

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS: A STUDY OF A VILLAGE IN JHARKHAND

NUPUR
RASTOGI

Introduction

‘Community’ has always been integral in giving valuable education to children. It has been since ages that members of a community have taken the responsibility of educating their children. From Buddha to Gandhi, education has never been thought of without the engagement of the community. It was only in colonial times that schools started mushrooming, and a disconnect emerged between schools and the community. Pre-colonial history shows that teachers used to be from the community, and their salary used to be paid by the combined efforts of the community members. But the colonials made the teacher a ‘paid servant’, by offering a job and ‘government salary’. It led to the distance between teacher, school and village. Since then, teachers and schools are alienated from the village and see each other as separate entities (Kumar, 1991).

International institutions like the World Bank and UNICEF emphasize the significance of community participation in schools, and hence it turned to be an integral factor to Samagra Shiksha, formerly known as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan. It has been a constant attempt to improve participation of the community in schools by building committees like Village Education Committees and School Management Committees. But how far are the communities practically engaged with schools, is still a question. Rao (2009) also points out that a lot of responsibilities have been put on the communities in the name of participation but not much has been done in terms of their capacity building.

The study primarily focuses on two broad objectives: first, to know the perception of the community about their engagement in schools; and, second to find out the factors influencing that engagement. These factors can be understood on the spectrum of gender, livelihood, awareness, and dynamics of the village. The literature on different community engagements has been reviewed for this study. For this research, villagers, teachers, and PRI (Panchayati Raj Institution) members have been considered as ‘Community’. ‘Engagement’ refers to the active involvement of community members in organizing events in schools, participation in decision making, and extending

Nupur Rastogi is pursuing her MA in Education from Azim Premji University. She is currently on sabbatical for a year to work with Telangana Government as Strategy Consultant For Inclusive Education.

support to teachers and headmasters, if needed, for the overall benefit of children.

Literature Review

The following literature review situates the scope of the research, reviewing some attempts that have been made to improve the engagement of the community with schools.

Shiksha Karmi Project and Lok Jumbish, Rajasthan

Ramchandran (2001) did a study on ‘Community Participation in Primary education’ in the context of Rajasthan. She referred to the disempowered, either in the geographic area or gender as ‘community’. She studied two innovations in Rajasthan – Lok Jumbish and Shiksha Karmi Project (SKP). She writes that community participation was started as an official acceptance of the problem of dysfunctional schools. The SKP started in 1987 as a ‘people’s problem’ when the community got engaged enthusiastically. All the decisions and consensual functioning started happening in the Village Education Committee (VEC) meeting. But later the leadership of the project got too involved with the “success” of the project, and the community was left behind. Another innovation, Lok Jumbish came in 1992 as a solution to non-participation of people in schools. The focus was on involving people who are generally left out and then having a debate around educational matters in the village. The project also ensured that the functionaries and teachers became accountable to the community. However, it was found that still there were families on the fringe that were left out. Ramchandran (2001) questions that though building consensus and meaningful conversations are important for community participation, are these possible in an unequal society like ours?

Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja, Uganda

A non-formal learning program was started for the Karimojong community in Uganda named, “Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja” (ABEK). This program worked on developing a flexible timetable that led children to attend classes without compromising on household chores. This small change led to enhanced participation of children in formal education. The curriculum was also designed according to the local pastoral context and teachers were recruited from within the community. Earlier this community was rejecting formal education as children had to be involved in household chores. (UNCHR-UNDP, 2004). This program uncovers the reasons why communities reject formal education and do not consider it relevant. It is a relevant example to understand that the education structures need to be molded according to community and their ways of life not vice-versa.

Primary Education Program, Malawi

In Malawi, the primary education program (1995) funded by the World Bank aimed at the participation of the community in building the classrooms and other infrastructures. The orientation of the community was done to mobilize them and make them own the program. The government identified the area in which the school was supposed to be open. The community finalized the site and efficiently completed the construction (World Bank, 1999). The involvement of the community contributes to solving issues that the school faces in terms of infrastructure, teachers or even the students who have difficulty in pacing up with classes. It gives a sense of responsibility to the community and hence "... promotes transparency and accountability in the existing education system and can promote the sense of ownership among the community" (Sharma et al., 2015).

