

Leading for Equity in the AI Age *Continuous Learning for Effective Leadership*

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence is changing education, but it is also forcing us to ask an important human question: **Who gets to participate meaningfully in the future we are preparing children for?**

Although access to schooling and digital devices has expanded, equal access does not always result in equal learning. Within the same classroom, students with similar abilities may experience very different opportunities to question, create, collaborate, and solve problems. Some may confidently use AI-enabled tools to explore ideas, while others may remain silent—not because they lack potential, but because they lack access, confidence, exposure, or guidance.

This paper argues that equity must be understood not merely as access to education or technology, but as access to meaningful, purposeful, and high-quality learning experiences. It positions student engagement as one of the most visible indicators of equity in classroom practice and presents the “**Let’s Grow Together**” framework as a practical model for helping school leaders and teachers translate this principle into action.

The paper draws on evidence from six independently conducted pilots across the Salwan Education Trust between July and August 2026. The pilots covered six subjects, six age groups, and 608 students. All six schools recorded an increase in active participation, with gains ranging from 9 to 28 percentage points. In the schools that tracked the quality of student responses, learning also moved from simple recall towards critical, creative, and application-based thinking.

The findings suggest that technology can open the door to engagement, but it is the teacher who invites the child to enter, ask questions, take risks, and remain involved. Wait time, higher-order questioning, collaboration, oral expression, and sensitive teacher scaffolding sustained the gains more effectively than technology alone. The paper concludes that equitable education in the AI age depends not only on infrastructure, but on leaders who continue to learn, listen, reflect, and make deliberate choices that place human development at the centre of every educational decision.

1. Equity Beyond Access

For many years, the conversation around educational equity focused primarily on access: access to schools, classrooms, textbooks, teachers, and digital devices. These remain

essential. However, access alone does not guarantee that a child will feel seen, heard, or able to participate.

A student may be physically present in a classroom and still remain invisible within the learning process. They may hesitate to answer because they fear making a mistake, lack confidence in expressing themselves, or have never been asked a question that connects with their lives. Another student may have the same textbook and the same lesson but receive greater encouragement, more opportunities to speak, and richer exposure to technology.

This is the new challenge of equity.

With the rise of Artificial Intelligence, educational inequality is increasingly becoming an **AI divide**. The divide is not limited to whether students have access to a device or an application. It also concerns whether they know how to use technology meaningfully, question its outputs, evaluate information, and apply it creatively.

The central question for school leaders is therefore not simply:

“Do our students have access to technology?”

It is:

“Are all our students receiving the guidance and opportunities they need to think, participate, and grow?”

This shift is particularly important in the Indian context, where educational institutions are working to translate the vision of the National Education Policy 2020 into everyday classroom experiences. Policy may provide direction, but leadership determines whether that direction becomes visible in the life of a child.

2. Reimagining the Role of Leadership

The role of a school leader is no longer restricted to administration, timetables, compliance, and resource management. Contemporary leadership must also shape the quality of learning relationships within the school.

An equity-focused leader works to create a learning ecosystem in which:

- Teachers are supported as continuous learners.
- Students are encouraged to express ideas without fear.
- Curriculum and assessment allow for different ways of thinking.
- Technology is used purposefully rather than symbolically.
- Participation is monitored, especially among quieter and less confident learners.

Equity does not mean giving every student exactly the same support. It means understanding what each learner needs in order to participate fully. One child may need additional time; another may need a visual prompt; a third may require peer support or a chance to explain an idea orally before writing it down.

This requires leaders to move from a culture of uniformity to a culture of responsiveness.

Continuous learning is central to this transformation. Leaders who model curiosity and reflection send a powerful message to teachers: professional growth is not a one-time activity conducted during a workshop. It is a daily habit of noticing, questioning, trying, and improving.

A school grows when its adults are willing to grow alongside its children.

3. Equity Begins in Classroom Interactions

Policies and infrastructure create the conditions for equity, but classroom interactions make equity visible.

An equitable classroom is not necessarily one in which every student speaks at the same moment or produces identical work. It is one in which every learner has a genuine opportunity to contribute, make meaning, and experience progress.

Three questions help us recognise such a classroom:

1. Are students participating actively or merely complying?
2. Are teachers valuing the process of thinking or only the final answer?
3. Does classroom learning connect with students' experiences and concerns?

