

Essay 15

Breaking Down the Barriers

Integrating the School and
Beyond in Education

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Few cases more effectively demonstrate the need to engage parents and communities in the education system than the education of girls.

In contexts where over 80 percent parents expect their daughters to become housewives or whatever their future in-laws would like them to do,¹ engaging parents and communities and addressing deep-seated societal norms has been critical in meeting the Millennium Development Goal of increasing access to education for all children.^{2,3}

As Urvashi Sahni, Founder and Director of the Study Hall Foundation that runs the Prerna School, for girls from economically poor backgrounds in Lucknow, India, writes, “Teachers become strong advocates for girls’ rights with the parent community. They leave no opportunity to educate the parent community about girls’ rights.” Based on her experience with Prerna, Sahni recommends that schools deal with social barriers head-on; teachers often need to take on an activist role and intervene when girls do not attend school, counsel parents, and enlist the support of local NGOs.

Parental and community engagement is crucial not only to bring students—especially those marginalized—into the school system, but also to make sure they stay and learn. Beyond issues of access and retention, research finds that communities play a positive role in improving school infrastructure and governance—especially reducing teacher absenteeism. There are also several cases on how parental involvement has facilitated improvements in learning. A longitudinal study of learning outcomes in 100 Chicago Public Schools identified ties with parents and communities as one of five critical factors that led to improvements in reading and math over a seven-year period.⁴ Similarly, an evaluation⁵ of a parent empowerment program in rural Mexico found improvements in intermediate school outcomes, including a reduction in primary school grade repetition and failure.



ENGAGING PARENTS IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

As global education policy has become aware of the need to engage parents and communities, countries have responded by creating various enabling institutional mechanisms. Following global examples of decentralized school-based management through the empowerment of parents and communities, India's Right to Education Act (2009) seeks to bring all children into the school system and mandates the creation of School Management Committees (SMCs) in all government schools. SMCs are responsible for monitoring school functioning, overseeing grant utilization, increasing enrollment and retention, and creating school development plans for improvements in school infrastructure. There has been a similar focus on organizing Parent-Teacher Meetings (PTMs) at frequent intervals, with a push to increase parents' attendance at these meetings.

However, these institutional mechanisms face significant constraints that prevent them from being effective. An analysis of SMCs by the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies⁶ across five Indian states found that SMC members were largely unaware of their roles and powers. Furthermore, only about 20 percent of members had received some training, and even the majority of those trained rated the training ineffective. Across the country, training and capacity building of SMCs has been inadequate, with limited follow up and support.

Studies from around the world find that information gaps among parents and bodies like SMCs prevent them from playing their intended role. Parents, especially those of first-generation learners, remain unaware of their role in ensuring effective schooling, and information about their children's learning outcomes and needs is rarely communicated in ways that they can comprehend or respond to. This makes forums such as PTMs exercises in futility. As Prachi Windlass of the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation writes, this lack of information ultimately silences parents and prevents them from being the influential agents of change they can be.⁷

New technology-driven solutions and data provide avenues for keeping parents informed. However, the problem isn't the access to information—it is the inability and lack of capacity to use it effectively. For parents to be active users of data, it is critical that they are not supplied information in a top-down manner, but are instead agents in its collection and authentication. One model example is Pratham's Village Report Cards experiment, where report cards were created at the hamlet-level with wide local participation. Their involvement in the data collection process was

followed by discussions in village meetings and eventually led to community action through active engagement with the school system.

There are no quick fixes, though, and while the aforementioned institutional mechanisms provide a good starting point to understand the constraints parents and communities face in being effective agents of change in the school system, it is also crucial to recognise that these are by no means the silver bullets in addressing the need for parental and community engagement.

INADEQUACIES OF EXISTING INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

The aforementioned institutional mechanisms can only be as successful as the autonomy they're allowed to have and the change they're able to influence. While on paper, SMCs in India are responsible for monitoring how school grants are utilized and for creating school development plans, in reality, they were found to have the discretion to spend less than 2 percent of the total money that schools receive in a year.⁸

The World Bank,⁹ studying school systems across South Asia, finds that the decisions—ranging from teacher recruitment and training to curricula and textbooks—that might have an impact on school quality rarely fall within the purview of individual schools themselves. With entities allocating resources and making decisions at a level much higher than the school system, SMCs are eventually toothless in ensuring the effectiveness of teachers and other school-level resources. For school management to happen in a decentralized manner, it is not enough to focus just on the demand side. The supply side, schools, must have the ability to respond to this demand, and unless, governance structures are reformed, any measures that claim to empower communities and parents will remain tokenistic.

