

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION FOR SUSTAINABLE INCLUSION OF EDUCATIONALLY DEPRIVED CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS OF NORTH DINAJPUR, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

Abhishek Dey¹ and Dr. Indranil Sarkar²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Bankura University, West Bengal, India
(Corresponding author)

²PhD, Department of Social Work, Visva Bharati, Sriniketan, West Bengal, India

Email: abhishekdey@bankurauniv.ac.in

Abstract

The paper delves into the sustainability aspect of child education, emphasizing the widespread agreement on the crucial role of community involvement in improving the quality of education. This consensus is underpinned by the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009, which mandates the establishment of School Management Committees (SMCs) comprising parents, teachers, and local authorities. The primary objective of these committees is to enhance educational outcomes and create a conducive learning environment. Research consistently underscores the positive correlation between parental engagement and children's academic success. However, it is crucial to note that effective engagement in rural areas must be tailored to local contexts. The paper's focus on North Dinajpur district stems from the region's alarming literacy rates, particularly among females, with only 36.5%. Additionally, the high prevalence of early marriages, affecting 39% of the population, serves as a compelling motivation for this study. Drawing on prior experiences and available data, the present paper sets out to evaluate community-driven initiatives aimed at mainstreaming educationally disadvantaged children into elementary schools. Emphasis is placed on the imperative of a rights-based approach, highlighting that education is a fundamental right for all children, regardless of their background. The study meticulously examines whether social work interventions and community strengthening efforts contribute to the sustainable inclusion of marginalized children within the educational system. It also seeks to unravel the multifaceted dynamics in rural and urban North Dinajpur, shedding light on the challenges and successes of community-driven educational initiatives to mainstream out-of-school children in schools. Ultimately, the paper strives to contribute valuable insights into the broader discourse on education quality and community participation, with the aspiration of improving educational outcomes for all children, especially those facing socio-economic challenges in rural and urban areas.

Keywords

Community participation, community leadership, school inclusion, deprived children, sustainable school attendance, sustainable inclusion

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Introduction

It takes a village to raise a child is a popular proverb with a clear message: the whole community has an essential role to play in the growth and development of its young people. In addition to the vital role that parents and family members play in a child's education, the broader community too has a responsibility to assure high-quality education for all students. Schools form the core contents of the socialization process and thus constitute significant elements in defining the community. Bray (1996) presents three different types of communities, first one is geographic community, second type is ethnic, and third one is communities based on shared family or educational concerns which all together have influence on the socialization of children. Schools create bonds or connections amongst people through common and shared values, they nonetheless establish links through the set of knowledge imparted and other forms of social practices put in place. Thus, when students' parents and other members of the community take active roles in the various aspects of the school's operations, the standard and quality of education and the student attendance is likely to significantly improve (Abbass, 2012). The government has taken up initiatives to develop such system of functioning namely the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 aims to empower communities to play a key role in the decision-making process of all government and government aided elementary schools, by performing the following functions: Monitor school functioning (mid-day meals, toilet facilities, teacher and student attendance, etc.); Oversee utilization of grants received from the government, local authority or other sources; Prepare the school development plan (infrastructure, academic achievement, etc.). Governments often face logistical challenges in monitoring school administrators, thereby necessitating community involvement in monitoring of school functioning. At the same time, the local community has the highest incentive in holding education providers accountable, and often has the most relevant, ground-level information in monitoring schools and education status of children.

This study aims to explore how community participation improves the sustainable inclusion of educationally deprived children in schools through various civil society led interventions in North Dinajpur district of West Bengal. Some of the major findings reflect observations emerging from field experiences in facilitating alternate strategies in enabling leadership within community participation and improving school effectiveness in sustainably mainstreaming the educationally deprived or out-of-school children along with that on-ground interventions undertaken by grassroots organisations by mobilizing the communities have tried to tackle the challenges like social distance between local community teachers.

