

“Community Participation and School Improvement Diverse Perspectives and Emerging Issues”

R. Govinda

**Vice-Chancellor, National University of Educational Planning and
Administration, India**



Move towards involving the community members and empowering them to govern the schools currently finds a prominent place in education policy documents in almost all countries. In fact, community participation in school management has a long history. After all, the first schools were founded and even funded solely by local community groups. The State entered the scene much later in the history of schooling. Initially, role of the school had been to wean the individual away from the emotional world of the home in order to socialize in the outside world and for introducing young men and women to the rational world of knowledge and learning. With the onset of industrialization along with the emphasis on compulsory schooling, and education for informed citizenship and economic development becoming the main goals, national governments began to take the responsibility of funding and organizing school education. This, in some ways, set the stage for distancing the home and the community from school organization. With the evolution of ‘national systems of education’, governments began asserting their authority and control over the system of schooling as fully legitimate. Today, all over the world, it is the prerogative of the national governments to determine the shape of the school system as a publicly funded phenomenon.

Seen in the above evolutionary perspective, the current focus on participation of the community in school management is actually an instance of ‘coming round full circle’. Perhaps, one has to unscramble and understand what this return of the community to school means, in rhetoric and in reality. Why are we promoting community participation? Does it represent a genuine interest of the State to reconfigure its relationship with the school and the civil society in a more democratic manner? Or is it the political and economic expediency that is pushing the governments to take recourse to such actions? What can community participation do for improving schools? How do we institutionalize and sustain community participation? How do we address diversities within community in mobilizing their participation in school management? These are some of the critical questions to be examined.

Why Community Participation? Diverse Perspectives

What are the motives behind the on-going movement for involving community in school management? Following are some of the broad motives that provide the rationale for bringing community participation for school improvement in different countries. *Democracy Rationale*: One view on the recent reforms sweeping different countries and bringing community to school management is that it is prompted by a genuine desire on the part of the governments to broad base decision making and to promote democratic principles of participation. Some also link the move towards democratization to parental activism in many countries for obtaining a larger role in decision making. *Social justice and equity rationale*: Where the society consists of multicultural settings and diverse socio-economic groups, it is considered that parental participation on a democratic basis in school governance will contribute to goals of social justice and equity. In fact, throughout the 1960s and 1970s a major force behind the development of increased parental involvement in the United States stemmed from concerns about social justice and equity. In many developing societies with wide differences in economic capabilities, the argument finds great favour among policy makers. This indeed is

one of the main factors that has influenced the recent adoption of the Right to Education Act in India with significant importance attached to the role of school management committees. *Economic rationalism and free market principle:* Traditionally education system has remained very little affected by the development in the world of economy and production. However, this phase of protective isolation appears to be coming to an end as economic rationalist and corporate managerialist policies have been sweeping the public sector provisions in all sphere of life. Governments have come under severe pressure for restructuring the bureaucracy to achieve greater outputs for the given inputs. Devolution of authority to the schools and to the community members seems to be a part of this larger restructuring process. This emphasis on managerialism in education seems to be both structural and ideological with notions of efficiency, productivity and accountability becoming the driving force for the reforms.

What can Community do for Improving Schools?

