Community Participation in Primary Education

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Acknowledgments

Executive Summary

Community involvement in education is important for many reasons. It aids in the ability to identify local education issues and to develop strategies to resolve barriers that impede access and retention and compromise quality. Civic participation in the life of local schools also helps to ensure the relevance of the curriculum and its delivery. It can also be an effective component in monitoring the process and outcomes of education at multiple levels. In resource-constrained settings such as India, community participation can also serve as an effective means of advocating for and mobilising the resources needed to move towards a high-quality public system of education throughout the country.

Romantic ideals of participatory development as a paradigm for social development are gaining momentum world-wide, yet the academic literature has yet to gain consensus on a unitary definition of community participation. NGO's and government organizations alike are criticized for using the term to sell preconceived ideas rather than fostering free choices to communities. Botes and Rensburg (2000) quote an Indian villager as stating, "They (the developers) arrived already knowing everything. They come here and look around, but they see only what is not here" (p.42). Gilbert (1987) generally endorses the benefits of popular participation, but he believes its achievements in practice have often been vastly exaggerated and its outcomes have often damaged the interests of the weaker groups in society, mainly because advocates downplay the political dimension of community participation.

Community participation in education is embedded in its context, so it activation requires an understanding of the setting. This project aimed to explore how key stakeholders, e.g., teachers, parents and government officials, define community participation. The study further aimed to determine factors that aide or impede participation and to recommend ways to enhance the amount and quality of participation.

The study was set in Morigaon, Assam and Medak, Telangana. We collected data through Focus Group Discussions with teachers and with members of School Management Committees (SMC), Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) and Mothers Groups and in-depth Interviews with government officials. Because there were no PTA and Mothers Groups in Medak, we conducted a case study in Chebarthi village which serves as an exemplar of effective community engagement.

Virtually all participants acknowledged the importance of community participation and endorsed community development through an active and engaged citizenry; however, most had very limited understanding of the concept of community participation. Most people regarded SMC activities as the definition of participation, although SMC actually engaged in monitoring and administrative roles. There were Mothers Groups and PTA in Morigaon, but their roles overlapped. Mothers Groups were active in Morigaon and

supported teachers by helping with activities such as morning prayers, mid-day meals, and cleanliness of the school.

In both sites, we observed poor participation in the SMC. Teachers blamed parents for not attending meetings and parents blamed teachers for lack of information about meeting times. Some key reasons for poor performance of the SMC were low member participation, corruption, cultural barriers such as the caste system, and political pressures.

Suggestions for improving participation include: increasing general understanding of the meaning of participation and how people can participate. On-going trainings that use the language and concepts of participation are needed to build and sustain the capacity of SMC. Committees such as Mothers Groups, PTA and SMC should develop fixed guidelines for operationalizing their unique roles to avoid redundancy, even as they explore areas for mutual community-building and collaboration.

In education, too, community participation is increasingly encouraged as a means of achieving accountability. To this end, the Government of India mandates SMC or Village Education Committees (VEC) in every school. These committees are supposed to encourage communities to participate and "assume ownership" of the education system, which would ostensibly increase accountability. However many studies have shown that SMC and VEC seldom perform their mandated roles and many engage in corrupt practices.

Findings from the current study can serve as preliminary research for a larger study of the Government of India's perception of community participation, how this perception is translated in their programs and what is the community's idea/expectation from them.

Definition and Scope of Community Participation: Guidelines for SMC operations are clearly stipulated in the 2009 Right to Education Act, but school and community stakeholders require broader, more focused and sustained education, guidance. Capacity building is needed at each level of the education system, as is a common understanding of what effective community participation is, and how it can be achieved and maintained.

Participative Decision Making: Shared decision-making can be best initiated in smaller but direct areas, such as the times for meetings. Numerous parents spoke of their inability to attend meetings due to work commitments.

Language: To ensure active, equal participation, trainers must use the appropriate language. As a teacher in Kapili block, Morigaon pointed out, communication is the key to participation.

Mothers Groups: In Morigaon, Mothers Groups appear to be an effective way of involving mothers in the child's education. Fathers were often unable to attend meetings due to work, and mothers were more involved in the upbringing of children at home. This cultural pattern of family roles can be utilized in designing programs that encourage mothers to play a more active role in their child's education and in village development.

