



From hierarchies to communities: the power of a unique school culture in defining teacher collaboration in a private school

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Abstract

This study examines how school culture shapes teacher collaboration in a private school setting, focusing on the transition from hierarchical structures to community-driven educational environments. Using a single case study approach, the research investigates collaborative practices at Seven Valley Schools in Türkiye, emphasizing the impact of interdisciplinary planning, peer mentoring, and participatory governance. The study also explores the role of the Simurg Philosophy, which integrates self-discovery, freedom, and holistic learning into the school's educational framework. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, school founder, and principal, supplemented by focus group discussions and individual interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns and relationships in teacher collaboration. Findings indicate that a strong collaborative culture enhances teacher motivation, professional development, and student engagement. Leadership practices that support autonomy and innovation further contribute to a dynamic and inclusive school environment. The study highlights the importance of distributed leadership, trust-building, and participatory governance in fostering sustainable teacher collaboration and suggests future research on the long-term impact of such cultural models in education.

Keywords Teacher collaboration · School culture · Simurg philosophy

Introduction

The 21st-century school is increasingly expected to function as a collaborative, learning-focused community rather than a bureaucratic hierarchy. As educational demands become more complex, teacher collaboration has come to be seen as a key condition for school effectiveness and innovation (Kelty & Wakabayashi 2020; García-Mar-

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tínez et al., 2021; Vangrieken et al., 2017). In this shift, school culture plays a central role; it shapes how teachers relate to one another, how leadership is exercised, and how change is negotiated in daily practice (Arar & Taysum, 2020; Cameron & Quinn, 2006). Studies consistently show that schools with a strong, supportive culture of collaboration report higher teacher motivation and retention as well as more positive student outcomes (Arar, K. 2019; Hoy & DiPaola, 2008; MacNeil et al., 2009).

A collaborative school culture is more than the sum of individual relationships; it is a shared framework of values, norms, and expectations that guides how teachers work, make decisions, and interpret their roles. When this culture emphasizes trust, mutual support, and shared responsibility, teachers are more likely to engage in joint planning, peer feedback, and continuous professional learning (de Jong et al., 2019; Postholm, 2016). Research suggests that such environments empower teachers to assume leadership roles, experiment with new pedagogical approaches, and contribute actively to school development, thereby linking collaboration to both instructional quality and teacher well-being (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Şahin et al., 2023).

Historically, however, many education systems have been organized along industrial lines, with decision-making cascading from principals to teachers and leaving classroom practitioners relatively isolated (Reinius et al., 2024). Recent work points to a gradual shift toward more learner-centred, community-driven “ecosystems,” where distributed leadership and collaborative governance are used to integrate the voices of teachers, students, and parents (de Jong et al., 2022; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). In these contexts, collaboration is not only a technical arrangement but also a cultural and ethical orientation that defines what it means to be a professional in the school community.

Despite this growing body of research, there is still limited understanding of how locally grounded philosophical or cultural frameworks shape teacher collaboration in everyday school life. Much of the literature focuses on structures such as professional learning communities or formal leadership models, while fewer studies explore how a school’s unique philosophy becomes a lived culture that organizes collaboration, identity, and pedagogy. Seven Valley Schools in Türkiye provides a compelling case in this regard. Drawing on the Simurg legend, the school has developed a distinctive philosophical model built around seven symbolic “valleys” that emphasize curiosity, freedom, unity, and self-discovery, and it explicitly positions teacher collaboration at the heart of this vision.

This study therefore seeks to examine how the Simurg Philosophy is implemented in the daily life of Seven Valley Schools and how it shapes teacher collaboration, professional relationships, and leadership practices. By analysing teachers’ and leaders’ experiences within this culturally specific framework, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how school culture and locally rooted educational philosophies can support, enable, or complicate collaborative work in contemporary schools.

A short chronology of Turkish private schools

During the Ottoman-Turkish period, education was predominantly religious and government-controlled, but private institutions, mainly established by minorities and foreign missionaries, also flourished. The mid-19th century Reorganization reforms (1839–1876) allowed greater autonomy for private and non-Muslim community schools (Altıntaş, 2021). European and American missionary schools, such as Robert College (established in 1863) and Galatasaray High School (originally founded in 1481 but restructured in 1868), provided Western-style education in multiple languages (Mutlu, 2020). With the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the government emphasized democratic and national education under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Turan, 2000). The Law on *Unification of Education* (1924) nationalized all public and private schools and placed all educational institutions under government control (Turan, 2000). While private schools continued to exist, their expansion was restricted due to the government's dominance in education.

The post-World War II era saw significant policy changes favouring private enterprise, including in education. The Democrat Party government (1950–1960) facilitated the opening of more private schools, especially in urban areas. The increasing demand for higher education also led to the establishment of private preparatory schools, which played a critical role in helping students gain admission to competitive public universities (Cinoglu, 2006). However, political instability and military interventions in 1960 and 1971 interrupted educational liberalization. Still, private schools continued to grow, especially in economically prosperous cities like Istanbul and Ankara (Tansel & Bircan, 2007).

The 1980s marked a turning point for Turkish private education under Turgut Özal's government (1983–1989), which pursued neoliberal policies. The state encouraged private investment in education, leading to the growth of private primary, secondary, and higher education institutions. The *Private Education Institutions Law* of 1983 provided more autonomy to private schools, attracting domestic investors (Bayram, 2018; Özcan, 2020). In the 1990s, private universities emerged, with Bilkent University (1984) being Türkiye's first foundation university. Many prestigious private high schools, such as Koç and Sabancı High Schools, were also established during this period (Mızıkacı, 2010). This momentum continued into the 2000s, and by 2015, private schools accounted for more than 15% of total student enrollment (OECD, 2024).