A child who gives an incomplete answer may still be demonstrating valuable reasoning. A student who asks an unexpected question may be showing deeper engagement than one who simply repeats a textbook statement. When teachers make space for these forms of participation, they create a culture in which thinking becomes more important than performance alone.

This is why student engagement can serve as an important, visible indicator of equity. When more learners begin to question, explain, collaborate, and take intellectual risks, equity has moved beyond policy language and entered classroom practice.

4. The “Let’s Grow Together” Framework

The “**Let’s Grow Together**” framework provides a practical structure for teachers and leaders who want to introduce small but meaningful changes in classroom practice.

It is built around four simple questions:

Element	Guiding question
What to do	What specific classroom practice can be introduced?
Why it matters	How will this support participation and learning?
How to implement	What can the teacher do before, during, and after the lesson?
Inspirational reinforcement	How can the practice be encouraged and sustained?

The strength of the framework lies in its simplicity. Teachers do not always need large programmes or complicated interventions. Often, a thoughtful question, an additional pause, a change in grouping, or a different way of receiving student responses can alter the emotional climate of a classroom.

These small actions are not insignificant. Repeated consistently, they can change who speaks, who listens, who takes risks, and who begins to believe, “My ideas matter here.”

5. Classroom Practices That Strengthen Equity

5.1 Begin with a Question That Matters

A lesson becomes more inviting when it begins with a question that students can relate to.

Instead of beginning a lesson on climate with a definition, a teacher might ask:

“Why can two cities in the same country experience very different weather?”

Instead of introducing artificial intelligence through terminology, the teacher may ask:

“If a machine gives you an answer, how will you know whether the answer is trustworthy?”

Such questions activate prior knowledge and create an entry point for students with different levels of background knowledge. They also help learners understand that education is not merely about receiving information; it is about making sense of the world.

5.2 Value Thinking, Not Only Correctness

Many students stop participating when they believe that only correct answers are valued. This is especially true for children who need more processing time or who have previously experienced failure.

Teachers can make participation more inclusive by:

- Allowing sufficient wait time after asking a question.
- Asking students to explain how they arrived at an answer.
- Accepting partial responses as starting points for further thinking.
- Inviting students to revise their ideas.
- Treating mistakes as evidence of learning rather than as personal shortcomings.

Consider a student who responds incorrectly to a mathematical problem but explains a logical method. The answer may require correction, but the thinking deserves attention. A teacher might say:

“Your method helps us see one important step. Let us examine where the result changed.”

This response protects the student’s dignity while opening the door to conceptual learning.

5.3 Promote Higher-Order Thinking

In an age when information can be generated instantly, the ability to think critically becomes even more important.

Questions that require analysis, comparison, interpretation, evaluation, and creation help students move beyond memorisation. For example:

- “Which solution would be most practical for your community, and why?”
- “What evidence supports this conclusion?”
- “How might the result change if one condition were different?”
- “Can you design a solution that uses fewer resources?”
- “What could an AI system misunderstand about this situation?”

These questions allow multiple responses and make space for different forms of intelligence. They also strengthen the human capacities that technology cannot replace: judgement, empathy, imagination, responsibility, and ethical reasoning.

5.4 Make Learning Collaborative

Collaboration gives students more than an opportunity to work in groups. It teaches them how to listen, negotiate, explain, and build upon another person’s idea.

Well-designed collaborative tasks are particularly valuable for students who may not volunteer in whole-class discussions. A small group can provide a safer space in which they first formulate an idea, test it with peers, and then share it publicly.

However, collaboration must be structured carefully. Teachers need to assign meaningful roles, establish expectations, and ensure that one student does not dominate the task while others remain passive.

5.5 Use Technology as a Bridge, Not a Substitute

Technology can make abstract concepts visible, stimulate curiosity, and provide new ways for students to explore ideas. AI tools can support brainstorming, visualisation, feedback, and problem-solving.

Yet technology alone does not create equity.

A digital tool may engage students initially, but it cannot automatically identify why a child is silent, whether a learner has misunderstood a concept, or when encouragement is needed. Nor can it replace the trust developed between a teacher and a student.

The teacher remains essential in helping learners:

- Ask better questions.
- Check the accuracy of AI-generated information.
- Recognise bias and limitations.
- Use technology ethically.
- Connect digital outputs with real-world consequences.
- Develop independent judgement rather than passive dependence.