- **Recommended Guidelines**: Mothers groups should be mandated in each school and clear guidelines should be created for the functioning and regulation of these groups.
  - Atleast 5 members in the group
  - Members must be from the same village where the school is located
  - Members must be mothers of primary school students.
  - Each year chairperson and members must be elected during the Annual day celebration.
  - Atleast 2 mothers must visit the school on a given day. Shifts can be rotational among members.
  - Members must be provided some incentive in the form of an annual stipend for their service.
- **Training:** Capacity building workshops should be conducted every two months based on the felt needs of the group.
- **Cluster resource persons** can provide technical and training support to the groups. He/she also needs to monitor the performance of the group and give and receive timely feedback.
- **Convergence Meeting**: Mothers group and SMC of a school should converge atleast once in two months for sharing updates on the work done. Agenda for the next month should be shared in this meeting.

- **Mother's group outreach**: Mothers group should reach out to other parents of the school and discuss and deliberate on school related issues. They can involve other mothers/parents in school functions/activities.

Student Parliament:

Student parliaments were an innovation initiative in Assam. Here, various responsibilities, such as sports, were distributed among students and captains were elected. Captains also helped in classrooms with teacher shortages. These programs can motivate students to assume responsibilities in classrooms and build a sense of belonging and ownership. Students can also serve as trainers, educating and encouraging participation in their communities.

Background

Community involvement in education facilitates the identification of community-specific education issues and informs the development of strategies to remove barriers to access and quality in education with in a given community. In resource-constrained countries such as India, community participation is also an effective instrument for mobilising resources to improve the state of public education in the country.

Community participation is an overused and under-articulated concept in developing countries, including India, where the centralised planning of schemes and policies have paid little heed to the potential for communities to help achieve desirable outcomes. In colonial times, community passivity could be explained by engrained hierarchies, then post-colonial divisions of caste, class and gender replaced colonial instruments in diluting opportunities for democratic participation. Efforts to enhance community engagement and ownership of public institutions, in this case, schools, thusbegin with a question of whether and why participation in democratic processes is important.

Relevance of Community Participation in Education

Schools are a focal social institution that is intrinsically linked to their community's welfare and growth (Dayaram, 2011). Strong, sustained community participation in the management of local schools can enhance transparency and accountability in the education system and promote a sense of ownership, agencyand responsibility for positive change. Education is also known to have a tremendous impact on social and economic development. Historically, policies and programs that target certain sectors of society have been planned centrally and initiated without consultation or dialogue with intended beneficiaries. Lacking information on the needs of constituents and their local context is a main reason for failure of social welfare programs. Growing recognition of the need for communities to be active agents in change is now spurring policy makers toward a more demand-driven approach in which policies and programs are based on communities' needs and expectations.

Williams (1994) identified three models of community-education linkages. In the first, called Traditional Community Based Education, education is deeply embedded in local social norms and the Government has a minimal role. Education is a local process, in which older generations share skills they consider important and relevant with younger community members. In the second model, Government Provided Education, communities are passive recipients and the Government assumes communities' needs and holds key responsibility for providing, regulating and standardising education. The third is a collaborative model. Here, communities support government-sponsored education (see also

Pailwar & Mahajan, 2005). India's education system is now closest to the second model, but striving towards the third.

Community participation can take different forms, ranging from parents sending their children to school to active participation in school-related meetings, assisting with school construction and supporting teachers in achieving positive outcomes (Coppola, Luczak & Stephenson; cited in Pailwar & Mahajan, 2005) As such, participation constitutes an efficient strategy for achieving objectives such as improved access and quality, voicing community-specific needs and objectives, developing the curriculum collaboratively with school authorities, reaching marginalized groups, creating accountability and ensuring sustainability of programs that are implemented (Pailwar & Mahajan, 2005)

Quality of Education: Learning Outcomes

Quality of education as measured by students' literacy and numeracy skills is a main indicator of the efficiency of public education systems. The Global Monitoring Report (2007) ranked India 100 among 125 countries on the Education for All (EFA) Development Index, which accounts for progress on universal primary education, adult literacy, gender parity and quality of education. Physical and social barriers to access, poor infrastructure (overcrowded classrooms and lack of toilet facilities), poorly designed curriculum and teacher absenteeism all reduce the efficiency of the public education system. Enrolment also did not guarantee learning, as children who stayed in school for five years had very low achievement levels. The 2010 ASER Report found that one in five children in Grade V was illiterate and only 25% could read Grade I text (Dayaram, 2011)

Forms of Community Participation as envisaged by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

Sarva Shikhsha Abhiyan (SSA) was initiated in 2000 as India's government flagship program for universalizing primary education. To help accomplish this goal, SSA legislation mandated community involvement in the school system. The intention is to democratize education in the country's rural communities by ensuring that parents and local communities play a central role in the functioning of their school systems. The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 (RTE), through efforts to improve school infrastructure, teacher-pupil ratio and enhanced roles and responsibilities for School Management Committees (SMC) (in some areas referred to as Village Education Committees (VEC))had the potential to transform public education in rural India.