The Simurg legend as a unique school culture: a journey of self-discovery and collective growth

The educational philosophy of Seven Valley Schools (founded in 2021) is deeply inspired by the Simurg legend, a powerful metaphor for personal transformation, perseverance, and collective wisdom. Rooted in Persian mythology, the story of Simurg tells of birds embarking on a challenging journey through seven valleys—each symbolizing a stage of growth and enlightenment—only to discover that they themselves are the wise Simurg they were seeking. At Seven Valley Schools, this legend is more than just a story; it is the foundation of an educational culture and philosophy that

nurtures resilience, curiosity, and collaboration. Each of the seven valleys—*Curiosity*, *Exploration*, *Talent*, *Freedom*, *Unity*, *Productivity*, and *Self-Discovery*—mirrors the school's commitment to holistic learning, fostering an environment where students and teachers grow together through shared experiences and challenges (Yedi Vadi, 2025). By embracing the Simurg philosophy, Seven Valley Schools cultivate a unique school culture where teacher collaboration thrives. Just as the birds in the legend learn that their strength lies within their collective journey, teachers at Seven Valley engage in continuous learning, mentorship, and shared leadership, transforming their teaching practices through mutual support.

In aligning the Simurg philosophy with established educational literature, its implementation reflects key principles found in holistic and transformative education. For instance, the emphasis on curiosity, exploration, and creative risk-taking parallels Dewey's (1938) view of experiential learning as a process of active inquiry. Similarly, the school's focus on personal growth within a community resonates with Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory, which positions self-reflection and meaning-making as central to individual development. The communal journey depicted in the Simurg myth also aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, emphasizing learning as a socially mediated process facilitated through collaborative dialogue.

In practice, the Simurg philosophy is operationalized through schoolwide policies and relational norms that align with its seven symbolic valleys. For instance, *Curiosity* and *Exploration* are embodied in interdisciplinary project-based learning and flexible curricula that encourage both teachers and students to experiment and question established routines. *Unity* and *Freedom* are expressed in participatory decision-making processes, where teachers share responsibility in curriculum design and governance, echoing democratic schooling traditions that highlight shared authority and collective responsibility (Apple & Beane, 2007). *Productivity* and *Talent* translate into a performance philosophy that values individual creativity alongside collective outcomes teachers are encouraged to pursue self-directed professional growth while contributing to institutional development, supporting findings that teacher agency flourishes when autonomy is balanced with collegial expectations (Priestley et al., 2015). Finally, *Self-Discovery* is cultivated through reflective dialogue, mentorship programs, and peer observation systems that help teachers and students recognize their potential within the community. These practices transform the Simurg legend from a mythic narrative into a living framework for teaching, leadership, and human relations within the school.

Compared to other holistic educational models, such as *Montessori's learner autonomy*, *Waldorf's artistic humanism*, or *Reggio Emilia's community-based inquiry*, the Simurg philosophy distinguishes itself through its explicit emphasis on collective transcendence—the idea that personal and institutional growth are inseparable. Whereas other approaches often begin with the development of the individual, Simurg begins with the interdependence of the group; learning is viewed as a shared journey toward self-realization, not an individual pursuit. This perspective situates collaboration not merely as an instructional technique but as a moral and cultural commitment that unites the school's professional community.

Beyond its local context, the Simurg philosophy contributes to international discussions on collaborative school cultures by reframing professional growth as a shared moral and existential journey rather than solely a technical or organizational process. While frameworks such as professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) emphasize shared responsibility and joint decision-making, the Simurg approach embeds these principles within a deeper narrative of collective self-realization and moral interdependence. Scholars of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017; Montero, 2019) similarly argue that local cultural narratives can serve as powerful foundations for inclusive and value-driven school practices. In this sense, Seven Valley Schools demonstrate how a culturally rooted philosophical framework can function as a living system that shapes professional identity, pedagogical decision-making, and collaborative culture. By grounding the Simurg philosophy in both empirical evidence and established educational scholarship, its implementation can be understood not as anecdotal practice but as a theoretically coherent model of holistic, relational, and culturally situated schooling.

The current study

The shift from hierarchical structures to community-driven schools is essential for fostering innovation and inclusivity. Bottom-up decision-making encourages teacher participation in governance, leading to more effective policies and stronger teacher commitment (Macias, 2017). Decentralized leadership distributes power among school members, allowing for adaptive management and localized problem-solving. Participatory governance enhances transparency and trust, ensuring that all stakeholders, including parents and students, contribute to educational policies. Central to this transformation is trust-building in schools, which strengthens relationships between teachers and administrators, fostering a collaborative environment (Kolleck et al., 2021).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) represent a well-established approach to institutionalizing collaboration and shared learning in schools. Broadly defined, a PLC is *a collective of educators who engage in continuous reflective inquiry to improve student outcomes and teaching practices through shared leadership and mutual accountability* (Hord, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Scholars commonly emphasize four core dimensions of PLCs: (1) shared mission, vision, and values; (2) collective inquiry into teaching and learning; (3) collaborative teams focused on results; and (4) a commitment to continuous improvement (Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). Through these interrelated features, PLCs transform schools into learning organizations where professional dialogue and evidence-based reflection become integral to everyday practice.

Building on the principles of decentralized leadership and participatory governance, professional learning communities (PLCs) as conceptualized in DuFour and Eaker's framework (1998) offer a concrete and widely adopted model for sustaining collaboration and continuous improvement within schools (Gillespie, 2010). By creating structured spaces where teachers can engage in meaningful dialogue, share best

practices, and collectively analyze student data, PLCs reinforce the trust and transparency established through community-driven decision-making. These communities not only enhance professional development but also ensure that teachers remain active contributors to the adaptive and innovative culture of their schools, further bridging the gap between policy implementation and classroom practice (Gomendio, 2017). Professional learning communities (PLCs) provide a structured approach to teacher collaboration by emphasizing continuous learning, shared leadership, and data-driven decision-making. PLCs allow teachers to analyze student performance, refine instructional strategies, and engage in reflective teaching practices (Ventista & Brown, 2023). By fostering a collaborative learning environment, PLCs help bridge the gap between theory and classroom practice. Despite extensive research on teacher collaboration and school culture, existing literature often examines these aspects in isolation, focusing either on structural or cultural elements rather than integrating both perspectives.

While numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of collaborative environments for student achievement (Gurr & Drysdale, 2012; Hargreaves, 2019; Reeves et al., 2017), and extensive research has explored how trust, shared leadership, and collective agency contribute to teacher collaboration within the leadership for learning paradigm (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; MacBeath & Dempster, 2009), less attention has been given to how these cultural dynamics operate within specific institutional contexts and evolving learning ecosystems. This study seeks to extend that line of inquiry by examining how such cultural elements are enacted and sustained within a unique school culture that redefines collaboration as both a professional and communal process.

Traditional top-down leadership models have historically constrained teachers, limiting opportunities for meaningful professional collaboration. Although contemporary education policies promote teacher teamwork, many schools struggle to cultivate collaborative cultures that are self-sustaining, innovative, and deeply embedded in their institutional identity. Addressing this gap, this study investigates the cultural mechanisms that sustain teacher collaboration by examining trust-building, shared expertise, and collective decision-making as essential drivers of long-term collaboration. To explore this issue, the study focuses on the unique case of Seven Valley School, guided by the following research questions. In line with the study's qualitative design, the findings are organized around the three research questions that guided the inquiry. Each subsection presents the results corresponding to a specific question, illustrating how collaboration, philosophy, and leadership collectively contribute to the development of a unique school culture at Seven Valley School.

- What collaborative practices exist at Seven Valley School, and how do they develop?
- How did the Simurg Philosophy emerge at Seven Valley School, and how has it influenced teachers' practices?
- How does leadership shape teacher collaboration within the school's cultural framework?

Method

Research model

This study employs a single case study design to examine the relationship between school culture and teacher collaboration at Seven Valley Schools in Bursa, Türkiye. A case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how a unique pedagogical framework the Simurg Philosophy shapes collaborative teaching practices (Yin, 2018). This design enables a rich, contextualized understanding of the processes and relationships that characterize collaboration within a single, culturally distinct school environment. The single case was selected because of its uniqueness: the Simurg Philosophy provides an integrated cultural and organizational framework that defines leadership, collaboration, and pedagogical relationships within the school.

Study group

The study group consists of ten teachers, one school principal, and one school owner from Seven Valley Schools. Purposive sampling was used to ensure participation by individuals directly involved in collaborative processes. This combination of teachers and administrators allowed for multiple perspectives on how collaboration is enacted and supported within the school's cultural framework. Demographic details of sample group have been given in Table 1:

Participants represented a diverse range of professional backgrounds, experience levels, and subject specializations, including primary education, English, Turkish, science, social studies, mathematics, and pre-school education. The teachers ranged in age from 26 to 41, with 3 to 25 years of teaching experience. The principal and school owner each had 25 years of experience in education, providing insights into leadership and institutional development. Teachers' tenure at Seven Valley ranged from one to twelve years, reflecting a mix of newly appointed and long-serving educators.

Table 1 Sample group's demographic details

Code	Gender	Role	Age	Years of Experience	Experience in Seven Valley	Branch
T1	Male	Teacher	35	25 years	4 years	Primary School Teacher
T2	Male	Teacher	35	4 years	1 year	English Language
T3	Female	Teacher	33	12 years	3 years	Turkish Language
T4	Female	Teacher	37	9 years	2 years	Science
T5	Female	Teacher	35	12 years	12 years	Primary School Teacher
T6	Female	Teacher	41	12 years	10 years	Social Sciences
T7	Female	Teacher	34	8 years	4 years	Primary School Teacher
T8	Female	Teacher	26	3 years	3 years	Primary School Teacher
T9	Female	Teacher	28	4 years	3 years	Pre-school Teacher
T10	Female	Teacher	31	6 years	2 years	Mathematic
P1	Male	Principal	45	25 years	12 years	History
F1	Male	Founder	52	25 years	15 years	Divinity

Data collection tools

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions designed to capture participants' perceptions, experiences, and reflections on teacher collaboration. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow for both comparability across participants and flexibility for in-depth exploration (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This format provides structure through predetermined questions while enabling participants to elaborate on their lived experiences in their own words a critical feature for uncovering the nuanced social and cultural dimensions of collaboration within a single case study (Cohen et al., 2018). The questions were guided by the research objectives and addressed three main areas: Collaborative Practices, e.g., *How do teachers at Seven Valley School collaborate in daily practice? What factors strengthen or hinder collaboration?* Leadership Influence, e.g., *How do leadership practices shape teacher collaboration? What kinds of support do administrators provide?* The Role of the Simurg Philosophy, e.g., *How does the school's philosophy influence your professional relationships and teaching practices?* These questions were developed following a pilot study and expert review to ensure clarity and relevance.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework: (1) familiarization, (2) coding, (3) theme development, (4) review, (5) definition, and (6) reporting. Each transcript was read line by line, and descriptive codes such as "*co-planning lessons*," "*trust through mentoring*," and "*leaders encourage creativity*" were generated inductively from participants' narratives. Similar codes were then grouped into conceptual categories for example, "*joint project design*" and "*cross-subject integration*" formed Interdisciplinary Planning, while "*peer mentoring*" and "*experience sharing*" became Mentorship and Peer Support. These categories were later synthesized into three overarching themes: Collaborative Practices, The Role of the Simurg Philosophy, and Leadership Influence (see Table 2). Throughout analysis, categories were compared across transcripts, refined for coherence, and finalized through researcher consensus.

Table 2 below illustrates how specific raw codes were condensed into categories and then integrated into the larger thematic structure.

During analysis, several tensions emerged, particularly where Simurg-related codes overlapped with collaborative practices (e.g., Curiosity with innovation, Freedom with autonomy), where leadership actions were embedded in everyday collaboration (such as joint lesson design facilitated by leaders), and where interdisciplinary practices appeared simultaneously in planning, mentoring, and reflection; these overlaps were addressed through memo writing, peer debriefing, and iterative refinement of the codebook. Intercode reliability was ensured by having two of the four researchers independently code 30% of the transcripts, reaching an initial agreement of 83%, and then resolving discrepancies through negotiated consensus to produce a revised codebook that was subsequently applied to the entire dataset.