Literature Review

According to a policy brief from the National Education Association (NEA), "when schools, parents, families, and communities work together to support learning, students tend to earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, stay in school longer, and enroll in higher level programs" (Pride Surveys, 2016). Many research studies have identified various ways of community

participation in education, providing specific channels through which communities can be involved in children's education. Colletta and Perkins (1995) illustrate various forms of community participation: a) research and data collection; b) dialogue with policymakers; c) school management; d) curriculum design; e) development of learning materials; and f) school construction.

Heneveld and Craig (1996) recognized parent and community support as one of the key factors to determine school effectiveness in Sub-Saharan Africa. They identify five categories of parent and community support that are relevant to the region: 1) children come to school prepared to learn; 2) the community provides financial and material support to the school; 3) communication between the school, parents, and community is frequent; 4) the community has a meaningful role in school governance; and 5) community members and parents assist with instruction.

Interventions that work towards providing school-relevant information to parents and local stakeholders have been found to increase transparency and influence school functioning. For instance, an intervention in Uganda allowed schools and parents to monitor how local authorities utilized school grants - by publishing data on monthly transfers in local newspapers (Reinikka and Svensson, 2004).

Findings also showed a positive effect of community participation on enrolment and student learning. Like in Pakistan, a campaign that collected and disseminated detailed information on school and student performance to parents, teachers, and school administrators to an entire education market caused underperforming schools to either improve or shut down (Andrabi *et al.* 2009). This transparency was found to have significantly improved school functioning and student test scores.

The role of parents and teacher's community leadership to assist social inclusion noted was noted in various research findings. According to research from the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education "No matter their income or background, students with involved parents are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school" (Brooks, 2019). Ashley Brooks (2019), in her article further highlighted that successful Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) can promote student welfare in home, school, and community. It will also help establish a closer relationship between them so that parents and teachers may cooperate intelligently in the educational interest of the child.

A study in Kenya analyzed the role of parent committees empowered to recruit a local contract teacher, perform attendance checks on teachers on a regular basis and monitor teachers' performance (Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer, 2007). Findings revealed that this school-based management training had a positive effect on student learning, more so among the contract teachers than regular teachers.

A working paper by Jason Silberstein (2023) also viewed that programmes which offer similarly structured opportunities for parents and community members to become involved in local schools can complement parallel reforms directed at improving teaching inside the classroom for improved learning outcomes.

A study conducted in Uganda by Atuhurra, Winter, and Nishimura (2022) during the Covid-19 pandemic induced extensive school closures, highlighted on a “collaborative partnership model” between the community and teachers that support children’s learning. The study found out that when families collectively seek to hold schools accountable, with a more horizontal relationship where parents and teachers collaborate as joint “principals,” there was a sharp rise in the number of teachers conducting home visits and co-developing strategies for families to directly support their children’s learning through at-home timetables and engaging older siblings as tutors. The study also emphasized on the possibility of going beyond teachers and parents’ relationship by including various leaders and youths in ensuring children’s learning space in localities.

Another study conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic viewed that the attitude of teachers toward the community is crucial in forming a reciprocal relationship between school and community (Prasad and Bara, 2022). The study opined that teachers are in a better position to introduce interventions that encourage community members, and suggested training programs for teachers to impart the importance of community participation and the ways to materialize it.

As a school process, community involvement is considered as an essential indicator for school evaluation. A research article by Msezane (2020) highlighted that the willingness of a school to encourage parental and community involvement are gradually forming a part of the processes that are evaluated at school level.

Evidence from community-based capacity building interventions therefore indicates that such programs have the potential to impact teacher and student attendance, teacher accountability, and ultimately student learning. These outcomes are, however, contingent upon certain conditions such as the tenure of the school committee and the degree of autonomy. This evidence reinforces the fact that merely instituting local community bodies to oversee school functioning, without supplementing it with capacity building, is insufficient. Here comes the scope of the civil societies and NGOs in bridging the gap between community involvement and sustained effectiveness by building convergent platforms amongst the concerned stakeholders. On that account, examples of innovative mechanisms and strategies to ensure continued inclusion of the once out-of-school children in schools will be demonstrated in the present paper.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach and adopts an exploratory stance, aiming to delve into a specific research area without predefined hypotheses or rigid methodologies. The target population for this research consists of elementary school-aged children, aged between 6 to 14 years old, residing in two distinct settings: the urban areas within the wards of Raiganj Municipality and the rural regions of Goti Panchayat, both situated within the Goalpokher-I Block of the North Dinajpur District.