School Management Committees (SMCs)

Section 21 of the RTE mandated the formation of School Management Committees (SMC) for all government, government-aided and special category schools. The SMC is

intended to be the basic unit of a decentralized governance model with active involvement of parents in the school's functioning. The idea is that the parents are the main stakeholders in the education process and hence they should be the change leaders who initiate the reversal of inefficiencies in the system through constructive, collective engagement (Dayaram, 2011).

Key functions of School Management Committees

1. Monitor functioning of the school and look after concerns such as mid-day meal provisions, toilet facilities and teachers' attendance.
2. Monitor receipt and utilisation of grants from the government, local authorities or any other source.
3. Prepare annual and three-year School Development Plans that address infrastructure and academic achievement.[1]The SMC is also responsible for supervising and supporting implementation of the School Development Plan. Proper authorities should then release requisite funds or respond in a timely manner, or else SMCs should know to whom they should report problems. SMCs should also have reasonable control over managing finances and creating a social audit mechanism to ensure transparency.
4. Monitor academic progress of students. It is especially difficult for parents who are illiterate to track their children's progress. Interventions that focus on improving the human capital of mothers and that work with mothers but focus on enhancing in-home learning for the child can improve learning. Adult literacy campaigns can thus be an effective way to train SMC members who can then enhance their children's learning.

Forming the School Management Committee

Bearing in mind community heterogeneity and the need to ensure adequate representation of all groups, the RTE suggests the following composition for SMC:

➢ 75 % parents/guardians, of whom 50 % should be women. This representation of women is an important step in addressing gender inequities in education and paying special heed to the needs of girls in the education system. The visible impact of women's self-help groups in rural villages has also encouraged women to assume leadership positions in the SMC. The President or Vice President of the SMC should thus be female. Marginalized sectors of the community should have representation in direct proportion to their population in the village.

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[1]Though the guidelines say that the School Development Plan needs to be a collective effort of the SMC, reality is that it is often drafted in an extremely non participative manner with some people using their power and authority to take the lead. Also, ineffective training programs that fail to build SMC members' capacity to plan and untimely funds are major impediments in the drafting of the plan.

> ➢ The remaining 25 % should be local authorities, school teachers and academics /students in equal proportions.

Formation of the SMC needs to be democratized and not led or controlled by political elites of the community. However, most states have not yet laid down a comprehensive election procedure for forming SMC. Assam and West Bengal are the only two states that have clear, detailed procedural guidelines. Moreover, headmasters, teachers and parents are not always aware of SMC and are unclear about their role in their formation and functioning.

Mother's Groups (Mata Samitis)

The supporting role of families, especially mothers, in children's learning must be integrated into education interventions. A recent study that tracked young children in Assam, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh found that children in Assam who had attended anganwadis had better school readiness preparation than the higher proportion of children in Andhra Pradesh who had attended private pre-schools and schools. What differed in Assam was that mothers were better educated and home literacy environments were richer - more mothers telling and reading stories to children. Another study in rural Rajasthan and Bihar with mostly illiterate and unschooled mothers of children aged 4 – 8 found that engagement activities of mothers with their children led to improvements in children's ability to read and do basic arithmetic. Enrolling children only after age 6, preparing them through school readiness programs, starting at least one year of school preparation classes for children under 6, involving mothers in the child's learning, or better yet starting mothers' adult education programs and integrating them with the child's learning process are necessary initiatives for a strong beginning for all children (ASER, 2013)

In conclusion, there is growing recognition of that community participation improves the efficiency and effectiveness of educational programs. Community involvement not only promotes accountability and transparency; it helps ensure sustainability of interventions as beneficiaries assume ownership and take responsibility for programming initiatives. This said, it is important to realize that parents and communities will not come together and work independently to universalise elementary education. An optimal mix of autonomy and guidance is required. Autonomy is promoted when services in the community are based on a demand responsive approach, i.e., communities voice their needs and responsive programs are launched. At the same time, governmental and non-governmental organisations need to appropriately guide and supervise parents and communities, educating them about their roles and training them to understand key concepts such as the child learning processes, assessing learning outcomes, teacher-child relationships, current issues faced by the school and the community, and how their communities can work toidentify and addresssuch issues.

