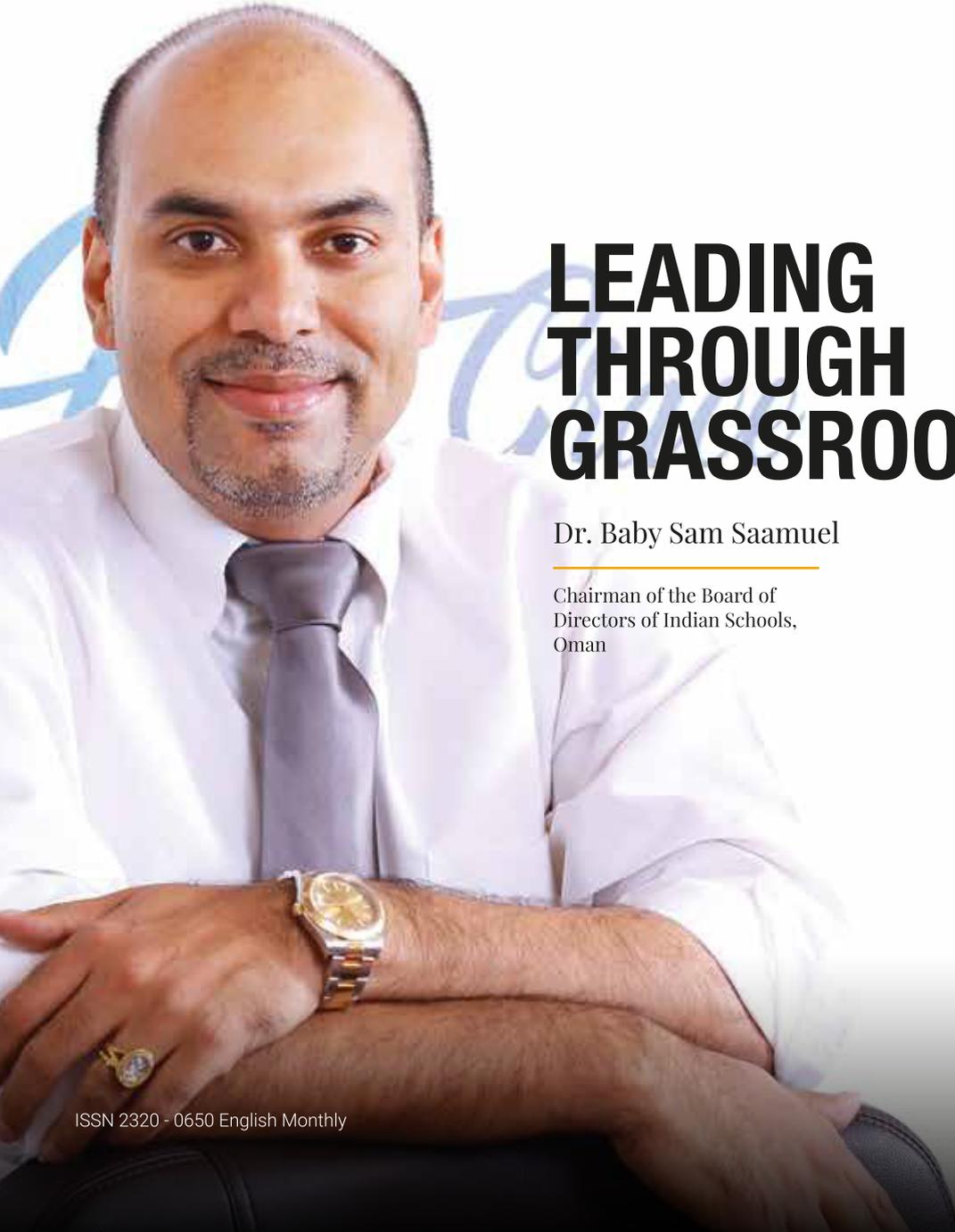


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LEADING THROUGH GRASSROOTS

Dr. Baby Sam Saamuel

Chairman of the Board of
Directors of Indian Schools,
Oman

Leading Through Grassroots

The Driving Force Behind
Ownership, Belongingness
and Commitment

There has been plenty of debate and research over the aspects that attribute to a thriving school. What makes a school successful? What are the key factors that distinguish effective from the least effective schools? With multiple paradigms for school operations, how can we judge if a school model is effective? In this story, we travel to Oman, through the vivid words of **Dr. Baby Sam Saamuel** Chairman of the Board of Directors of Indian Schools, Oman – who provides crucial answers to these pertinent questions.