Though original schools were the creation of local community groups, throughout much of the world public education has largely become the preserve of bureaucracies. Apprehensions are often expressed many on the appropriateness of pushing parents into school management. Whether such reservations are justified or not, one has to accept that community participation is not a panacea for all the ills of the school system. Research explorations and field experiences point to five broad areas of school management in which community participation could add significant value. (a) *Improve enrolment and retention and regularity of attendance:* Despite significant improvement in levels of student enrolment in most developing countries, regular participation of children in schooling and completion of the elementary cycle of education continues to be a problem. Even though school authorities and teachers could address this issue, field studies and experimentations clearly indicate that the problem can be addressed effectively only through involvement of parents and community members. (b) *Improve infrastructure facilities in school:* Improving the physical conditions, particularly through better maintenance, including basic academic facilities in the school is another area that community members could collectively take care of. In fact, in several countries, the school management committees are vested with the responsibility of receiving and utilizing funds towards physical infrastructure improvement and maintenance. (c) *Mobilize supplementary resources:* Even in the best of the conditions, financial resources provided by the Government or raised through student fees are never adequate for attempting substantial improvement in the quality of the processes and outcomes of schooling. Local community as the primary stakeholder could contribute towards this goal. In fact, studies have shown that supplementary finances from the community and quality of learning are closely linked. (d) *Monitor implementation of development projects:* Proper utilization of resources and implementation of development efforts supported by the Government or other agencies need close supervision. This necessarily has to be done on a continuous basis and parents and local community are best suited to do this task effectively. (e) *Play the role of a social watch:* A long standing complaint of the common tax payer has been that the education system is, in general, run in a nontransparent manner and the people managing the system have no direct accountability to any one though the system is dependent very heavily on state funding. Involvement of the community in school governance is seen as an answer to this criticism. With adequate representation of the parents who are the direct stake holders in school governance, it expected that the system would become more open and accountable. This is also expected to significantly improve the efficiency of every school.

Institutional Framework for community participation

Theoretically and in legislation the issue of community participation seems to be a settled one. However the

contours of participation in practice seem to be still in a process of flux. More specifically, the question of ‘How do we operationalise community participation?’ continues to perplex. While everyone appreciates that a top-down model prescribing community involvement in school governance through official diktat is inimical to the basic idea of participation, how do we adopt a bottom-up grassroots model. Experience from an Indian Project demonstrates that it is possible, but requires enormous commitment to building democratic processes at grassroots level.

The basic assumption is that capabilities for self-management among the community members evolve through practice rather than prescription. Therefore, the Project began vesting in the community the responsibility of determining the demand and preparing local education development plans based on concrete empirical explorations. Through this approach, the attempt was to create a system of management from below by laying great emphasis on the formation of village teams. A core team of the block level education management committee functioned as a spearhead for the purpose, using participatory school mapping and other aspects of micro planning as a method of people’s mobilization. It is the villagers themselves who carried out field surveys and prepare an education map of the village indicating the status of every child in the village. An important feature of the approach is its focus on issues equity by ensuring the participation of traditionally excluded sections in the process of institution building, which is very critical in a state which has still a long way to go in reaching the goal of universal elementary education.

How can such initiatives of ‘building from below’ be sustained? There is no clear cut answer. However, it is important that, whatever be the institutional structure, acceptance of these structures and their functioning by the State as well as the community is critical for their sustainability and effective functioning. As experience shows many institutional structures such as village education committees and school management bodies created through executive orders from the state have never taken roots in the absence of acceptance among the stakeholders. What is required is to work towards convergence between the state perspective and that of the grassroots level stakeholders.

Community Involvement in School Improvement: Emerging Issues

The new management framework with active community involvement effectively responds to several criticisms of the traditional approach. But it brings with it new issues and challenges. New actors are introduced into the task of governance with which they have very little familiarity. While the new actors acquire the necessary skills and orientation, old actors are required to change their mindsets and reconfigure the relationships. Authorities have to be willing to shed some of their prerogatives and powers while parents and teachers have to learn to discharge their new found responsibilities effectively. The new school based actors do not have the scope to pass the buck and put the blame on the ubiquitous ‘systemic problems’ which are beyond their purview. Some of the emerging issues are discussed in the following.

- (a) A major manifestation of a widening of parental involvement, through legislated representation on school committees, is that it provides parents with greater voice in school policy, planning, governance and administration.² Several issues in this connection need to be examined: (i) How much or how little power and influence are exercised by parent representatives in the various decision making groups; (ii) The extent to which elected parents on school councils can and do represent diversity of interests, values and views of the parent body as a whole; and (iii) Is this a genuine attempt to embrace parent and community involvement in democratizing school decision making, or an

² O’Donoghue, T.A. and Dimmock, C.A.J. (1998) *School Restructuring: International Perspectives*, London: Kogan Page. (pp. 167-168)

attempt by the governments to avoid criticism on themselves.