Research Questions

This study explored the following questions in the Medak and Morigaon study sites:
1. How do people in the study communities understand community participation?
2. What factors (personal, social, economic and structural factors) facilitate and impede community participation in primary education?
3. How do the study communities participate in existing avenues for participation?
4. To what extent are SSA mandates on community participation (i.e., SMC) being operationalized in the study communities?

Research Design

A qualitative interview design is appropriate for the above-stated exploratory research questions. This approach emphasizes the importance of human experiences and interactions in a particular social context. When a researcher removes an event, social action, answer to question, or conversation from its social context, or ignores the context, meaning and significance are distorted (Neuman, 2000). To investigate participation in primary education, researchers must thus talk with and observe people who hold a stake in this enterprise in the context of theirown communities.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and included 1) members of participatory structures such as SMC, PTA or Mothers' Groups and 2) stakeholders such as government officials in charge of design and implementation of education policies. Data collection was designed to include:

1. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with SMC members (2 groups)
2. FGD with PTA members (2 groups)
3. FGD with Mothers groups (2 groups)
4. FGD with teachers (2 groups)
5. In-depth interviews (IDI) with key SSA officials

However, due to a lack of organized PTA and Mothers Groups in Medak, the design was adapted to collect from community participation structuresin that site, as follows:

1. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with SMC members (2 groups)
2. FGD with teachers (2 groups)
3. In-depth Interviews (IDI) with key SSA officials
4. Case-study of a village

Recruitment

District Project Coordinators (DPC) employed by CGC recruited participants in their respective sites. Both DPCs are trained in social work research methods and are well-versed in the demography and sociocultural milieu of their study site. Required permissions were obtained from local government and schools. The DPC also obtained informed consents from participants in the local language.

Findings

Most participants were aware of the SMC; for many, community participation was synonymous with these committees. In Medak, SMC were the only formal avenue for participation. In Morigaon, schools also had Mothers Groups and PTA. Participants from one Medak school also mentioned an active alumni group that helped with school activities. Some senior teachers related the history of SMC, noting they were previously referred to as School Education Committees and Vidya committees. As one teacher explained, "*Depending on the government sir, when there was Telugu Desam Party government earlier, it was named as Vidhya committee. Elections were conducted, but the body of members remained the same*." But they said very little about the purpose and aims of the committees. Teachers and parents held misconceptions about membership of the committee. For instance, one teacher said, "*SMC means a School Management Committee. In that except teachers, everyone else will be a part of it. In that headmaster will be there as a convener. Teachers will always be helpers. But we are not a part of SMCs. Only HMs will be a part of it.*" Likewise, a parent asked the FGD facilitator if members of SMC received any form of monetary compensation.

Teachers in Morigaon had a better understanding of the concept of community participation. They stressed its importance and talked about school-community co-ordination in social development. A teacher from Kapili block observed, "Community participation will be a success only if there is communication between the students, teachers and the guardians, then not only the school but the entire society will develop." Another added "we have an SMC and the Mother's Group, the SMC, the mothers group should have an understanding with the teachers, if the teachers are only busy with teaching, then the environment won't relate to education; if the external resources are mixed with education then such education would be quality education." Finally, another referred to the role of individual responsibility: "I guess the question was about how to develop the society, so my personal opinion is that, I am the society and in order to develop the society we have to develop our own personality."

