

Between literacy and learning: Community engagement in public education – Part I

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Key findings

For a child's effective education, parents and the community as a whole play a key role. Studies have shown parental engagement improves a child's achievements. While initiatives like Right to Education Act, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and mid-day meal programme nudge the children to attend school, but the learning outcome also depends on parents' engagement at home.

In view of scarce resources in rural India, community participation is both crucial and difficult. However, due to features like poverty, illiteracy and locational disadvantages in rural belts, the community engagement plan needs to be customised to give a child maximum possible support.

Maria Montessori (1870-1952), the pioneer of the scientific method of primary education that bears her name, firmly believed that early childhood education is key to the betterment of society. Educationists have accepted and adopted this perspective widely over the past century. This is best reflected in the inclusion of quality education in the UN's [Sustainable Development Goals](#).

India has made significant progress in facilitating quality education for all. Today, education is considered a ticket to a better future. Even the poorest families in rural heartlands aspire to educate their children. The percentage of children between ages 6 and 14 who are not enrolled in a school has been [going down](#) since 2006. However, positive sentiments toward education and improved enrolment numbers have been ineffective in curing low attendance ([especially in the under-developed¹ states](#)) and poor performance of students who study in government schools.² After the range of investments in transformational initiatives, such as [Right to Education \(RTE\)](#), [Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan \(SSA\)](#)³, and [mid-day meal \(MDM\)](#), these performance issues are quite puzzling.

MicroSave recently conducted a [study](#) on Direct Benefit Transfer ([DBT](#)) in education in Uttar Pradesh (UP). During the course of this study, we interacted with a wide range of stakeholders like government school principals, teachers, government officials, parents, and students. A majority of them shared similar views on the poor performance of students who study in government schools.

Administrations across the world have handled the challenge of addressing the quality of education in government schools in different ways. Common strategies include restructuring of the curriculum and learning process, [ensuring teachers' availability](#) and competence, and improving the infrastructure of schools. Other strategies include extending aid through government educational programmes to poor students with an aim to facilitate improved access to education.

In India, the RTE Act 2009 guarantees free and compulsory elementary education to every child

aged between 6 and 14. The Government of India and state governments together, under the SSA, provide children with a basket of school essentials⁴ to reduce the financial burden on their parents. Mid-day meal (MDM) is another programme that aims to ensure proper nutrition for students. While these programmes have improved enrolment by incentivising education, the motivation to learn is still low. Creating access to education is yet to lead to effective learning.

However, education is not the responsibility of



a single institution. While schools indeed have a major role to play, the support and encouragement from the community also contribute to effective learning. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in [a research](#) on the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), infers this as well.

"The involvement of parents in young children's education is a fundamental right and obligation. Both the OECD (2006) and UNICEF (2008) argue that ECEC services should recognise the rights of parents

1. Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh
2. http://img.asercentre.org/docs/Publications/ASER%20Reports/ASER%202016/aser_2016.pdf
3. Now under Samagra Siksha
4. In Uttar Pradesh, for session 2017-18, students received uniforms, textbooks, bag, shoes, socks, and sweater

to be informed, comment on, and participate in key decisions concerning their child. Research shows that there is a substantial need and a demand for a parental component in ECEC services (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Research also demonstrates that parental engagement in ECEC services enhances children’s achievements and adaptation.”

In resource-scarce rural areas, in particular, the participation of the community is essential. [The National Education Association](#) states that the popular proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child”, produces a clear message that “the whole community has an essential role to play in the growth and development of its young people.”

Challenges

MicroSave’s research with the Uttar Pradesh (UP) Education Department involved dialogues with a range of stakeholders.⁵ The research identified three barriers that rural communities face in education: 1. poverty, 2. locational vulnerability, and 3. lack of job opportunities. Poverty is a full-time battle that leaves parents with little time and motivation for non-salient opportunities like education. Isolation restricts the community as a whole from using urban learning methods like museums and libraries. Often locational disadvantages also contribute to a lack of job opportunities, as rural students may not devote efforts in studies because education does not always provide employment in the rural areas.



Figure 1: Challenges faced in education

By community	By schools/authorities	Others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of job opportunity Lack of money Young generation unwilling to take up traditional occupations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents not taking interest in child’s education Teachers’ absenteeism Lack of infrastructure like computers, the Internet, or even tables and chairs in rural areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outdated curricula Access to education is difficult, especially for the poor



Figure 2: Steps taken to address the challenge

Community involvement	Motivation for teachers	Others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formation of SMCs to give the community a voice in educational decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring teachers’ availability and competence via regular training and initiatives like DIKSHA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiative like Sarva Sikhsha Abhiyan and Right to Education Restructuring of the curriculum and learning process, initiatives like SWAYAM

Recognising the importance of community engagement, RTE mandated the formation of [School Management Committees \(SMC\)](#) for every school. This elected body comprises parents, local authorities, and the principal. It monitors the functioning of the school and oversees utilisation of grants for various benefits like uniforms, sweaters, etc. However, most community members are not aware of their rights and responsibilities. This greatly impairs the participation of the community in a meaningful way.

Do the challenges call for a complete overhaul of existing systems or are there cases of [positive deviance](#)?

Is there a way to harness existing resources and improve the situation through incremental innovation?

We discuss these in [part II](#) of this IFN.

“Maa-baap koi responsibility nai lete, sab kuch teachers ko hi karna h, usme bhi school bhejna nai bhejna unki marzi he, class ke beech se utha ke le jate hain.”

(Parents do not take any responsibility for their child’s education. Everything is assumed to be the teachers’ responsibility. On top of this when they do send their children to school there are many instances when they take them home in the middle of a school day) – Principal, Meerut

5. Gorakhpur, Lalitpur, Lucknow, and Meerut districts of Uttar Pradesh were covered in the study.