- (b) As noted earlier, building a system of accountability has been one of the driving forces behind the move to involve parents and the community in school management. But accountability cannot be seen in a fragmented manner in terms of administrative efficiency and professional capabilities. To whom should the school be accountable - to the Government or the Parents or the Public (tax payers)? It is found that parents in general are interested in their children's education and that they wish to be informed about their progress and prospects. ... But it is the experience of many schools that parents have no wish to interfere in professional matters relating to the organization and management of internal affairs.³ Evidence suggests that they are more interested in outcomes than in processes. There has been a similar lack of enthusiasm to take part in the new accountability procedures through which parents can question the school's performance and possibly take corrective action. While school management committee can become the main body for decision making with respect to general management issues, questions of academic and professional management has to be independently dealt with by professionally trained personnel. Community members' role in academic decision making cannot have a uniform prescription as it depends on the profile of the members constituting such management bodies and the mutual confidence that the teachers and the members of the committee enjoy.
- (c) An important rationale for the restructuring policies emanates from the concern shown by many governments to cut public spending and to secure greater efficiency and value for money in education. This pursuit of economic, rationalist policies in education has led to criticism from parents and teachers that governments are placing more responsibilities on schools while failing to provide adequate resources. This cannot be considered as mere activist posturing. It calls for examining if the policies are merely passing over the burden to the already burdened common man. Following two issues are at the core of this argument. (a) There is an issue of equity in the expectation that local communities and parents will contribute directly to the human, physical and financial resources to school. (b) Some parents may consider that the payment of taxes entitles their children to an otherwise cost-free, publicly provided education.
- (d) Though most countries in the developing world advocate community participation as an important component of their efforts to improve the education system, two significant questions are being raised particularly in the context of developing countries.⁴ The first apprehension is that, under the low state of educational development in many countries, such extreme localization of authority may make school the locus of unwarranted power struggle undermining the basic concern of improving school efficiency. This is well illustrated by the studies of school management committees in several parts of India.⁵ The second apprehension is more global in nature. Many fear that handing over school control and management to local councils and boards may in the long run lead to deprofessionalisation of school administration and even cut into the authority of the school heads. In fact, scholars investigating the effects of school autonomy reforms in some of the industrialized countries point out that this may gradually erode the power and authority of the school itself and lead to further central control on vital matters of schooling such as curriculum, learner evaluation, personnel management and so on.

Even though several issues remain to be tackled, studies also reveal that active participation of the community in school governance has added substantial value in terms of effective school functioning. However, lack of clarity and

³ Cave, E. (1990) "The changing managerial arena", in Cave, E. and Wilkinson, C. *Local management of schools: Some practical issues*, London: Routledge, pp. 1-14.

⁴ Govinda, R. (1998) School Autonomy and Efficiency: Some Critical Issues and Lessons, Paper presented at the ANTRIEP Seminar on Improving School Management, Colombo, Sri Lanka, December 1998.

⁵ A.K. Singh, National Study of Village Education Committees in India, NUEPA, 2010.

internal contradictions in the system tends to undermine the contribution of parental involvement in school governance. It has been found that that school governing bodies in which parents are prominent are making a valuable contribution to the functioning of the system as a whole. ... But governing bodies work under several conflicting pressures and demands. Four central dichotomies are identified: (a) Elitism versus pluralism - elite models of distribution of power present public institutions as largely dominated by ruling groups. (b) Centralization versus devolution; (c) Professionals versus laity; and (d) Support versus accountability.⁶

Conclusion

In summary, the policy of community involvement in school governance has resulted in changes in three basic areas. First, there is a widening and diversifying of the forms of parental and community involvement, particularly in school decision making. Second, tighter public spending policies are redistributing responsibilities for the resourcing of schools with consequent ramification for parents and other non-government sources. Third, emphasis is placed on improving learning outcomes for all students, a policy which involves increased expectations of both parents and schools.⁷ But these changes may be transient unless the policy is pursued with consistency and commitment by all concerned.