Using the 'Five Factor Theory' based on research by celebrated international authors and educators – David Miller Sadker and Karen R. Zittleman, Dr. Baby Sam Saamuel brings to life the story of Indian Schools, Oman, based on the five common characteristics that effective schools seem to share.



QUALITY LEADERSHIP

Is quality leadership integral to the success of your schools?

Yes. Quality leadership is essential for any organisation – for its smooth functioning, consistent growth and long-term vision. As Chairman of the Indian Schools Board, I believe that the visionary leadership offered by those at the helm of the schools – from 1975 onwards when the first Indian School opened in Oman – has enabled us to grow in our reach and capacity. We now stand at 21 schools in Oman, spread across the length and breadth of the nation, with seven of them situated in the capital region.

The current leadership model of the Indian Schools in Oman follows a system where the entire network of schools, as a whole, is governed by the Board of Directors. Each school is in turn managed by a 'School Management Committee (SMC)', while the Principal and other senior administrators oversee the day-to-day functioning.



“What makes the Indian Schooling System unique in the region is that the Board, as well as the SMCs, comprise of distinguished leaders from the community, offering their expertise and experience voluntarily.”

What is the form of leadership your schools follow?

Within the Indian Schooling System, from the Board, cascading down to the various levels of leadership, each individual and team is empowered to carry out their functions and roles with an effective delegation and minimal micromanagement. Resource empowerment is an area that is under focus, and it is being achieved through cross-functional trainings, skill development, and opportunities for active participation in the growth of the organisation as a member of committees such as 'Task Forces', specific committees formed for various initiatives, etc.

Task Forces, for instance, comprise of teachers from schools and also community members who give exposure to the management, while giving the space for creative and innovative thinking for developing solutions to the specific task at hand – say preparation of an SOP or a manual.

What are the outcomes that directly result from practising quality leadership?

The impact of the increased focus on empowerment has been immediately reflected in the change in attitudes. There is an enhanced sense of ownership, belonging and commitment which follows increased participation in the various initiatives of the schooling system.

“Most importantly, these become essential life skills that are then passed on to students and others.”

HIGHER EXPECTATIONS FROM THE WORKFORCE

Should a leader have high expectations from his/her workforce?

As a leader in my professional life, I have observed that many times, it is our perceptions or rather misperceptions about our abilities that limit our thinking and confidence. In the presence of faith in us, as shown by high expectations, the potential to deliver the expectations too tend to rise. Within our schooling system, the benefits observed from increasing expectations from the workforce has been an increase in confidence and productivity. On the other hand, when expectations are miscommunicated, it can hamper the positive outcomes.

Is there a mismatch between the expectations of the teachers and the school management?

Indian Schools in Oman employ around 2,472 staff out of which 1,927 constitute teachers. As an organisation of this scale, it is indeed possible that there are mismatches between the expectations of individuals and that of the organisation.

What we have been doing – at the Board level, SMC level and school level – is to increase opportunities for interactions between the management and the staff, and to facilitate better communications. The measures adopted are diverse and include regular Teachers' meet, semi-annual Teachers' open forums, Teacher's needs surveys, deployment of suggestion boxes, and dedicated email IDs for feedback, the establishment of a grievance committee, etc.

What are the parameters to judge the success of your schools?

Any schooling system can be considered as successful only when every single student becomes successful, confident learners. This is an ambitious aim as more often than not, the focus of society and even the schools themselves may be on attaining high grades, rather than ensuring competence.

As 21st-century skills grow in demand and relevance throughout the world, all schools, including ours, must now define success also in terms of the holistic development of children.

In recent years, our schools have begun to aim for participation and success of students in academics, co-curricular and extra-curricular initiatives.

How do your schools enable teachers to reach their highest potential?

• Various initiatives have been implemented, and many more are under implementation to enable our staff and faculty to empower themselves and be global citizens. For new recruits, the induction involves mentoring activities. For all staff, regular 'Faculty Development Programmes (FDPs)' are being conducted at the level of individual schools for the training and development of faculty. Besides, there are also Board-level initiatives that are carried out across all schools like skill development or training programmes in collaboration with international universities. This also includes opportunities to exhibit creativity and skills through contests and events as well.

• Recently, we had a 'CBSE Capacity Building Programme' where we had resource persons from CBSE, India who conducted on-site training for teachers – the first-of-its-kind training programme for our schools with the participation of



1,300 teachers attending the sessions in person at five different venues. At the same time, the rest of the faculties participated in the live streaming of the sessions at their respective schools. The areas and topics of the training were selected as per the inputs received from our teachers based on the surveys undertaken.