The appropriate principle is simple:

Technology may open the door, but human relationships determine what happens inside the classroom.

6. Leadership That Enables Practice

Effective classroom practice is difficult to sustain when teachers feel isolated, overburdened, or judged only by outcomes. School leadership must therefore create conditions in which experimentation and professional learning are safe.

Leaders can support teachers by:

- Sharing one practical classroom strategy at a time.
- Creating short, regular opportunities for peer learning.
- Encouraging teachers to discuss what worked and what did not.
- Recognising improvement rather than celebrating only perfection.
- Using classroom evidence to guide professional development.
- Connecting technology training with pedagogy and student needs.

Weekly micro-practices can be especially effective. A school may focus on wait time during one week, student questioning during the next, and collaborative reflection the week after. Teachers can then observe, record, and discuss the changes they notice.

Such professional learning is more likely to become part of classroom culture because it is practical, manageable, and connected to the teacher's immediate experience.

A leader's message matters greatly. When leaders say, "Let us learn from this lesson," rather than "Why did this lesson fail?", teachers are more willing to reflect honestly. That emotional safety eventually reaches students.

7. Policy, Context, and Human Purpose

The National Education Policy 2020 emphasises competency-based learning, inclusion, creativity, critical thinking, and holistic development. These principles are meaningful only when students encounter them in actual classrooms.

Contextual leadership is necessary because no two schools are identical. A strategy that works in one setting may need adaptation in another. Student age, language background, available resources, teacher confidence, community expectations, and school culture all influence implementation.

Initiatives such as the Happiness Curriculum, Entrepreneurship Mindset Curriculum, and Atal Tinkering Labs demonstrate the value of broadening learning beyond textbook knowledge. However, their success depends on how thoughtfully they are integrated into the school's daily life.

The important question is not whether a school has introduced a particular programme. It is whether the programme has helped students become more curious, confident, compassionate, and capable of applying their learning.

8. Reflective Questions for Educators

School leaders and teachers may use the following questions during professional reflection:

- Which students participated actively today?
- Which students remained quiet, and what might explain their silence?
- Did I allow enough time for students to think?
- Did I value explanation and reasoning, even when the answer was incomplete?
- Were students able to connect the lesson with their lived experiences?
- Did technology deepen learning, or merely make the lesson appear innovative?
- What evidence shows that students understood the concept?
- What small change could make tomorrow's lesson more inclusive?

These questions shift reflection from “Did I complete the lesson?” to “What did students experience while learning?”

That is an important change in perspective.

9. Evidence from Six Pilot Schools

9.1 Purpose and Scope

Between July and August 2026, six Salwan campuses conducted independent pilots using a broadly comparable case-study protocol. The pilots conceptualized and spearheaded by Rashmi Oberoi, Head of Primary Wing at Salwan Public examined changes in student participation and, where data was available, the quality of student thinking.

The pilots included six subjects, multiple age groups, and 608 students. Each school adapted the intervention to its own context while following a common broad sequence:

1. A baseline lesson.
2. A technology or AI-supported element.
3. A design or computational-thinking activity.
4. A collaborative task supported by reflection or exit cards.

9.2 Participation Findings

All six schools recorded an increase in active participation.

School	Baseline	Final	Gain
SPS, Mayur Vihar	49%	77%	+28 percentage points
SJS, Naraina Vihar	34%	53%	+19 percentage points
SPS, TDSC, Ghaziabad	39%	66%	+27 percentage points
SPS, Gurugram	80%	98%	+18 percentage points

School	Baseline	Final	Gain
SPS, Rajendra Nagar	76.9%	93.0%	+16.1 percentage points
Salwan Girls' Senior Secondary School	45%	54%	+9 percentage points

The figures should not be treated as one pooled experiment because the schools used different instruments, including composite indices, participation rates, participation ratios, and qualitative ratings. They are better understood as six independently conducted pilots showing the same direction of change.

The consistency is significant. Despite differences in subject, age group, duration, and teaching team, participation increased in every school.

9.3 The Quality of Engagement Changed

The evidence suggests that students did not merely participate more; in several schools, they began to participate differently.

Where question-type data was tracked, standard or recall-based responses declined while critical-thinking and out-of-box responses increased.