Janshala, Jharkhand

An experiment with community involvement in education took place in Jharkhand with the name 'Janshala' which revealed what community participation can do to schools. After getting the community engaged in schools, Teacher participation improved extensively. Teachers got more involved in cultural activities, in classes and preparing Teaching Learning Material (TLM) which had a direct effect on enrollment and retention of students. Students were more interested in attending classes, and thus Paliwar and Mahajan (2005) say that a simple engagement in the form of an experiment built a conducive environment for education in the community.

Community-owned primary education Program, Nepal

In Nepal, COPE (community-owned primary education) program funded by UNDP focused on the building of schools by mobilizing the local resources. The schools are being managed and monitored by the community members and the local governing bodies. The program has succeeded in ensuring enrollment of girls in the school, providing them equal opportunity in education. These girls would else be engaged in looking after their siblings and doing household work. Out of around 9000 students enrolled in 120 COPE schools, 52 % are girls. 63 % of the total number of girls being enrolled are from disadvantaged groups (UNDP, 2003, as cited in Pailwar, Mahajan, 2005).

A study was conducted by NGOs 'Save the children' and 'Oxfam' on Community Engagement with schools in five states including Jharkhand in 2013-14. It revealed the gender dynamics of the community engagement as the women were assigned roles limited to 'caretaking and nurturing activities' while men were involved in decision making about expenditure

and civil works. Thus, gender is one of the major spectra while considering community engagement in schools. Another is what Gaynor (1998) stressed that the teachers are not inclined towards parental engagement in schools as they view it as disrespect to their professional status. This can be understood from the teacher's position as follows: What if community engagement comes with insecurities for teachers?

Williams (1994, as cited in the World Bank document, 1999) identified three models of community-education linkages. It can be a traditional community-based education in which the older generation passes the required skills to the younger generation. The government has a minimal role to play in this model. The second model is government-provided education in which the government assumes that the community needs to hold key responsibility to ensure quality education but the community acts as a passive recipient of the service. The third is the collaborative model of education in which the community supports government-sponsored education. The question here is, do all communities fall under one of these models or has the model been extended in the current context?

The literature suggests that whenever attempts are made to involve the community, it has always generated positive outcomes. The outcomes have varied from teachers, parents, students, and infrastructure based on the kind of engagement that has been made. The literature brings forth one more important aspect of the involvement of the third party in developing community engagement in schools. In all the cases studied above, the program is run and funded by an intervention. Does it mean that community engagement is not an organic or self-driven process, instead of always needing a foreign intervention? A few cases also question if it is possible to include 'everyone' in the process of engagement. Ramchandran (2001) says that decentralization and community participation go hand in hand. If it is so, what could be the dynamics of this engagement and decentralization in a rural North belt of India? The process of searching for literature helped in understanding that in the name of 'community engagement', most of the research has been limited to SMCs and VECs, and thus very limited literature is available that goes beyond these institutions.

Research Questions

1. What is the perception of the community about their engagement with schools?
2. What are the factors that influence this engagement?

Methodology

The site for the study was a village in Ramgarh district, in the state of Jharkhand. The study was both qualitative and quantitative, and both exploratory research methods (i.e. Focus Group Discussions), personal interviews, observations and structured research methods like survey questionnaires were used. Personal interviews were conducted with 22 respondents including teachers and parents from all castes, both genders, and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) interventions working in the village. The questionnaire was done with 19 respondents including teachers and parents. These parents also include members of the school management committee. The Focus Group discussions were conducted in a group of teachers and parents.

Ethical Considerations

The fieldwork conducted for this study is a part of academic learning. No personal benefits were involved while conducting the study. All the respondents were asked for consent before starting personal interviews with them. They were given consent forms, and the interview started only when they signed the form. The consent form that informed them of the objective behind conducting this study. They were also told that they could choose to opt-out of the interview whenever they want to, and they can also choose not to answer any particular question. Their names have not been used while submitting data for the study. For questionnaires, they were asked to fill in anonymously. For Focus Group Discussion also, no names are mentioned and only the conversation was noted. The data has been kept safe, and only used anonymously for analytical purposes.