Frequency and Attendance

The frequency of SMC meetings ranged from once every month or two to as-needed. Attendance was especially poor in Medak, which SMC members acknowledged. One teacher estimated that only 10% members attended meetings. Women had lower participation than men. One woman confessed that her husband attends meetings on her behalf when needed. Teachers typically organized and convened the meetings. One teacher declared: *"100% participation from teacher"*. Acknowledging teachers' participation, as parent said "*They only take care of everything, if there is any need for signatures then we go for signing.*"

Also in Medak, people often came only to mark their attendance by signing a register. The facilitator had great difficulty recruiting people for the FGD because people only wished to register their attendance and leave. Few were interested in participating in discussions or in SMC meetings. As one parent explained, *"they ask us to come for meetings at least once a month. But due to agriculture, we all cannot go, so 2-3 members go on behalf of all of us."*

Purpose of the SMC

Most members were familiar with the monitoring function of SMC. Almost all noted that members monitor teacher attendance, mid-day meals etc. Beyond that, parents were not certain about their roles. A common theme among teachers and parents was that both groups spoke about parental responsibility for monitoring student performance. One parent stated, "We talk about students, is everyone attending regularly, how their studies are and so on. They show me marks and tell about performance. For us, studies are the main priority." Teachers complained of parents' lack of interest and concern about their children's education. One teacher said, "*Here we don't have anyone who thinks about community development*". Another added, "*We tell the parents to sit with their children at least for an hour after the school and talk to them about what they have learnt in the school that day; but that doesn't happen here. They don't even see if the children are doing their homework. They go out and get drunk.*"

Other SMC monitoring roles mentioned were teacher attendance and mid-day meals. As one member summarized "We have to ensure the students read well, are fed well, and take care of their health." Apart from these functions, teachers' understanding of SMC roles also included working on preventing dropouts and ensuring 100% enrollment, looking after infra-structure needs, etc. One teacher added that SMCwas responsible for taking care of children who faced challenges in learning.

Performance of SMC

Attendance at trainings

Teachers asserted that despite clearly laid out roles and regulations, many SMC members had poor knowledge of these as they do not attend trainings. As a teacher pointed out "….There are all these responsibilities for SMC and for these they are being provided with training as well, but 90% will not be attending these trainings. MEOs and others will write reports that they conducted trainings. But generally there will be less than 10% who attend. Therefore they themselves don't know what the aims of these SMCs are."

Participation at Meetings

Another important indicator of poor performance was low attendance at SMC meetings. As noted earlier, both parents and teachers noted poor attendance at meetings as members signed in and left. Parents said they had work commitments that made it difficult to attend meetings. A parent in Maravelly village stated, "*Teachers have asked us to come at 9:30 that is the time they come, but we go to work by 7 in the morning. We cannot conduct meetings at night. And moreover these teachers have to come from outside the village so by the time they come it will be 9:30 and have to leave after school to reach their home*".

Parent Involvement

Teachers consistently pointed to a lack of parent involvement in education. Reasons given were lack of interest, parent illiteracy and poverty. As a teacher shared, "Parents do not have financial strength; their daily thoughts are how to earn today and what job to find. They do not have job or employment security and are always worried about earning a livelihood. Always they have these thoughts and are fully occupied. Once if they have stabilised income and food, then they can think about children's education. But that is not going to be the case." In Medak, migration was another reason for poor participation as parents didn't understand the local language and would migrate every 6-7 months, causing discontinuity in education.

Barriers to Participation

Parents and teachers at both sites endorsed the importance of community participation for growth and prosperity. As a parent in Mayong block pointed out, "development will come when people work for their development and if every household does that development will occur automatically." A mother from Bhurbandha block said, "Talking about village development it has to come from boys and girls" acknowledging the investment in young children for the development of the society. Despite this positive attitude about community participation, behaviour did not follow in either site. Parents and teachers agreed there was poor participation and that committees like SMC were not

functioning to their full potential. Some reasons cited for poor participation were as follows.

Cultural Barriers

India is country crippled by the hierarchical structure of its society based on caste, class and gender. This structure impedes community participation and some individuals and groups find it difficult to have their voice heard. This was a common theme in conversations with women who deputized their husbands to participate in SMC and teachers who made decisions on behalf of everyone regarding SMC meeting timings, etc. A parent from Mayong block shared, "number of literate youth and the caste system stand as barriers, as overall development of the population has not taken place, only few are employed. "As a person's social status determines their power in society, equal participation is very difficult.

Corruption

Corruption was a major hindrance to participation and effective functioning of SMC. Participants shared instances where work was impeded due to widespread corruption. A participant shared that members asked for their share of funds that came for school work. Numerous incidences of misappropriation of funds were also reported.