School or subject	Standard responses	Critical responses	Out-of-box responses
SJS baseline	74%	22%	4%
SJS final	46%	37%	17%
TDSC Social Science baseline	79%	16%	5%
TDSC Social Science final	54%	31%	15%
TDSC Mathematics baseline	83%	13%	4%
TDSC Mathematics final	60%	28%	12%
Gurugram baseline	50%	35%	15%
Gurugram final	40%	40%	20%

At Mayur Vihar, the indicator for critical thinking and analysis rose from 37% to 72%. At Salwan Girls' Senior Secondary School, application skill and mathematical reasoning moved from low to moderate, while formula recall and conceptual visualisation remained unchanged.

This is an important finding. Growth was not limited to remembering more information. In several settings, it appeared in students' ability to apply, reason, interpret, and generate responses.

9.4 What Made the Difference?

The pilots point towards a clear distinction between the role of technology and the role of teacher practice.

At TDSC, the intervention elements were tracked across different stages. The most durable gains were associated with wait time, higher-order questioning, computational-thinking routines, collaboration, and exit-card reflection.

One teacher observed that the change came from:

“Quieter students who had simply never been asked a question they wanted to answer.”

Another noted that the important factor was not only the AI activity, but:

“The questions we asked and how long we were willing to wait for an answer.”

These observations humanise the data. Behind the percentage-point increase is a child who may have spoken for the first time, a learner who may have discovered that their explanation was worth hearing, or a student who found an entry point into a lesson that had previously seemed distant.

At Salwan Girls’ Senior Secondary School, AI visualisations helped students understand composite spatial structures and increased initial engagement. However, teachers also reported that technology alone was insufficient for weaker learners. Misconceptions required direct, guided teacher support.

At Rajendra Nagar, oral and collaborative activities such as podcast scripting and dictation-and-sentence-building produced stronger participation gains than an individual written story-writing activity. This supports the wider finding that discussion and shared meaning-making can create more opportunities for students to contribute.

10. Interpreting the Findings

The six pilots establish three important points.

First, student participation can be measured in practical classroom settings. Although the instruments differed, all six schools recorded improvement.

Second, the quality of engagement matters as much as its quantity. A classroom in which more students repeat factual answers has improved participation, but a classroom in which students begin to reason, question, and apply ideas has moved further towards meaningful equity.

Third, technology is an enabler, not the complete solution. It may stimulate interest quickly, but sustained growth depends on the teacher’s ability to create an inclusive environment.

The human element is especially important for students who are hesitant, underconfident, or struggling academically. Such learners may need repeated encouragement, carefully framed questions, additional wait time, peer support, visual explanation, or individual scaffolding.

No application can provide all of this without a teacher who knows the learners and responds to them thoughtfully.

11. Limitations

The findings must be interpreted with appropriate caution.

The six pilots did not use identical measures. Some reported participation percentages, while others used composite indicators or developmental ratings. The duration and design of the pilots also varied. The Rajendra Nagar case study included six sections and 215 students, making it larger than the standard two-section model followed by several other schools.

For these reasons, the results should not be presented as a pooled causal study. They are better described as convergent evidence from six independently conducted school-based pilots.

The evidence is encouraging, but further research would benefit from:

- Common measurement tools across schools.
- Larger and more diverse samples.
- Longer follow-up periods.
- Comparison groups where feasible.
- Separate analysis of technology-led and teacher-led practices.
- Student voice data capturing how learners experienced the change.

12. Conclusion

Equity is not created by technology alone, nor by policy documents alone. It is created through the everyday experiences that tell a child:

“You belong here. Your question matters. Your thinking is valuable. You can grow.”

In the AI age, the most important educational investment remains the development of human capacity. Students need to know how to use technology, but they also need to know how to question it, challenge it, improve it, and use it responsibly.

The evidence from the six Salwan pilots supports a clear conclusion: technology can accelerate engagement, but teacher practice sustains and deepens it. The most powerful changes emerged when teachers used wait time, thoughtful questions, collaboration, reflection, and direct scaffolding to help students participate more confidently.

Leadership, therefore, must be understood as a human practice. It involves making decisions about curriculum, assessment, professional development, and technology with a constant awareness of how those decisions affect the child sitting in the classroom.

When leaders continue to learn, teachers are encouraged to experiment. When teachers are supported, students are more willing to participate. When students participate

meaningfully, equity becomes visible—not as an abstract aspiration, but as a lived classroom experience.

AI may open the door to possibility. It is compassionate, reflective, and purposeful teaching that helps every learner walk through it.

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