Table 2 Example of Code-Category-Theme development

Raw Code	Category	Theme
“We plan together and choose which valley the project belongs to.”	Interdisciplinary Planning	Collaborative Practices
“Experienced teachers always support me when I feel stuck.”	Mentorship & Peer Support	Collaborative Practices
“Parents join our planning meetings so students don’t get confused at home.”	Teacher-Parent Collaboration	Collaborative Practices
“Freedom valley reminds me to respect my colleagues’ teaching styles.”	Freedom	Role of the Simurg Philosophy
“Curiosity valley pushes us to explore new teaching ideas together.”	Curiosity	Role of the Simurg Philosophy
“The principal gives us space to try new methods without fear.”	Creativity & Innovation	Leadership Influence
“Our leaders mentor us not only professionally but personally.”	Mentoring Culture	Leadership Influence

Through these iterative comparisons, a total of twenty-two categories were consolidated into the three main themes presented in Table 3.

Validity and reliability

Several strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. Data trustworthiness was achieved through interviews with multiple stakeholder groups (teachers, principal, school founder). Expert (in the field of education administration) review and a pilot study strengthened content validity by confirming that the instruments aligned with the research objectives. Intercoder reliability checks ensured consistency in data interpretation, while member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants for feedback. These steps enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study. While findings are not statistically generalizable due to the single-case design, they provide analytical generalization that can inform studies in similar educational contexts.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in full compliance with international research ethics standards. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and provided voluntary consent prior to participation. Data were collected, stored, and analysed following principles of integrity, transparency, and respect for participants’ rights and well-being. No personal or identifying information was disclosed at any stage of the research process. Additionally, to enhance the fluency and readability of the manuscript, limited assistance from AI-based tools (e.g., *ChatGPT-5* and *DeepL*) was employed solely for language refinement and grammatical accuracy.

Table 3 Central themes and categories identified in the study

Theme	Categories
Collaborative Practices	(1) Interdisciplinary planning (2) Mentorship & Peer Support (3) Teacher-Parent Collaboration (4) School Culture (5) Innovation (6) Teaching Effectiveness (7) Teaching Motivation (8) Student Outcomes (9) Shared Responsibility
The Role of Simurg Philosophy	(1) Talent (2) Freedom (3) Unity (4) Discovery (5) Curiosity (6) Productivity (7) Self
Leadership Influence	(1) Teacher-Student Interaction (2) Creativity & Innovation (3) Collaborative Learning (4) Teacher Motivation (5) Mentoring Culture (6) Student Development

Findings

The analysis revealed several interrelated themes that reflect how teacher collaboration, school leadership, and the philosophical principles of the Simurg model interact to shape the school's organizational culture. Through thematic coding, recurring patterns were identified that highlight both the structural and cultural dimensions of collaboration within the school community. Table 3 presents the central themes identified in the analysis.

What collaborative practices exist at seven valley school, and how do they develop?

Collaborative practices in education refer to the processes where teachers, students, and other stakeholders engage in shared activities that promote joint decision-making, mutual support, and collective responsibility for the improvement of teaching and learning outcomes. In the context of schools, these practices can include interdisciplinary planning, peer mentoring, team-based lesson design, shared leadership roles, and collaboration between teachers and parents. The essence of collaboration lies in the pooling of resources, knowledge, and skills to foster a more dynamic, inclusive, and adaptive learning environment. Seven Valley School's collaborative practices main components can be seen in Fig. 1.

Figure 1 illustrates the centrality of collaboration at Seven Valley Schools, where teachers, students, and parents are co-constructors of the educational experience. At

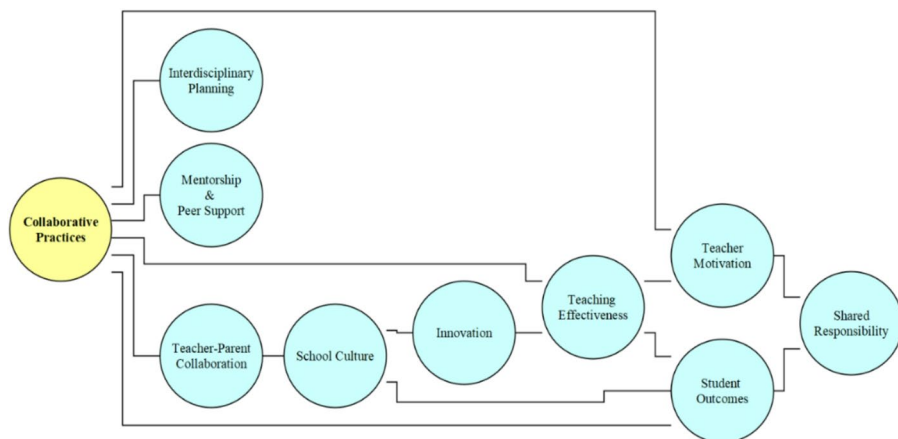


Fig. 1 Collaborative Practices in Seven Valley School

the core of this culture lie interdisciplinary planning, peer mentoring, and teacher-parent engagement, each reinforcing the others. Teachers regularly collaborate to refine instructional strategies and design engaging, competency-based activities that link multiple disciplines. For instance, T4 explains, “*We think we live out the Discovery Valley to its fullest in our laboratory. Our students design experiments freely.*” This example underscores how collaboration is not simply an organizational routine but a pedagogical extension of the school’s Simurg-inspired emphasis on discovery and freedom. Likewise, the founder (F1) notes, “*Our educational model aims to shape each student according to their potential. We strive to support both their academic development and personal growth,*” which aligns with the idea that collaborative school cultures foster shared responsibility for holistic development (Stoll et al., 2006). However, the data also reveal that this idealized view sometimes masks uneven participation; not all teachers experience collaboration with the same depth or frequency, suggesting that the school’s rhetoric of unity occasionally outpaces its everyday practices.