Data Analysis

Responsibility:

The current study was done with the intent of understanding the current engagement of the community with schools, and what community that includes villagers and teachers think about it. The data shows that both teachers and parents have different opinions about the responsibility of the education of children. Teachers say that both parents and teachers are equally responsible for education, though they also acknowledged that the mother has an important role to play in a child's life, that is why parents are more responsible for their children's education than teachers. On the other hand, though parents acknowledge equal contribution still the dependence was more on teachers. They say that they are illiterate and don't know what to teach their children. Some parents have assumed a demarcation and say that whatever is happening on the other side of the line is the teacher's responsibility, and they have no role to play on that side. Teachers have

demanding that at least parents should take responsibility for sending their wards daily to school but parents say that even though they send their children, nothing happens in school and children pass their time around the pond, so they think it's better not to send them to school at all. This data presents a gap that is existing between parents and teachers, which is leading to nowhere but allegations on each other. This gap continues with teachers saying that parents do not come for meetings when they are called. While parents say that they do not even get to know if there are meetings. This conversation pointed out that teachers only inform students orally during the assembly, and this information does not reach parents. Thus, the issue of taking responsibility is a matter of concern from both parents and teachers.

Private School Parents:

Conversations with parents who send their children to private schools informed that a private school is considered better than a government school because the private school has more accountability towards children. The question emerged during the interview: do they consider themselves part of the community, and believe that they should have a say in the school? Quantitative data suggest that 80% of respondents believe that the community should have a say in the functioning of the school. During interviews, parents said that they should have equal say in the functioning and decision-making of the government school because they are a community, and the children from the village belong to them too. However, some bias was found towards these parents when one of the SMC members questioned one of these parents during FGD that parents who send their children to private schools have no right to get involved with government schools. This again led to the idea of contention among themselves of seeing each other as part of the same community. This discussion also brought forth the new emerging institutionalized version of the School Management Committee (SMC). In the heat of the discussion, it was found that one of the SMC members has his children in a private school. It was after he was chosen as SMC member that he transferred his children to private school, and no elections happened after that time.

Youth as volunteers:

The teacher said that unemployed youth from the village should come and teach in school but the people from the village said that teachers don't do anything, youth should get at least some minimum amount if they are to teach in schools. On asking about their current engagement, parents said that they only go to school for attending Independence Day and Saraswati Pooja celebrations. They never go and question the school authorities by themselves because they are illiterate and that is why they have no right to questioning school authorities.

Community Volunteers:

Para-Teachers have their concern that they are not paid well, and that is why they are not able to give their best in school. They said that their constant worry is how to get money for the home. On the other side, there is a community volunteer who is teaching in a private school as a formal teacher, and in a government school as a volunteer for the last 4 years. He said that he cannot accept that children are passing 9th and 10th without any guidance. The school has no teacher for class 6th to 10th for the last 4 years. He does not know how to get teachers for the school. He says that the best he can do is, going and teaching by himself so that at least they pass their matriculation examination. It was observed that though everyone respects him nobody comes forward to support him in teaching, or to support him financially.

SMC:

SMC members said that they hold meetings on regular meetings, but some parents are not SMC members denied this claim. They said that these meetings do not happen at all, and instead, they said that SMC is only about a family having all its members in SMC. These members decide everything by themselves, and nobody gets to know anything about the meeting. SMC is not trained as per the need. They are not much aware of their roles and responsibilities except for managing the funds they receive for school. They never go out and interact with the villagers. Quantitative data suggests that 80% of respondents were aware of some committee in school but they have never been engaged or called by the committee. PRI representatives acknowledged that nothing is happening in terms of community engagement. Some said that parents are responsible while others said that SMC members are responsible.

Factors:

The data suggest that livelihood, illiteracy, and lack of awareness are major reasons that the villagers don't get engaged with the school. Some of them said that schools should call them, then only they can start their engagement with schools. While teachers said that parents should come and question them, they cannot call all parents for engagement all the time. Thus, again the problem of who takes the initiative. However, quantitative data suggest that 78% of respondents believed that villagers should take the initiative. But how? They had no idea.