The selection of participants for this study was purposeful and driven by specific criteria. The criteria for inclusion encompassed children who fall into three categories: out-of-school children,

which refers to those who have never been enrolled in any formal educational institution; school dropouts, signifying children who were previously enrolled but have discontinued their education for various reasons; and school irregular attendees, denoting those who attend school sporadically, rather than consistently.

Data collection for this research was carried out using a case study methodology, which involves an in-depth investigation of specific cases or individuals within the chosen population. Additionally, the researchers employed observation as a data collection method, likely to gain insights into the behaviors, activities, and interactions of the selected children in their respective educational settings or environments. The data which was collected have been analyzed thematically.

Findings and Discussion

As increasing number of research studies show the close relationship between active community participation and the improvement of the education delivery, NGOs have been exploring ways to integrate parents and communities in education projects. The degree or level of participation varies from project to project, given the different contexts in which projects are planned and implemented, and the different ways to achieve the project goals. The paper now turns to reviewing selected education project run in the slums of Raiganj Municipality (urban) and Goti Gram Panchayat of Goalpokher-1 Block (rural) in North Dinajpur district.

Case 1: Rural

Background: Supplementary Education Centres (SECs) in the *Gram Sansads* of Goti Gram Panchayat of Goalpokher-1 Block, an extremely underdeveloped, unreached, and lesser privileged area with regard to basic services and amenities, covering around identified 1772 educationally deprived children (out-of-school – never enrolled, dropout, school irregular), who have been extensively deprived of minimum standard of formal education. 13 SECs have covered about 850 children (6-14 years) through direct and indirect reach. The SECs were mostly operational within government school premises in every *gram sansad*, where it has been tried to ensure protection of the children by means of creating child safety nets so that the never-enrolled and out of school children can attend regularly.

Problematization: A large number of these out of school children were either engaged as child labourers or their parents were reluctant to send them to school. Being out of the sphere of formal education, a larger section of those children was mostly engaged in non-formal education in madrasahs, maqtabs and were thus never enrolled in the govt. schools. There is no existence of any government recognised madrasah in Goalpokher-I, which leads to deprivation of the children both from non-formal as well as formal education system after a certain period of time.

Intervention: Along with facilitating age-appropriate remedial coaching, extensive home visits by field workers and peer group members, community advocacy meetings in all the covering villages were attempted to mainstream them in the formal education system. This has not only helped the children to be on the track of Right to Education, but also led them stay protected from exploitation, abuse, early marriage, and trafficking (cross country as well as inter-state border).

Case 2: Urban

Background: In urban too, 3 SECs in Raiganj Municipality area, which has targeted the educationally deprived 101 slum pockets.

Problematization: The families in the slums comprise of economically poor people with lack of understanding of child rights and entitlements. As a result, they also do not know the ways to access services even it is made available from the municipality. That led to many children lose connection from formal education, staying vulnerable and engaged in unhealthy environments.

Intervention: The SECs situated in 3 government secondary schools, targeted children from the slums of 3 different areas – 15 out of 25 wards, made ways for the severely irregular and drop-out children to regularize them in the neighboring government schools. The targeted children in the centers once had lost minimum connection with the schools has been regularized through age-appropriate remedial coaching, regular home visits to their families as well as tracking their attendance in the schools. Attempts have also been made to streamline and strengthen the already existing community-based monitoring mechanism – by sensitizing the members and building their capacities to be more accountable for sustainable ensuring of the mainstreamed children.

Specific Interventions for Community Participation:

Community has been considered as the main driving force behind the discussed education project. Communities have been empowered considering that community at large will take the shared responsibility and leadership in monitoring the education of the children in their communities and at the same time they would also ensure protection of these children from early marriage, abuse, and trafficking. Strengthening community-based monitoring mechanisms were done towards ensuring enrolment, retention of children in formal schools and protection from all forms of child abuse and exploitation.