Mentorship and peer support are also deeply embedded. Teachers mentor new colleagues through lesson observations and reflective feedback, a process that both socializes newcomers and sustains a collective professional identity. As T1 describes, “*We meet with teacher candidates and then ask them to teach a class in our environment. We observe their teaching and how they interact with students.*” This practice exemplifies what Hargreaves (2019) terms “*collaborative professionalism*” a dynamic where trust and shared purpose replace evaluation-based accountability. Yet, several teachers also pointed out that mentorship demands additional time and emotional investment, echoing findings that collaborative cultures require emotional labour and negotiated workload (Kelchtermans, 2006). This tension indicates that collaboration is not uniformly beneficial; while it strengthens professional ties, it can also create hidden labour expectations that disproportionately burden more experienced teachers.

Teacher-parent collaboration represents another distinctive dimension. Teachers and parents co-design educational tools and activities, reinforcing a sense of commu-

nity beyond the classroom. T2 notes, *“When a game is designed for students, the parents also collaborate, designing it with their children at home.”* Such practices blur the boundaries between home and school learning spaces, illustrating how Seven Valley’s collaboration model extends into the domestic and emotional lives of families. However, as T10 admits, *“We are supported by the administration when we encounter communication issues with parents.”* This remark reveals an underlying power dynamic while collaboration is celebrated, it also depends on effective mediation by leadership to prevent role conflicts or tensions between teachers and parents. This highlights that collaboration at Seven Valley is not entirely horizontal; it requires hierarchical intervention to remain functional, suggesting that the school’s image of seamless community partnership relies on carefully managed authority structures.

Collaboration also shapes teaching effectiveness and motivation. Teachers report that collective planning improves lesson quality, facilitates innovative practices like game-based learning, and boosts their sense of agency. T5 explains, *“We use game-based approaches in our lessons, and this method allows students to learn without stress.”* Such statements highlight a reciprocal relationship: collaboration enhances teacher motivation, which in turn sustains the collaborative ethos. Nevertheless, some participants noted the challenge of balancing creativity with standardized curricular requirements. This tension between autonomy and accountability between *“freedom”* and *“curriculum”* illustrates that sustaining collaboration is an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed achievement. In this sense, collaboration operates as both an enabling and constraining force: it encourages pedagogical experimentation but simultaneously exposes teachers to institutional pressures for measurable results.

Collaborative practices also have a significant impact on teacher motivation. The data indicate that collaboration enhances teachers’ job satisfaction and engagement. This collaborative environment fosters a sense of ownership and belonging, as teachers actively contribute to school-wide projects. T4, shares her experience: *“Our lessons are generally more enjoyable and engaging because of the experiments we do together. This not only makes them more educational but also more enjoyable.”* The sense of shared responsibility for student outcomes and the opportunity to innovate with colleagues are key drivers of teacher motivation and engagement at Seven Valley Schools. Another teacher, T4, explains: *“When I have a project idea, everyone listens enthusiastically and contributes. This helps me grow, and it’s a great motivation.”* This collaborative and supportive atmosphere is further emphasized by the school’s founder (F1) says, *“At our school, there is always a human-centred approach. Teachers continuously support each other in the educational process by prioritizing students’ needs.”* Yet the findings also suggest that this motivational climate may create subtle normative pressure teachers feel expected to demonstrate enthusiasm and creativity, which may limit opportunities to voice fatigue, disagreement, or alternative pedagogical perspectives.

While the primary focus of this study was on teacher collaboration, it is essential to acknowledge the positive impact of these practices on student outcomes. Teachers observed that students develop critical life skills such as problem-solving, creativity, and effective communication. T4 says *“When we teach through a skill-based approach, by learning through doing, students have more lasting learning outcomes.”* T5, adds: *“In a relaxed environment, students express themselves freely,*

and this makes learning much easier for them.” This student-centered approach, supported by collaboration among teachers, ensures that students not only gain academic knowledge but also develop essential skills for their future. Although collaboration is a core element of Seven Valley Schools, the study also identified challenges in sustaining these practices. However, the collaborative culture at the school continues to support teachers in overcoming these obstacles. As T10, the math teacher, explains, *“We are supported by the administration when we encounter communication issues with parents or students. The administration takes great care to not put us in direct conflict with parents, allowing us to focus on our professional roles.”* This reflects the broader finding that effective collaboration is sustained when leadership structures buffer teachers from unnecessary conflict and enable them to prioritize instruction (Leithwood et al., 2004).

How did the Simurg philosophy emerge at seven valley school, and how has it influenced teachers’ practices?

The role of Simurg philosophy is a central theme in Seven Valley Schools’ educational approach. This philosophy underpins the school’s commitment to nurturing students who are not only academically successful but also emotionally intelligent, self-aware, and capable of independent thinking. In this context, Simurg represents the ideal of helping students discover their full potential through a personalized and transformative learning experience. However, teacher accounts reveal that the philosophy’s emergence was not simply adopted as a coherent framework but was gradually constructed through institutional storytelling and leadership discourse, indicating that its roots are as much organizationally produced as culturally inherited.

Figure 2 illustrates how these elements interconnect to form the school’s holistic vision. However, the Simurg Philosophy is not merely symbolic; it functions as a cultural script that guides how teachers teach, how leaders make decisions, and how

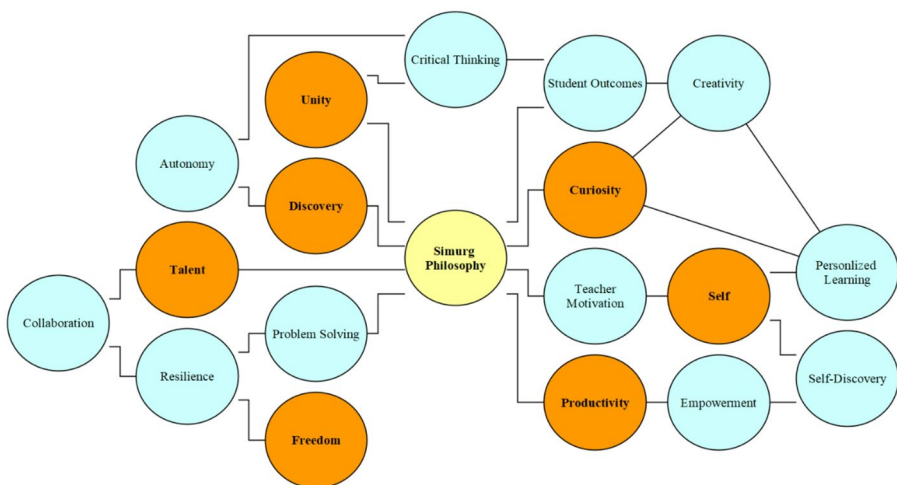


Fig. 2 The Simurg Philosophy and Components

students experience learning. Teachers frequently describe it as a shared “*moral compass*,” shaping both professional relationships and pedagogical choices.