Political Pressure

Many study participants spoke about political pressure in SMC decision-making. One summarized that one thing is said at the school level, but is compromised at the official level. He cited an example: "we got a stitching order, it was an unofficial order, and there was no stamp or signature. So that order was brought to us and we had to give them the clothes. Even if it was unofficial, we had a meeting and we were pressurised to give the clothes. Actually the uniforms should have all the specifications and if they are handed over to SMC members, they check everything and then take them. But in this situation, when the students received the uniforms, they were torn. SMCs were given some work, where did it get diluted, at the official stage." Another example by a Head Master in Medak: "School, toilets were under repair and SMC was asked to take care of it. In fact I was the HM then. Then I got a call from MP's PA. That was a political issue, how would SMC people take care of it? It is a fundamental right for SMC people, but we get political pressures saying 'why did you repair toilets? It is our work' and all that. After fighting for half a year, I was able to get the work to SMC. These political pressures hinder participation as people fear repercussions. As a teacher from Patancheru observed, "Some people request us not to give them any work. That is because there are so many pressures and we think it is better not to have any such work. The contract system exacerbates the problem of corruption, where work is contracted out to people with high reaching networks."

Mothers Groups (Morigaon)

Mothers Groups are informal committees of mothers who actively support school functioning. They were active in Morigaon but not Medak. Though there were no fixed guidelines for these groups, they provide support to teachers with assembly, mid-day meals, cleanliness of the school premises and other auxiliary functions. The FGD with Mothers Groups revealed a highly motivated group of mothers engaged in school functioning from the time of assembly to the end of the school day or later. Members would take turns to help out with chores. Two mothers came from 8-10 am; another two came from 10-12 and so on. They believed in the efficacy of education and looked forward to the bright future of their children and the development of their village. They all agreed that there is improvement in the education system. Mothers received Rs.1000 per year for their involvement. Women suggested that apart from performing their traditional role they can also help in teaching students extracurricular activities such as stitching, prayers, and help with lessons. Mothers shared that they often faced resistance from home. One said that her husband questioned her involvement in school without receiving monetary compensation and asked her not to go; but she continues because she feels it is her responsibility towards her children.

Parent Teacher Associations (Morigaon)

Similar to Mothers Groups, PTA do not have fixed mandated guidelines and operated only in Morigaon. PTA members also monitored school functioning and attended meetings on student performance. Apart from these regular activities, members contributed during festivals like 'Saraswati Puja' and found these events a good way to bond. These functions added to student enthusiasm as they learn dance and song and perform during events.

In-depth Interviews with Education Officials

In-depth Interviews with officials were conducted to understand administrators' perspectives on community participation.

Awareness of SMC Roles

Officials had better awareness of SMC roles and focused on holistic learning, overall child development and improving school environment. Apart from administrative roles of SMC, some officials added activities such as attending morning prayers, working on general knowledge, multiple language training, tracking student performance, etc. According to one official, the main purpose of setting up SMC is that if parents take responsibility for the functioning of the school, students would get a sense of belongingness. But this is goal is not known to the people at ground level. They simply obtain signatures from members as needed. If all members knew their functions, they would presumably be more motivated and likely to contribute.

Other Means of Participation

Officials in Medak were not aware of any other organized avenues for participation than SMC's. One official shared that parent meetings were organized only on demand from higher authorities and not voluntarily organized by parents. In Morigaon, apart from SMC, there are Mothers Groups and PTA, student parliaments, active NGO presence etc. An official noted, however, that participation in Mothers Groups and PTA is quite limited.

SMC Functioning

Unlike the opinion of parents and teachers, officials in Medak had conflicting views on the functioning of SMC. One official cited less than 5-10% SMC as functional in his area. But others stated that most SMC in their jurisdiction are functioning. He added that functioning is assessed by reviewing monthly meeting minutes and monthly resolutions. Another shared that of 94 SMC; only 2 were inactive as students in that village were moving to private schools. However he added that parental participation in these SMC is only 30% to 40%.

Problems with SMC Operations

According to officials, reasons for poor participation and other problems in SMC functioning included lack of co-ordination of teachers and parents. Teachers fail to communicate timings of the meetings and parents fail to attend. Another official stated, "SMCs exist because there has to be a committee with a chairman, Vice Chairmen and members when the higher authorities visit the school."

Suggestions for SMC Membership Composition

Many agreed that SMC composition needs to improve. One official pointed to the need for adequate representation, stating, "It would be better to have one of the students' parents as Chairman and elect the Chairman of the SMC accordingly." Another stressed the importance of women's participation, nothing, "One third of SMCs should be composed of women from SHGs so that when men go to work, women can attend meetings."