Sensitization programmes and orientation of the community members and stakeholders on child rights, related vulnerabilities, and collective responsibility towards ensuring child protection were organized on a regular basis. Meetings with parents, guardians, and community members in sharing the progresses, gaps, opportunities and incite community participation to access and gain the benefits of RTE in Raiganj Municipality area and Goti Gram Panchayat, Goalpokher-1 have taken place. Summarily, the outreach programmes have been the attempts in formation and strengthening of safety net mechanisms. In almost all the target areas, programmes like the following were organized consistently:

- **Parent-Teacher Meetings:** As per the RTE norms, every Govt. schools already have a Mother-Teacher/ Parent-Teacher Association. But in most schools, it was found that though these associations were formed, but hardly any practical meetings took place. The community level awareness on RTE norms and advocated to start and regularize these meetings on a monthly basis. These meetings when began to take place in the schools where the supplementary education centers (SECs) were also situated have become participatory platforms to review, discuss, exchange opinions on the status and progress of the enrolled children. This has resulted into direct impact in regularizing the school irregular and slow learner students.
- **Community Sensitization Meetings:** Initially community meetings were organized to generate awareness among the community members, stakeholders, and service providers (duty bearers) on their rights, entitlements, duties, and the available resources they can claim and access in order to fulfill them. Later, to establish sustainability in creating ‘child friendly communities’ (CFCs) these meetings have been regularized for community-based tracking and monitoring – for consistent service delivery of the education systems (free primary schools, sishu shikha kendras, secondary schools) and as well as these services were availed regularly and more comprehensively.
- **Children Group Meetings:** In every supplementary education center there is a Child Friendly Group, consisting of the 6-14 years age group children and 10-19 years adolescents. To inculcate peer influencing/ monitoring and boost up the confidence of the slow learners and irregular students, the positively progressing children were encouraged to motivate their peer mates in improving their performances and regularizing in attending schools.
Child Clubs among the CABA (Children Affected/infected By AIDS) children were also formed for participatory and peer influencing towards equating mainstreaming of the children among them as well as indirectly to the other children in their communities.
- **Village/ Ward Level Child Protection Committees** was formed in all the Gram Sansads and Municipal Ward areas to work as watch group in the respective areas. The group members were capacitated on child rights issues and their role in preventing children from being child labourers, married at an early age and trafficked. The panchayat has been involved in the process to make this an integral part of their various activities.

Specific Strategies for Community Participation:

Some of the key strategies that were intertwined within the interventions were primarily: a) Knowledge/Capacity Building of the Service Providers, Duty bearers; b) Building Linkages with the Panchayat and Local Administration; c) Assessing Feedback and Making Plans; d) Increasing Participation of Women; e) Sensitization of the stakeholders on Accountability roles.

Specific Outcomes:

The outcomes of the interventions may be highlighted both in qualitative and quantitative terms. Through the interventions of community-based tracking approaches, individualized planned home visits, stakeholders' sensitization sessions, participatory discussions, the parents gradually have gained understanding and interest on the basic child rights. They were also found to be utilizing the available and accessible local resources to attain them in an improved manner. Through these SECs in rural and urban areas, a total of 361 educationally deprived children were mainstreamed to formal education during the second year of the interventions. Out of them, 196 children were out of school children. About 135 never enrolled children were enrolled in schools. About 65 drop out children were re-enrolled and regularized in schools. About 165 school irregular children were tracked and found to be regular in schools after a year of the interventions.

Conclusion

The community members exhibiting leadership in aiming towards ensuring mainstreaming of the deprived children in to the school system are in return required to be monitored for sustained effectiveness. That is even in case of absence of the operating NGO, the community must be strengthened enough to oversee and ensure sustainable inclusion of the mainstreamed children for once and continued time. Whether the service providers and community stakeholders are working to perform their roles must be monitored and regulated by the leadership from community institutions like Panchayat, Block administration, SI education office, etc. To ensure sustainability, the whole process needs to be cyclic in nature, i.e., the community doing follow-up tracking of the school enrolment, and attendance should be followed-up by those institutions. It is only when this two-way approach of community participation is adopted, sustainability of inputs, outputs and the process can be ensured.

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