One of the most evident reflections of this philosophy is its emphasis on self-discovery and creativity. As T1 notes, “*We try to create an environment where children can bring their imaginations into reality. It is about helping them connect their dream world with the real world.*” This statement captures how the philosophy redefines education as a process of becoming rather than attainment. Yet, while many teachers embrace this vision, they also navigate a subtle tension between imagination and institutional structure. For instance, some described struggling to sustain open-ended, creative projects within the constraints of standardized curriculum requirements. These tensions reflect a broader paradox of holistic education: the challenge of reconciling the freedom of inquiry with measurable accountability. This demonstrates that the philosophy does not uniformly permeate practice; rather, its enactment is uneven and shaped by systemic constraints, revealing a gap between the school’s aspirational narrative and everyday pedagogical realities.

The principle of freedom often invoked as a core value of Simurg is particularly multifaceted in practice. Teachers link freedom not only to classroom autonomy but also to the trust granted by school leadership. As T5 remarks, “*Simurg philosophy brings to mind freedom. We create an environment where students can freely express themselves. In lessons, we use game-based approaches, which help students learn without stress.*” This underscores a culture where psychological safety supports innovation. Yet, as several teachers acknowledge, too much freedom without coordination can risk fragmentation. For example, F1 admits that “*Our model is not about conforming to the status quo; it’s about creating a unique educational experience.*” While this vision fuels originality, it also requires leaders to maintain coherence across diverse teaching styles a delicate balance between freedom and unity, two of the school’s defining “valleys.” Thus, freedom operates both as an empowering professional value and as a managerial challenge, positioning leadership as the arbiter between individual creativity and institutional consistency.

The Simurg Philosophy also manifests in mentorship and collegial relationships. Teachers view the philosophy as a living framework that shapes how they relate to one another. As T10, a mathematics teacher, explains, “*I integrate this philosophy into my own identity and try to show the same path to my students.*” Here, teaching becomes an act of moral modelling; teachers embody the values they seek to cultivate in students. This alignment between personal and professional identity reinforces commitment and job satisfaction, though it may also produce emotional labor teachers feel pressure to personify the school’s ideals even when facing burnout or conflict.

The influence of Simurg is equally visible in leadership culture. Rather than prescribing behavior, leaders use the philosophy as a referential lens for decision-making and conflict resolution. P1 emphasizes this by saying, “*The greatest success for us is to contribute to our students’ development and help them discover their potential. As teachers, we always come together and support each other in this process.*” Such statements reflect a distributed and values-based leadership model where authority is exercised through dialogue rather than directives. However, the same participatory ethos can blur hierarchical clarity; some teachers described moments of uncertainty about decision boundaries or differing interpretations of what “freedom” truly means

in practice. This ambiguity highlights that leadership grounded in philosophical ideals can inadvertently obscure procedural expectations, complicating teachers' navigation of authority and autonomy.

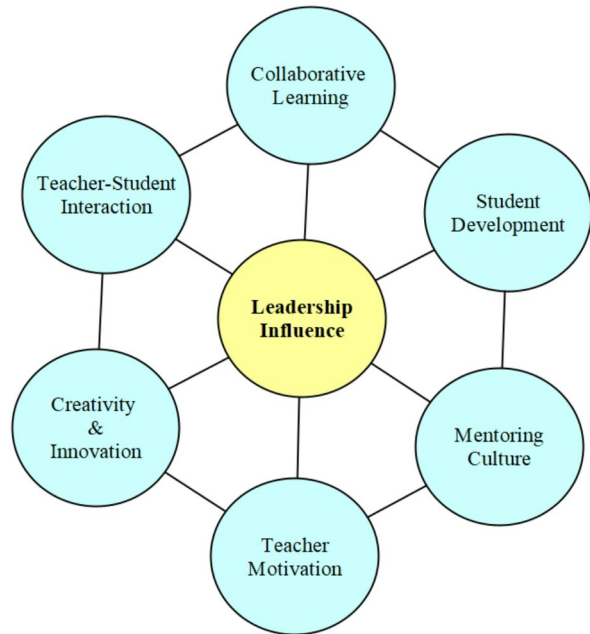
The impact on students is equally significant. Teachers report that the philosophy fosters autonomy, communication, and problem-solving skills. As T4 describes, *"By learning through doing, students have more lasting learning outcomes."* Yet, these successes coexist with concerns about sustainability maintaining individualized, exploratory learning for all students demands significant teacher coordination and emotional investment. This reveals a structural tension between the philosophy's aspirational ideals and the pragmatic realities of time, resources, and teacher workload. In essence, the Simurg Philosophy at Seven Valley Schools represents more than a pedagogical orientation; it is a cultural ecosystem that integrates freedom, unity, and self-realization into both teaching and leadership. However, its enactment is neither seamless nor static. Teachers' narratives reveal a dynamic interplay of idealism and pragmatism, freedom and structure, collective vision and individual agency, echoing broader perspectives on how educational philosophies evolve within real-world institutional constraints (Senge et al., 2012).

How does leadership shape teacher collaboration within the school's cultural framework?