Meaning of Community Participation

Education officials sense of community participation centered on the notion of belongingness and ownership. As an SSA official from Medak noted, "If parents take responsibility for school functioning, children will feel they belong...... knowing one's responsibility means being motivated to contribute. Another official from Morigaon stressed the importance of participation by stating, "No organization can run without the community even if the teacher teaches in the classroom. Every member of the community needs to keep coordination. The children of the community will learn in the school, therefore, it is very important for the community to keep track of the needs of the schools and that of the teachers. Wherever, the community is seen to be active, we found a better organization."

Stakeholder recommendations

- Meetings should be held to take feedback from SMCs – what did they do so far, what problems they face, and what help is required.
- Many SMC members are also illiterate; they can hardly write their names. Therefore, to make them aware of their roles, sharing is very important.
- Record attendance and ensure accountability.
- Tie SMC functions to government-delivered benefits, making participation mandatory and *cutting ration of members who do not participate.*
- Headmasters and teachers should make home visits and talk to parents about the importance of their participation.
- Teachers should conduct meetings at night to accommodate parents work schedule.
- Display the qualification of teachers at school entrance to build trust of parents and accountability.

Case Study:Cheberthy Village

Cheberthy is one of 27 villages of the Jagadevpurmandal of Medak District

The Mandal Parishad primary school was established in mid-20th century. The school's SMC has 14 members; the chairperson is female and a male from backward caste is the elected vice chairperson. The school has witnessed tension in the community with a high presence of Scheduled Caste and Backward Caste people and the migration of open-category groups. The headmaster narrated an incident where community members forbade their children to consume mid-day meals cooked by a person from a lower caste. This issue was resolved by employing backward caste community women to prepare the Mid-Day Meal and a Scheduled Caste community woman was elected to chair the SMC.

Teachers - Community Relationship
Teachers are the pillars of the school. They enjoy respect due to their commitment to teaching and improving student performance. This recognition makes them approachable and lends itself to forming trust. Another reason for the close relationship between teacher and community is that most teachers must work for atleast 5 years before they are transferred. In these 5 years they gain experience and inspire the community. Another important factor that triggered participation was the location of the teachers' residence. The village headmaster is a direct connection between the residence and community participation. The presence of the teacher round-the-clock in the village makes him/her an insider for the community. The headmaster lives about 8 kilometres away in a neighbouring village that is frequented by the people of Cheberthy for groceries, banking, health services etc. Thus the headmaster meets them informally, often creating a bond beyond the school.

Active Citizenry

The data collector met atleast 2 inspirational individuals from the community who took up the responsibility of ensuring education for the community's children. Mr. Laal Shareef was a school attender and as part of his job he would make regular home visits to ensure that all children attend school. Villagers recognize his contributions in ensuring their education. His legacy was taken forward by his son, Mr.Habeebuddin, also a teacher, who championed a high school in the village and successfully secured a high school in the Cheberthy village. Now retired, he serves as a Principal for a private B.Ed. college and engages in social work. Many young college going students visit him for guidance and give him prominence in all village related activities. Thus, two people took the initiative to transform the community. The communities trust in Mr. Habeebuddin is evidenced by the fact that the community contributed for the construction of a junior college in the village.

Civil Service Organizations

There are four Youth Organisations in the village, at least one operational since 1996. The four organisations are Ambedkar Youth, Bhagat Singh Youth, Sneha Youth and Chaitanya youth. Of the four, two are active. Many leaders who were active in forming the Youth organisations had completed Diploma and Bachelor Degrees in Education, which helped people to get involved with school-related activities. The Youth organisations have been instrumental in questioning teachers' absences and late coming to the school by staging demonstrations on the road and at the Offices of the Mandal Officers.

PEACE is an NGO which works extensively in Jagadevpurmandal. There are quotes related to women empowerment, environmental protection on school walls in the mandal, and their monitoring keeps teachers accountable and maintains transparency in the system.

