

Transforming Rural Primary Schools: Case for Community Centred Approach

Javed Siddiqui



State of Rural Schools

India has the exceptional achievement of having a primary school (class I-V) within one kilometer in 98 percent of its habitations. Access to physical infrastructure is matched in official records with enrolment in excess of 96 percent. But the good progress on getting rural children to schools is, however, substantially lost with low retention and insufficient learning levels, restricting opportunities for their future lives as citizens, parents and contributing members of the economy. ASER¹ 2016 shows that 27 percent of all children in Std. VIII were unable to read a Std II level text, almost 57 percent were unable to solve a 3-digit by 1-digit division sum. The proportion of children in Class III who are able to read at least Class I level is barely 42.5 percent.

Transforming Rural India (TRI) baselines focused on rural primary schools across 17 districts in east-central India showed even poorer results. Further, it found rural schools are rarely open for full school hours, on an average we have 25 percent regular teachers and 25 percent untrained 'guest' teachers and almost 50 percent vacancy. It is not a surprise that parents are pulling their children out of government schools: these are truly worrying statistics. Our schools are failing to equip children with basic skills and setting stagnation in inter-generational mobility. In rural schools, the majority of children are first time learners and, with over half of the parents never having been to school, their aspirations from schooling includes support in furthering family advancement. Thus, the social cost of this systematic neglect of rural schools includes the family and the community.

Beyond concerns on learning outcomes, our engagement with schools will need also to include as primary responsibility, shaping the child's future life in a democratic society. Well-functioning 'schools' in a deeply stratified society with pervasive embedded caste, class, gender discrimination and

hierarchies are primary spaces to forge new social contracts founded on our Constitutional values of freedom, equality, justice and liberty. The child has an opportunity in school to develop new fellowships beyond her family and kinship which create the necessary conditions for unfettered expression of her innate potential.

Transforming Rural India's Efforts

Education outcomes have intersectional and mutually reinforcing ratchets with other quality life dimensions. 'Early learning crisis' in primary schools are linked to the absence or the poor quality of preschools, particularly for rural children who are first generation learners and come from print-deficit homes. Much research has confirmed that a child's psycho-social and cognitive development is determined by her first 1000-day nutrition, which is linked to habitation, disease burden, sanitation, food availability at home, intra-household gender equality and such determinants. In addition to well-functioning schools we will need well-functioning village life for achieving foundational outcomes in schools.

The education effort at TRI is situated in its broader action engagement around multi-dimensional change in the village with leadership in the community. In our understanding one of the prime drivers of the poor state of our schools is a three-way trust deficit: the community-school, school-teacher, and child-community disconnect. TRI engagement attempts to create conditions to address this by taking a multi-pronged approach. In addition to working towards increasing school and teacher accountability and bringing pedagogical innovations for better classroom experience, efforts are also on to harness positively the aspirations of parents and a shared responsibility and accountability of community in shaping goals and engagement. TRI's Education Sector Council has detailed the following pathways to bring desired changes:

¹Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), India's largest NGO-run annual survey, has been conducted by Pratham since 2005.