Leadership influence refers to the role and actions of a leader in guiding an institution or organization to achieve its goals. In the context of an educational setting, it encompasses the ways in which leaders shape the environment, motivate staff, foster innovation, and ultimately influence the experiences and outcomes of both students and educators. Effective school leadership is seen in how a leader inspires confidence, provides support, and establishes an environment that encourages growth, autonomy, and responsibility. However, the findings suggest that leadership at Seven Valley does more than "guide": it actively constructs the cultural norms that teachers internalize, indicating that collaboration is not purely emergent but partially engineered through leadership discourse and expectation-setting. Components of Leadership Influence at Seven Valley Schools can be seen in Fig. 3:

Relationships in Fig. 3 highlight the essential role of leadership in shaping an effective learning environment. For example, leadership drives teacher motivation, which, in turn, positively affects student development and the school's overall academic culture. One of the most striking features of leadership influence at Seven Valley is the promotion of professional autonomy within a structured moral framework. Teachers consistently described leadership as empowering rather than controlling. T1 explains, *"We have opportunities to create wonderful productions because we are given freedom. We can freely express our ideas, and no one is restricting us."* This sense of trust reflects a distributed leadership model, in which innovation is encouraged through freedom of expression rather than compliance (Spillane, 2006). Yet teacher narratives reveal a paradox: while autonomy is celebrated, it is bounded by a shared philosophical script that leaders actively reinforce, suggesting that freedom operates within an implicit ideological frame rather than as open-ended professional latitude.

Fig. 3 Leadership Influence at Seven Valley School and Its Components



Leaders at Seven Valley play a crucial role in mediating these tensions. The principal and founder often describe their leadership not as management but as mentorship. P1 states, “*Our educational model aims to shape each student according to their potential. We strive to support both their academic development and personal growth.*” Beneath this inclusive rhetoric lies a strategic form of moral leadership, in which shared values guide decisions from teacher recruitment to curriculum design (Sergiovanni, 1992). This approach fosters alignment but can also create symbolic power dynamics, where philosophical ideals function as a subtle form of control. Teachers, while feeling valued, may experience implicit pressure to embody these ideals fully, blurring the line between personal conviction and professional obligation.

The leadership’s emphasis on emotional intelligence and relational trust has also reshaped traditional hierarchies. T4 shares, “*We create an environment where students can freely express themselves. In lessons, we use game-based approaches, which help students learn without stress.*” Although this quote addresses pedagogy, it also mirrors the school’s emotional climate. Leadership models empathy, which teachers then reproduce in their classrooms. However, this emotional reciprocity demands high emotional labour, particularly when teachers are expected to maintain affective harmony despite workload pressures, conflict, or fatigue. This suggests that emotional culture operates both as support and as an invisible performance requirement.

Leadership influence further manifests in the shared processes of decision-making and mentoring culture. Teachers report that strategic discussions, lesson planning, and parent relations are collectively negotiated. T2 highlights this, stating, “*The greatest success for us is to contribute to our students’ development and help them discover their potential. As teachers, we always come together and support each other in this process.*” Such collaboration indicates a strong participatory ethos, in which leader-

ship and teaching staff share ownership of decisions. However, sustaining this culture over time requires consistent communication and renewal of trust especially as new staff join or the school grows. Some participants noted that the intensity of collaborative expectations could become emotionally demanding, especially during periods of rapid change or differing interpretations of the Simurg principles.

Leadership at Seven Valley can thus be characterized as adaptive and value-driven, but also complex and fragile. F1 acknowledges this duality, explaining, “*Our model is not about conforming to the status quo; it’s about creating a unique educational experience that empowers both students and teachers.*” This statement encapsulates both the aspiration and the challenge of the school’s leadership philosophy. The vision of empowerment demands continual reflection and balance between innovation and consistency, empathy and accountability, idealism and practicality.

Discussion, conclusion, and implications

At Seven Valley Schools, interdisciplinary planning serves as a foundation for their collaborative framework, bringing together teachers from different subject areas to design cross-curricular activities. Research supports this approach, demonstrating that collaborative curriculum design enhances teaching effectiveness and student learning experiences. For instance, shared planning time has been found to improve instruction by fostering more cohesive, interdisciplinary learning experiences that better address students’ diverse needs (DePaola, 2022). Furthermore, the school’s strong emphasis on peer mentoring further reflects broader trends in educational research that highlight the significance of collaborative teacher relationships. Peer mentoring allows educators to share strategies, resources, and experiences, fostering professional growth and instructional improvement. Studies indicate that such collaborative discussions often influence teaching practices more profoundly than formal professional development sessions (Sun et al., 2013; Yu & Chao, 2023). Furthermore, collaborative curriculum design functions as a form of professional development, helping teachers refine both content knowledge and pedagogical skills. This process not only strengthens teaching effectiveness but also fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students (Trinter & Hughes, 2021).

Another integral component of Seven Valley Schools’ culture is teacher-parent collaboration, which plays a crucial role in creating a supportive learning environment. Research indicates that strong teacher-parent partnerships contribute to both student success and teacher effectiveness (Hannon & O’Donnell, 2021; Solone et al., 2020). Educators at Seven Valley Schools report that shared teaching practices result in innovative lesson designs and higher student engagement. These findings align with studies suggesting that collaborative learning environments foster student autonomy, self-regulation, and deeper understanding (Sharma et al., 2024).

At the core of Seven Valley Schools’ philosophy is the Simurg Philosophy, an educational model rooted in self-discovery, freedom, and holistic development. Inspired by the mythical Simurg bird symbolizing enlightenment and transformation this philosophy integrates seven guiding principles: Curiosity, Discovery, Talent, Freedom, Unity, Productivity, and Self. These elements collectively nurture a transformative

learning environment that empowers both students and teachers. Nevertheless, a central aspect of the Simurg Philosophy is the promotion of self-discovery and self-actualization. Encouraging students to engage in self-reflection and exploration helps them recognize their strengths, passions, and areas for growth (Sharma et al., 2023). This approach not only enhances academic performance but also contributes to personal fulfillment and well-being. Teachers at Seven Valley Schools strive to cultivate an environment where students can bridge imagination with reality, facilitating personal growth and identity formation. Research on imaginative learning models, such as Waldorf education, underscores the value of integrating experiential and arts-based learning to develop students' intellectual and emotional capacities (Attfield, 2022).