Intervention:

Some teachers also expressed the need for having some intervention from outside that could guide them in bridging this gap of lack of communication. Thus, the lack of communication was another factor that influences their engagement. Quantitative data suggest that 94% believed that better awareness

and communication can enhance the engagement of the community in the school. Some villagers also expressed that they do not want teachers from the local community as the local teachers are their(villagers') relatives and community do not take these teachers seriously. Thus, the community want teachers from outside.

Differences in Caste and Class:

Differences exist in the community in terms of caste and class. OBC has the majority but the Schedule Castes and Tribes who too are not economically sound, are not involved in any decision making at all. Even the Muslim families have a sort of disconnect with village and school. However, gender did not come out as a negative factor at all. Instead, the little discussion that happens in the village is in a village organization among women.

Key Findings of the Study

1. Perception:

Sense of Community. Even before assuming that there is a 'community' that has to be engaged with the school, it is important to understand that if they have any 'sense of community' among themselves. Before seeing school as a separate entity, do the villagers also see each other as separate entities? The study confirms it positively through instances of caste and religious differences and discrimination. The presence of power structure demolishes any sense of community among people. During interviews, the instance of personal grudges among women leaders of the village emerged.

Then parents who send their children to private schools – are they 'community' or not? The question emerges while interviewing different stakeholders. Parents say that they have full right to be called community and get engaged with the school, however, SMC members don't see them as a community. This gap might change according to context but the broad question emerges: Can the entire village be not called 'community' because of the differences existing in today's context? If not, then what are the limitations of community engagement?

A very important aspect that emerged is a psychological shift from local to the outsider. There has been a demand for intervention from outside to bridge the gap among villagers and call them together on one platform for the benefit of the education of children. Thus, there is hopelessness in bridging this gap by themselves. Some of the parents also demand teachers from outside because the local teachers are their relatives and they don't respect them anymore. Thus, it was found that they don't want a sense of familiarity with the teacher. There is also a lack of trust among teachers that they don't teach at all, and knowing local teachers personally just adds to that distrust.

2. Factors:

School Management Committee. The committee was made as a link between villagers and school. Few parents were elected from the community to be a member of the committee so that the community gets involved with the school. The step was taken knowing the significance of community engagement with schools. Ideally, the committee is a representative of both the school and the villagers, which makes them exchange each others grievances and opinions. However, the committee is not representing the village at all. SMC never reaches out to villagers and asks them what they have to say about the school and the way it is functioning. Meetings are not regular and are limited to a handful of parents. Most of the villagers don't even know the committee members. When the SMC members were asked if they ever try to reach out to villagers, and make communication with them, engage them in decision making or at least inform them of the major decisions that have to be taken on certain matters. The answers were negative, and they assume that villagers should come to them not vice versa. When asked about their responsibilities, they said it is to look after mid-day meals, attendance of teachers and students, and managing funds. It brought forth that SMC is not working as a representative or link between villagers and school but more like an institutionalized structure where the power of decision making is limited to only a few members.

Communication and awareness were another two major factors that influence participation. There is no discussion on education in the village, except for the village organization. People are not aware that their engagement is even important in the education of their children. However, 94% of respondents suggested that better communication and awareness can improve the engagement of the community in schools. For communication, the focus group discussion was in itself evidence that even after calling the number of people, only a few parents turned up.

Again, SMC as a link between villagers and teachers has a pivotal role to play. SMC has that space of building communication and awareness among parents and teachers. Seeing it from another side, if communication and awareness get better among the village community, it can make both SMC and school accountable for their duties, and even dissolve SMC and form new ones if it is not functioning as per expectations.

Discussion

It is found that the feasibility of community engagement is a bit unclear in the absence of a 'sense of community' among people. It is also found that a major psychological shift is happening in demand from local to teacher from outside.

SMC as a representative is not adhering to its role and responsibilities, and the communication and lack of awareness are other two major factors that are influencing the engagement of the community with schools.