It is critical that we also study how these institutional mechanisms actually “empower” parents and communities. Bodies like SMCs and PTAs must contend with profound challenges, mirroring as they do the larger hierarchies and structures in society. There is overwhelming evidence across Africa and South Asia that points to how the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of families posit them at different levels and allow them to take advantage of the education system towards their own interests and benefit. These forums are captured by local elites and are subject to the



larger social, economic, racial, and gender inequalities in society.

In line with this, the CBPS survey finds that even though the marginalized and weaker sections of society were represented in SMCs, their presence did not translate into active participation, and that there was a visible power dynamic between men and women, due to which women were unable to participate effectively.

All of these factors, coupled with a cascade model of training that fails to be cognizant of the heterogeneity of SMCs or the parent constituency more generally, prevents them from being truly participatory. Far from realizing the Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable education, this instead ends up perpetuating the inequalities in access to quality education. We have made rapid strides in utilizing granular data to inform political campaigns and identify and target social programs—this infrastructure may also be leveraged towards targeted training, communications, and messaging to address the specific concerns and constraints of parents from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

At a much more fundamental level, though, we need to reframe the larger conversation on parental engagement. Far too often, parents and communities are seen as regulators or watchdogs of the school system. Such a framing seldom fosters constructive interactions between schools and parents, and in fact, curtails the motivation of teachers and school leadership in promoting parental engagement.

Research finds that for parental engagement to be effective, parents and the school system must see themselves as partners. They must also share a relationship of mutual respect, trust, and be bound by a unity of purpose.¹⁰ There is also evidence that increased involvement in schools allows parents to develop a more positive attitude towards teachers.¹¹ It is crucial that such evidence is widely disseminated and that schools and teachers are actively trained—and reminded of their own incentives—to engage parents.

ENGAGING PARENTS BEYOND THE “SCHOOL SYSTEM”

As we think of parents as partners in the education system, it is also important that we broaden our conversation from how parents can engage

with the “school system,” to how they can engage with their children’s learning and education.

While we have increased access to formal education over the past two decades, we have also begun to assume that education happens only within the compounds of a school. SMCs and PTAs serve as vehicles that enable engagement with the school system, but should not cannibalize conversations about engaging the parent constituency more broadly and comprehensively.

It is essential that we go back to the basics, and embed the conversation on children’s learning and academic performance in the fundamental socioeconomic factors they are exposed to at home and in their communities. One study found that early childhood stunting and poverty levels have an impact on children’s cognitive abilities and academic performance, causing them to do poorly in school.¹² As a consequence of this, the authors estimate that over 200 million children under the age of 5 are unable to fulfill their developmental potential.

This makes it imperative that we address parents and communities in a more holistic manner, with the recognition that education policy cannot work in isolation from social policy. In line with this, Brazil’s Early Childhood Development Support program—predicated on the belief that the parents’ role is the “principal determinant in child development”—brings together the Departments of Education, Health, and Social Development to coordinate home visits to parents, to promote all-round development of children.¹³

To prepare children to be successful citizens in the 21st Century, there is an urgent need to emphasize a broader set of skills and find ways to leapfrog education innovations. The World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs Report¹⁴ lists skills such as problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, and ability to coordinate and work with others, among the top 10 skills in demand for the future. The Center for Universal Education at Brookings surveyed the educational mission statements and priorities of about 100 countries and found that more than 86 percent lay emphasis on 21st Century Skills such as communication, problem solving, and collaboration.¹⁵

When we think of education only in terms of literacy and numeracy skills, we inevitably erect barriers that keep out parents who can’t contribute in these areas, create a hierarchical relationship between the teacher and



the parent, and reinforce the socioeconomic inequalities between parents who have different capacities owing to their backgrounds.

The new emphasis on a broader set of skills provides a valuable opportunity to redefine these relations, recognize that learning can happen anywhere and the teacher is far from the only person who can allow children to cultivate the skills they need to be active citizens in a changing world. Skills like collaboration and communication, and creativity and problem solving, are far from the purview of just the school system—they may well be taught in theory in classrooms, but need to be practiced and honed at home and in society. Children need an extended time and space for learning, and unless we empower and train more agents outside the school system to serve as mentors and guides, we will fail to successfully equip students with the skills they need to be successful.

Ultimately, the jury is still out, with evaluations around the world yielding differing results, on whether parental and community involvement in schools leads to increases in learning outcomes. But we should be reasonably confident that parents have a unique role in the education of their children—as consumers and suppliers. Furthermore, as we devise mechanisms to translate the policy focus on 21st Century Skills to actual changes on the ground, a new parent-teacher partnership might just be the leapfrog opportunity that we've been looking for.

ENDNOTES

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