Teacher identity also plays a crucial role in supporting student identity exploration. Studies suggest that teachers who engage in self-reflection are better equipped to foster student growth and identity development (Rushton et al., 2023). The Simurg Philosophy aligns with humanistic psychology principles, particularly Maslow's concept of self-actualization, which emphasizes the fulfillment of one's potential as a fundamental human drive (Waterman, 2014). By fostering an educational climate that prioritizes self-discovery, teachers at Seven Valley Schools guide students toward a meaningful, purpose-driven life. Hence, the Simurg Philosophy also emphasizes freedom in the learning process, encouraging game-based and stress-free teaching methods to enhance creativity and engagement (Hu & Razlog, 2023; Jääskä & Aaltonen, 2022). This aligns with holistic education principles, which advocate for experiential learning that engages the mind, body, and spirit. The implementation of this philosophy has led to notable improvements in student outcomes, including the development of critical life skills such as problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking (Nold, 2017). Experiential learning approaches have been shown to enhance knowledge retention and student engagement, aligning with transformative learning theories, which emphasize perspective shifts through real-world applications.

Despite its many strengths, implementing the Simurg Philosophy requires balancing individual creativity with curriculum requirements. Maintaining this equilibrium necessitates continuous collaboration among educators, administrators, and policy-makers. However, the shared belief in philosophy's transformative potential provides a strong foundation for overcoming these challenges. Although, effective educational leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering collaborative, innovative, and dynamic learning environments. At Seven Valley Schools, leadership practices are designed to empower teachers, encourage professional autonomy, and promote innovation. Research suggests that when teachers are given the freedom to adapt curricula and explore creative strategies, their motivation and job satisfaction increase (Doğuş & Tabak, 2024; Yorulmaz & Çolak, 2013). In turn, this enhances student learning experiences by allowing teachers to implement innovative instructional methods.

Collaboration remains a cornerstone of effective leadership. Schools with strong collaborative cultures, supported by proactive leadership, experience higher instructional quality and improved student outcomes (Volante et al., 2023). At Seven Valley Schools, leadership practices align with a distributed leadership model (Yılmaz & Turan, 2015), fostering collective decision-making and shared expertise. This approach strengthens professional learning communities (PLCs) and ensures that collaboration becomes a sustainable and embedded practice.

Empirical and practical implications

The findings of this study contribute to the broader research on teacher collaboration, school culture, and leadership in education. While the qualitative methodology provided an in-depth exploration of how cultural mechanisms influence collaboration, the small sample size limits generalizability. Because the Simurg philosophy is unique to Seven Valley Schools, future research could focus on comparative studies involving schools guided by different educational philosophies or cultural frameworks. Comparative studies in varied national and institutional contexts would further clarify how leadership structures and collaborative practices evolve in distinct educational ecosystems.

From a practical standpoint, the study highlights the importance of integrating interdisciplinary planning, peer mentoring, and leadership-driven collaboration into teacher education programs. These programs should incorporate experiential learning methods, such as case studies, role-playing, and simulation exercises, to prepare educators for collaborative and culturally responsive teaching environments. Leadership development should prioritize strategic trust-building, distributed leadership, and participatory decision-making, fostering self-sustaining professional learning communities (PLCs). Additionally, teacher-parent collaboration should be institutionalized through structured initiatives that foster strong partnerships between educators and families. Research consistently shows that active parental involvement enhances both teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Schools should implement formalized frameworks for teacher-parent engagement, ensuring consistent communication and shared responsibility in student learning.

The Simurg Philosophy's emphasis on self-discovery, creativity, and holistic development underscores the need for curricular flexibility. Schools adopting holistic educational approaches should explore adaptive assessment models that evaluate academic progress alongside personal growth. This would ensure a more comprehensive and student-centered evaluation system. Finally, leadership training should address the emotional dimensions of school leadership, equipping educators with tools for emotion regulation and professional resilience. Future research should examine emotion management strategies among school leaders in diverse cultural and organizational settings to refine best practices for fostering well-being in educational leadership roles. By addressing these empirical and practical considerations, this study lays the foundation for future research on the intersection of school culture, leadership, and collaboration, providing actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers working to create inclusive, dynamic, and sustainable learning environments.

While the Simurg Philosophy is contextually grounded in the cultural and institutional environment of Seven Valley Schools, its underlying principles possess potential for cross-cultural adaptation. Educational institutions in other settings may draw upon its conceptual structure by embedding collaboration within locally meaningful moral, philosophical, or narrative frameworks that reflect their own cultural identities. Nevertheless, such adaptation necessitates a high degree of cultural reflexivity and participatory co-construction. The uncritical transplantation of the Simurg model

risks diminishing its symbolic and philosophical integrity, reducing a deeply value-laden paradigm to a set of procedural practices.

The findings have profound implications for teacher education and leadership preparation programs. Traditional professional development often emphasizes competencies and instructional strategies while neglecting the cultural and philosophical dimensions of collaboration. The Simurg case illustrates that sustainable collaboration requires teachers who are not only pedagogically skilled but also philosophically grounded capable of articulating shared values that give their professional relationships meaning. Teacher preparation programs could integrate culturally grounded reflection modules that invite educators to explore the moral foundations of their practice drawing on local narratives, philosophies, or community traditions. For example, pre-service teachers might engage in reflective dialogues around questions such as: “*What shared story unites our teaching community?*” or “*Which local values guide how we collaborate and care for learners?*” Similarly, leadership programs should move beyond managerial training to develop leaders as cultural interpreters and ethical facilitators. The Simurg example shows that effective leaders are not only organizers of collaboration but also narrative anchors who sustain coherence between institutional values and daily practice. Leadership preparation can incorporate case-based learning where participants analyse culturally distinctive school models and simulate value-driven decision-making processes.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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