• Appraisals and Teachers' survey helps us in identifying the strengths and challenges and act as a guide for implementing new development programmes. As a means of appreciation and source of motivation, teachers are also recognised for exemplary efforts.

• Such trainings are not limited to teachers. There was also a 'Leadership Development Programme' for Principals, in collaboration with a USA-based university, to enhance the leadership skills of the senior management team.

SCREENING STUDENT DEVELOPMENT REGULARLY

How does your school screen student development regularly?

The schools use various measures to track and assess student performance over the term. This includes soft skills, in addition to academics. These assessments are shared with the parents during parents' meetings so that both parents and schools can simultaneously engage in improving the areas of weaknesses.

What are your best practices that have improved student performance?

• One of the biggest causes of academic concern for students are the Grade X and Grade XII examinations – the results of which determine the eligibilities for future admissions. Understanding the need for additional assistance during these years, some of the schools offer a Gurukul programme wherein the weeks before the Board examinations, children stay in schools for almost a month while the teachers meticulously monitor and assist their studies day in and day out.

• Additionally, in the last academic term, during the Board examination period, select experienced teachers (subject experts) offer additional support across the nation – clearing the doubts of students by being available in the evenings via telephone or WhatsApp through dedicated tele-tutoring numbers.

Cover Story

- These are over and above the remedial classes/ enrichment classes that are offered in schools after classes as additional coaching to provide extra support to children. This additional academic support is now offered in most of our schools throughout the year and especially prior to the Board examinations.

- An 'Academic Cell', comprising of competent and experienced teachers, was set up to execute the initiatives of the 'Academic Sub-Committee', and bring about collaborated efforts across the Indian schools in Oman, such that the good practices at one school can be harmonised and emulated across all. An 'Academic Advisory Council' was formed comprising academic experts from across various domains, and acts as a think tank to guide, assist and facilitate the Academic Sub-Committee, as well as generate ideas to implement global best practices.

All of these efforts have shown improvement in students' academic performances.

Beyond academics, how do your schools assess and map the individual skill sets of the students?

As mentioned above, the continual assessment report for every student includes soft skills, in addition to academics. Over and above that, there are various opportunities where students are offered arenas to enhance and showcase their talents. These include skills across STEM, literature, arts, sports, and also soft skills such as leadership, communication skills, social conscientiousness, etc. For example, the 'Indian School Talent Fest' is an opportunity where the students can showcase a wide variety of skills, including unique talents that are overlooked in conventional contests. The event – 'Science Technology & Innovation (STAI) Aptitude Test' in 2018 – witnessed participation of 7,000 students, which also highlighted the scientific aptitude of the participants.

What are your schools' assessment measures to compare student performance nationally and internationally?

In addition to in-house assessment, we have begun adopting external assessment systems to understand a student's skill set, to identify strengths and weaknesses and track improvements.

Describe some of the problem areas of learning at the classroom level that has been successfully identified and resolved.

One area of concern among children is their ability to retain the information received during a classroom lesson. In the age of social and digital media, where information is required and consumed in real-time, our schools have introduced a virtual learning platform called 'Indian Schools Virtual Learning Environment (ISO VLE)'; an online MOODLE based space for collaboration and knowledge sharing which has already shown fruits.

One of the highlights of the portal is the special video recording of lessons done by subject experts; classroom lessons are made available with easy, anywhere access through the ISO-VLE platform. The portal when introduced last

year initially included video lessons for specific subjects for the 10th and 12th grades, and now comprises subjects of Grade 9 and 11 too and several other learning resources.

“ More than just a repository, this is a place where schools, teachers, and students can interact and collaborate among themselves and with each other. ”

What are some of the 21st-Century skills being addressed by your schools' curriculum?

Our schools, through our curriculum, programmes and initiatives, aim to inculcate and enhance 21st-century skills that include:

- Learning and innovation skills like creativity, critical thinking and innovation – This is being achieved through platforms such as 'Science Technology and Innovation (STAI)', various clubs, Avenir, Talent Fest, Indian School Quiz, etc.
- Emotional intelligence skills like social behaviour and connection, communication, and collaboration – This is being achieved through Gavel's Clubs, ISO-VLE, etc.
- Information, media and technology skills like information literacy, media literacy and ICT literacy –The classrooms are fitted with smartboards. Apart from that, there are ICT labs and the event STAI which promotes science and innovation. The 'IT Advisory Council' chalks out different strategies to leverage Information Technology for the benefit of the students and the schooling system.
- Life and career skills like leadership, flexibility, self-direction, cross-cultural skills, productivity and responsibility – Initiatives like Leadership Training Programmes, Peer-learning, ISO-VLE, Tele-tutoring, Student-run Magazines, Scouts and Guides, etc.
- Values like tolerance, empathy and acceptance – Initiatives like 'Young Communitarian of the Indian Schools (YCIS)' – a voluntary social service wing, Charity Clubs, Gift-A Book project (Gift a Book, Help the Needy, Save the Environment), Al Ta'ayush Al Silmi, Blood Donation Drives, etc.
- In 2018, the schools organised STAI as an interschool event, which was a first-of-its-kind pioneering initiative, and the biggest Tech event ever for the Indian Schools in the Sultanate. The event promotes scientific approach and innovative outlook among Indian school children and included innovative programmes such as STAI Aptitude Test, Planetarium, Youth Conclave, Augmented Reality Room, Concept Rooms, Game Rooms and contests.
- Through various clubs and forums, the schools are also trying to increase global awareness; financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; health literacy; environmental literacy. Recently, the schools launched 'STRIDE', an entrepreneurship club which included a keynote talk from a renowned entrepreneur in Oman. The club is associating with the 'Entrepreneurship Development

Institute of India (EDII)' to bring in their expertise.

- The latest school inaugurated in 2019 has been envisioned as a world-class facility with a focus on skill development and holistic education and as such, includes learning-labs for kindergartners onwards such as 'Kinesthetic Learning Centre', 'Cognitive Learning Centre', 'Physical Health and Motor Development Centre', 'Personal, Social and Emotional Development Role and Group Play Learning Centre' and a 'Learning Resource Centre'. The school will also be having STEM and 'Robotics Centre', in addition to classes with interactive panels and ICT labs. The school also has facilities for various indoor and outdoor sports and activities – like swimming pool and splash pools, kabaddi court, indoor badminton courts, table tennis, cricket practice net, running track, basketball court & a 'Health and Wellness Centre'.
- The infrastructural developments at other schools too are aiming to enhance the facilities that promote holistic learning.

CLEAR GOALS AND DIRECTION FOR THE SCHOOL

What are your focus areas and goals for your schools?

The overall aim is to ensure holistic education. To achieve this, there is a simultaneous focus on improving our academic competencies, infrastructural capabilities, the quality and effectiveness of our resources, introducing opportunities for children to identify and enhance their skills, etc.

“As Board of Directors, our ultimate vision and aim, captured by our charter, Vision 2020, is to ensure that every child from our schools will undergo transformative learning and be equipped with the knowledge, skills and well-being to find their identity and purpose in life.”

How does a school leader bring together every stakeholder to accomplish goals?

The Indian schools are community schools, run by and for the community. Therefore, through communication and empowerment, all the stakeholders can come together to achieve common goals.

The Board of Directors acts as an apex body that connects the various school managements and can have a bird's eye view of the entire system. As such, the Board provides guidance that impacts the direction and vision of all the schools. Multi-way communication is facilitated through various open forums, with teachers, parents and others. Also, transparency and communication are achieved through newsletters issued by the Board, websites of Board and schools, and circulars to parents.



SAFETY AND STRUCTURE

What are the parameters you use to consider your schools as safe schools?

Our schools are safe from the point of view of the emotional and physical wellbeing of our children and staff. This includes measures like having a school nurse, 24-7-365 hotline for tele-counselling, CCTV cameras on-premises, safe school transport system in some of the schools, etc. An HSE manual is in place which guides the schools in creating and maintaining a safe environment. There are regular HSE audits, facilitated by HSE committees, through an HSE coordinator within the Board.

UNIQUE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE SCHOOL

Describe some unique achievements of the school stemming from having addressed these parameters.

One of the most significant achievements is that as community schools, we have been able to offer access to education to all who seek Indian CBSE curriculum. Additionally, we are also proud to have consistently achieved remarkable academic performance in the Grade X and XII public examinations over the last year, making our performance one of the best in the region.

A Success Story of the School

In Aug 2018, the Indian schools in Oman launched 'Here 4U Let's Talk - 365 Tele-counselling', a first-of-its-kind service by a schooling system in the region. The primary aim of this initiative is to ensure a stress-free academic environment. Through this service, managed by the Counselling Cell of Indian Schools, counselling is offered to students and teachers of Indian schools any time of the day over the telephone, through a dedicated contact number. A team of qualified counsellors with expertise in tele-counselling is in charge of promoting and protecting the wellbeing of every caller – student or teacher – who requests advice or help. Of all the dozens of projects implemented so far, this project perhaps is the one with the most wide-reaching impact.