Pathways	Description	What success looks like ?
Enhance Parent-Child Interactions	This focuses on parental support to child, includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - building understanding of education and purpose among parents - sensitise Parent to alternative notions of childhood and for back-home support to child - learning material in homes, print-rich environment - joint work and presentations by Parent-Child 	Parent is invested, interested and supports child in her learning.
Strengthen Parent-School Engagement	This focuses on the Parent's engagement with school and teacher, includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - support parents to dialogue with teacher about her ward, wherever possible through PTA and similar structures - equipping her to assess learning attainment of her ward and of other peers of her child - Parent groups to support teachers and children interactions and school activities 	Parent has legitimacy and consensus about knowing how her ward is doing, she is also forthcoming in supporting legitimate affairs of the school.
(a) Strengthen local communities' engagement with School (b) Building and sustaining local ecosystem for supporting education	This focuses on "Community" which goes beyond parent to other villagers, women collectives, traditional collectives, Panchayat leaders etc. and could include engagements that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - foster sense of ownership, engagement, support and pride in the local school - citizen understanding of school including infrastructure as mandated under RTE, teacher and support from government - Strengthening of SMC – members' understanding of their role - Functioning of Villages Education Committee, Janpad Shiksha Upsamiti etc. - Social peer pressure on sending children to schools - Community engagement with drop-out children - Normative issues are children studying for couple of hours in evening etc. - Community volunteers - Shikshan-Mitra/Para-Teacher supporting children off-classroom - Shikshan Protsahan Kendras, Library, Children Activity Centre etc 	Local community owns the school, is interested, engaged and supportive of its well-functioning. Contributes (by way of volunteering, financial resources etc.) to setting mechanisms supportive of education.
Enhancing Teacher motivation and Capacities	Here focus is on teacher connect with mission of education, includes : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formal mechanisms for acknowledgment - Conversations and Peer Groups - Teacher Resource Centre- - Better classroom materials and methods – work sheets, Teaching Learning Material 	Teacher is motivated and skilled to make classrooms better, meaningful, engaging and imbued with learning and enjoying the act.
Strengthen Education System	Strengthening the monitoring and support system at Cluster and Block levels; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - participation in CRC and BRC meetings to make introduction of new methods a sustainable process. - Work with BEO to expand the program through CRC and BRC participation - Sensitisation of the governance and administrative structures towards this elements and build towards institutionalising them 	Education bureaucracy and local mechanisms are supportive of teachers, head-masters

Creating Space for Community Action

While learning from past efforts, we have placed the involvement of the community central to our efforts. Communities, largely seen as being illiterate, are perceived as being incapable of contributing to the learning of the children. Thus, it is alienated from the decision-making process related to schools. We are attempting to broaden engagement beyond mandated spaces like School Management Committee (SMC) and Village/Panchayat Education Committees, for community to also take responsibility for anchoring off-classroom support to children, mobilising parents and building a supportive print-rich ambience in the village. The key challenge being addressed is establishing community ownership and parent's engagement with schools which can bridge the existing trust deficit and bring a sense of purpose for teachers. The effort thus focuses on work with community collectives, Panchayats and their leaders to take responsibility and strengthen the local school system. Additionally, a cadre of socially motivated local women from within the community are being groomed to encourage and support public system interface platforms like the SMC, PRI-platforms.

Parallel engagement with the school teachers attempts both to support their capacity and connect them with the community and PRI leadership to seek help and support in performing their duties. Thus, the Theory of Change revolves around (a) triggering 'community action' (b) better engagement of parent (c) strengthening delivery capacity of the education systems. Results and community leadership form important elements of our approach, particularly as we would like efforts to sustain beyond our presence in the villages, schools. In order to institutionalize a process that creates an environment which promotes learning, we need affective and effective engagement of the community.

These efforts require a new mode of engagement with the community and the fostering of a new ethos, supported by practical methods like the engagement of Community Volunteers. This starts with building their perspectives on education, appreciation of the role of the school and children in shaping the child's life-mechanism and responsibilities of public education

system. Community based structures - such as federations and other collectives are central to this engagement. Events and processes in the community are facilitated by women in order to create an environment which promotes learning and begin engagement of the communities with the school. In order to institutionalize this process of engagement, their capabilities are strengthened to work with the existing functional structures such as the School Managements and the standing committees in the Gram Panchayat. This also gives these structures a broad base to make it more transparent and accountable to the community and thereby engaging them in the process of school development.

This is followed by interventions that develop the capabilities of community-based structures to work on education development initiatives. The activities designed by the children, parents and community volunteers is anchored by local community organisation, this is supported by the routine process of information flow and timely visibility of progress to different nodes.