Industries

There are several industries near Cheberthy village. Community and Youth Organisation leaders of the village approached them for financial help for the school. These industries readily donated computers and some amount in cash for the development of the school

This brief case study vignette depicts an active citizenry and a responsive environment. Each aspect of community, from individuals to organizations, actively engage in development of the community. When the community prospers, individuals benefit. Cheberthyvillage is a microcosm of a developing society, but still has far to go. The data collector observed that despite motivation within the community, attendance at SMC meetings was low. However the village is a good example of how individuals can join together and contribute to their own development. Today Cheberthy has not only has a primary school but also a high school and is inching towards building a College for its members. This can happen when members are equally invested in and committed to ownership of their community development.

Discussion

Community participation is a key component of the quality, sustainable education program envisioned by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan. Accordingly, SMC in each school have a mandate to ensure transparency and quality and to engage the community and promote ownership. To date, however, evaluations of SMC performance show almost no evidence of community participation (Banerjee et. al. 2006; Rao, 2009).These committees often exist only nominally. In a study in rural Andhra Pradesh, for example, 91% of SMC members and 87% of teachers were unaware of Micro Level Planning (MLP)[2]. Fewer than 70% of SMC members had participated in even one monthly meeting during their tenure (Rao, 2009).

The current study thus aimed to understand how key stakeholders in the primary education enterprise construe the concept and practices of community participation.

Meaning of Participation

All stakeholder groups concurred that community participation was essential to better accountability in the system and to promoting community development. Participants noted that well-functioning schools require the collaboration of students, teachers and parents. Yet, their ideas about the medium and purpose of participation varied. Teachers believed parental participation meant they would demonstrate interest in their children's education and would stay apprised on their performance. Parents understood teacher participation to be classroom teaching. SMC were viewed as a monitoring mechanism and their role was perceived to be limited to administrative duties. Not only did conceptualizations of community participation differ, they were all narrow and poorly understood.

Collaborations

In Medak, SMC were the only avenue for participation, whereas in Morigaon, there were SMC, Mothers Groups and PTA. But in the latter case, there was little understanding of the different committees and therefore no synergy or coordination among them. As a result, there was role overlap; both PTA members and SMC monitored mid-day meal. Clarifying   these and other community roles will help improve the work of each committee and the collective efficiency of all.

Barriers to Participation

Major barriers to participation included wide-spread, unbridled corruption and political pressures; and, structural hierarchies further hindered equal representation. This phenomenon was observed in top-down language used in virtually every FGD. Teachers

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[2] MPL is one of the major exercises undertaken by SSA for the preparation of habitation level educational plans in collaboration with the local community.

blamed parents for poor participation, for example, while parents blamed the structural conditions of poverty.

Private Schools

In Medak, growing numbers of students moving to private schools was leading to low enrolment and poor staffing. This situation threatened school closures and created insecurity among teachers and a lack of community trust in government schools. One teacher suggested that teacher credentials be displayed at the entrance to all schools in order to show parents that highly qualified teachers are teaching in government schools and to restore their trust.

Suggestions

Definition and Scope of Community Participation: Guidelines for SMC operations are clearly stipulated in the 2009 Right to Education Act, but school and community stakeholders require broader, more focused and sustained education, guidance. The ideal of equal participation is also far from being realized. Capacity building is needed at each level of the education system, as is a common understanding of what effective community participation is, and how it can be achieved and maintained.

Participative Decision Making: Shared decision-making can be best initiated in smaller but direct areas, such as the times for meetings. Numerous parents spoke of their inability to attend meetings due to work commitments.

Language: To ensure active, equal participation, trainers must use the appropriate language. As a teacher in Kapili block or Moriagaon pointed out, communication is key to participation.

Mothers Groups: In Morigaon, Mothers Groups seemed to be an effective way to involve mothers in their children's education. Fathers were often unable to attend meetings due to work, and mothers were more involved in the upbringing of children at home. This cultural pattern of family roles can be utilized in designing programs that encourage mothers to play a more active role in their child's education and in village development.

Student Parliaments:
Student parliaments were an innovation initiative in Assam. Here, various responsibilities, such as sports, were distributed among students and captains were elected. Captains also helped in classrooms with teacher shortages. These programs can motivate students to assume responsibilities in classrooms and build a sense of belonging and ownership.

Students can also serve as trainers, educating and encouraging participation in their communities.

Committee collaboration: To avoid redundancy and improve efficiency, each committee should have a specific and distinct role that all constituents area aware of and agree on. Thus, clear guidelines need to be developed for PTA and Mothers Groups, keeping in mind the existing functions of SMC. Committees should also convene regularly to set goals, discuss progress and plan for the future.

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