'Community' has always been considered very significant in imparting quality education to children. The aspect of psychological shift is very crucial in understanding this engagement. A lot of programs constantly focus on having a teacher from the community so that villagers do have a sense of familiarity, and the teacher is also familiar with the language and context of the children. Gandhi's 'Nai Talim' was about having teachers from the locality so that education is imparted with a modified local curriculum and pedagogy. However, the current study suggests otherwise. The need for intervention and unfamiliar teachers is a very colonial idea, that is still residing in the minds of the people. The question is whether this is a current psychological shift or was it always like this. Is the need for unfamiliarity and intervention is a new aspect of a community? This need can vary with the community but it is clear that on the issue of community engagement, it has become imperative to ask the community what do they think about Local teachers and extracting if there is a shift that is taking place? The question is, considering this aspect, would the definition of 'community' change totally? The second aspect is if interventions can bring this change in this psychological shift by working with both the local teacher and villagers?

The literature cited by Ramchandran (2001) suggests that even after working with projects, some disadvantaged groups are always left out on the fringe. She also questions, whether building consensus and having a meaningful conversation is possible in an unequal society like ours. This brings back the power structure that has been built by the SMC which has institutionalized itself and takes all major decisions by itself. The study found that there have been families that are not given equal respect by the villagers because of their double marginalization of caste and class. Thus, the question arises if it is even possible to include everyone. Also, the question: What kind of training does SMC need? Why are they not aware of their roles and responsibilities, and who will do that?

A point that emerged in the literature review was that community engagement comes with insecurities for the teacher. Gaynor (1998) stresses that teachers see it as professional disrespect. This study did not find much to support that point. Teachers stressed the importance of community engagement and the benefits children can incur from this engagement. However, the constant thread of interventions that were found across all programs reviewed in the literature suggested the role of interventions in developing community engagement. The study also revealed that the demand for intervention was

made. The presence of the first NGO working on livelihood has made great impact on livelihoods in the village. This has also convinced villagers that interventions can have advantageous results on the community.

It was interesting to find out that the community that was studied, also falls in one of the three models of community-education linkages, reviewed in the literature. The community falls under the second model in which the government provides education and assumes that the community needs to be responsible to ensure quality education but the community acts as a passive recipient of the service. The community that was studied fits well in the model. Thus, it is also an interesting study to know if all communities fall in one of those three models given by Williams (1994, as cited in the world bank document, 1999).

Research Limitation and Future Scope

The current research was done only in a single village of Jharkhand. There is scope of exploring other villages too that might or might not be carrying out some good practices of engagement with schools. Another NGO informed us that there was a village nearby that holds substantial discussions around education during Panchayat meetings, because of this NGO's intervention. It could be an opportunity to study that village too but the time duration of the field research was a limitation. Also, the literature review could have been studied well to shape more analytical questions around power structures. Though it was found that there were power structures present in the village specific questions in the interview and questionnaire could have given the more nuanced understanding of what villagers think about existing power structures. It is also important to walk around the site for the first two days, to sneak peek into nooks and corners of the village. It was by the end of the study that it was found that the most fragile and disadvantaged group resides at the periphery of the village. Instead, those peripheries should be a quality starting point for initiating interviews. The study has immense scope in the future, and it can be carried out from the questions raised in the Discussion section. It has to start from what is called a 'community', and are people even ready to come together as 'community'? Also, what kind of guidance and training do SMCs need? Is it turning into another institutionalized power structure, excluding villagers from consensus and decision making? The scope is wide, only the context of community and school would keep changing with the sites chosen for conducting the study.

Conclusion

The research concludes that the word 'community' is in itself very subjective, and making people come together as a community has to be considered while doing work on community engagement. Perhaps, the objectivity about the specific members of the community would be the key to pursuing research. However, the significance of community engagement is neither denied in the literature review nor the study. Interventions have a major role to play in community engagement in schools, suggested by both literature and the study. Thus, further research can take it from what sort of interventions are needed to develop community engagement, and do these interventions have to work first in developing a sense of community among villagers and teachers.

Good research is needed on SMC training and the kind of training they need. Does it need to be context-specific because what works out at one site might not work in another? The role of SMC as a community representative needs to be explored rather than a power-centric committee. With interventions and working with SMCs, communication and awareness need to develop among villagers. Communication and awareness are both the process and product of engagement. Thus, several factors influence the engagement of villagers with the schools, and all are imbibed in the perception of different stakeholders. All it needs to work out is discussion and dialogue between everyone, and capacity building of both villagers and SMC members to carry out their respective role in improving the quality of education for their children.

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