Progress

TRI's Primary Education Pilots, which commenced in 11 blocks in Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and West Bengal, started in 2017. In each block, engagement is anchored by Education Resource Organisation² working closely with community collectives. In Madhya Pradesh, TRIF has entered into formal agreement with state government to work with Teachers and CRCs and create a supportive environment for this effort. All the Resource Organisations are part of TRI's Education Sector Council which integrates broad strategy and periodically assesses the progress being made.

It has evolved as a space for mutual learning, peer support and creating joint-action. Resource organisations have developed roadmap across the five Pathways, in each block a baseline status of schools has been completed, informing context-specific strategies and activities. Today, 731 community volunteers across 566 villages are engaged in strengthening schools and off-school processes in their villages. 192 Village Organisations comprising leaders from Women Self Help Groups have set targets for their village schools. In 56

²Eklavya (<http://www.eklavya.in/>); Vikramshila (<http://www.vikramshila.org/>); Prajayatna (www.prajayatna.org); Vidya Bhawan (<http://www.vidyabhawan.org/>) and Samavesh (<http://www.samavesh.org/>)

villages parallel supportive learning spaces such as libraries and learning centres have been started and in 110 villages the Village Organisations organise Balmelas to support teachers. With such active participation of community members, SMC engagements have been regularised in 262 schools and in 176 villages SMCs are connected with the Gramsabha/Panchayat where concerns around educational issues are regularly placed. Teacher training and different capacity building efforts, which include effective use of TLM and alternative classroom processes, have been done with 319 teachers. The first annual dipstick study commissioned in May 2018 will show whether an education effort which simultaneously works with all the constituents – child, parent, community, teacher, school and situated within the context of community-led multi-dimensional effort -is able to produce better learning outcomes.

However, in one area where it is clearly making progress is involvement of community members in school affairs. A women leader captured this genuine desire to change: ‘We feel bad about our lives, alas if we could have studied..... we would not have been called ‘gawaar’ (illiterate), we don’t want our children to face this!’ Ranjita Devi, a leader from Dewla village Rajpur block responding to importance of education for community shared ‘... if children have knowledge and understanding they live life with cleanliness, they can talk with others and understand what other says. They know and can understand the things even outside

of the village boundary.... they know what are the schemes and support available from government and how to take advantage of these schemes.’

A few indications of promise for remote rural schools are visible in improved attendance, teachers spending more time in schools and with children, parent engagement with children, community efforts to recognise teachers, quality of SMC meetings etc. Communities have mobilised resources and volunteered to set up Children Activity Centres, organise summer camps. In Bankura, enthused school teachers have started a local magazine to share their experiences, best practices and also sharpen their writing skills. Laxman Mahato, teacher of Mukundpur Primary School opines that the ‘magazine becomes a voice for progressive region..... this magazine brought out regularly has the potential to become a voice of progress and reason in this entire region eventually helping the cause of good education’.

At Transform Rural India, this early experience gives us confidence in the power of convergent action to make the rural schools better.

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Javed, as a Manager, anchors the Transform Rural India (TRI) - Education Sector Council. He is responsible for establishing and nurturing partnerships and is also involved in supporting field engagement for deeper understanding and ground-level strategic actions. He has about twenty years of professional experience in the Elementary Education and Development sector, out of which, for eleven years he worked as a Research Associate for NGOs and State education bodies across India, managing various programs and project components. Prior to joining TRI Foundation, Javed has worked on Science Education with leading organisations like Eklavya, Azim Premji Foundation, etc. He has also worked as a Resource Support for government and non-governmental entities such as S.C.E.R.T., BGVS Maharashtra, Doosra Dasak Rajasthan India, Arch Nachiketa Trust, etc. Javed has done his Masters in Development Management from Asian Institute of Management, Philippines. He further holds a post-graduate degree in International Education & Development from the University of Sussex, UK and Master of Science in Botany. He may be contacted at javed@trif.in