Dynamics of transforming centralized and hierarchical management structures steeped in bureaucratic rigidities into a people friendly system is not just a technical exercise. Nor can one expect that a few rounds of exhortations to the community members through participatory processes will suffice. Changing the framework of power sharing in any public system can never be a simple process. It requires everyone concerned – the political leadership, the bureaucracy, school authorities, and parents – to imbibe a new ‘world view’ that underscores mutual trust and confidence. When such a transformation of the system is linked to empowerment of the people it makes it doubly complex and challenging. But there is no alternative. It can only be pursued through continued strengthening of democratic processes in school governance.⁸

⁶ Pascal, C. (1989) “Democratized primary school government: Conflicts and dichotomies”, in Glatter, R. (Ed.) *Educational institutions and their environments: Managing the boundaries*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press. pp. 82-92

⁷ O’Donoghue and Dimmock Op cit.

⁸ Govinda, R. (2000) “Dynamics of Decentralized Management and Community Empowerment in Primary Education: A Comparative Analysis of Policy and Practice in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh”, in Malberg, L., Hansen, S. and Heino, K. *Basic education for all: A global concern for quality*, Vaasa: Abo Academy University.

Community Participation and School Improvement

Some Critical Issues Based on Indian Experiences



R.Govinda
National University of Educational Planning and Administration
New Delhi, India

Why do we promote Community Participation?

- ✓ Participation as a value – democratic principle

OR

- ✓ For its instrumental role – improving efficiency of delivery

OR

- ✓ Is it a ploy of the State to give up its responsibility for establishing and financing schools?

What can community do for improving the school?

- ✓ Not a panacea for all the ills of the school system
- ✓ Community Participation can
 - Improve enrolment and retention and regularity of attendance
 - Improve infrastructure facilities in school
 - Mobilize supplementary resources
 - Monitor implementation of development projects
 - Play the role of a social watch

What can community do for improving the school?

- ✓ But Community Participation cannot
 - Improve quality of classroom teaching and learning, and evaluation and feed back to learners and parents
 - These will have to be still addressed by teachers with help and support from expert professionals
 - Autonomous specialized bodies for School Quality Monitoring could help

How do we get community into school management?

- ✓ Institutional arrangements are necessary
- ✓ Mere project based mobilization of the community does not last long enough

Institutionalizing Participation

- ✓ Enhanced role for Local Governments through decentralization
- ✓ Creation of empowered School management committees, school governing boards, village education committees, parent-teacher associations
- ✓ How are these structures created?
 - Through prescription by top-down official orders – focus on structures
 - Building from below through participatory mechanism – focus on processes

Institutionalising participation

- ✓ Many successful experiences of building from below
- ✓ *Lok Jumbish* (EFA Project in Rajasthan state) in India – unique strategy
- ✓ Participatory mapping of children *in* and *out of* school, by the community
- ✓ Promoting local leaders to champion the cause of education

Institutionalising participation

- ✓ Exploring the Human Face of the Problem
 - Enrollment and drop out are not just numbers
 - These are not mere statistics - There are real children behind them
 - It is only the local people who know the children (inside and outside the school) and can help improve the situation

Locating Children inside and outside the school on a Map

Sl.No	Symbol	Particulars
1	⊙	Primary School
2	⊗	Upper Primary School
3	⊗	Girls' School, Kendra (Primary Level)
4	△	Middle School
5	□	Family
6	○	Boys - going to school
7	○	Boys - not going to school
8	○	Girls - going to school
9	○	Girls - not going to school
10	—	Un-metalled Road
11	- - -	Footpath
12	—	Metalled Road
13		Railway Line



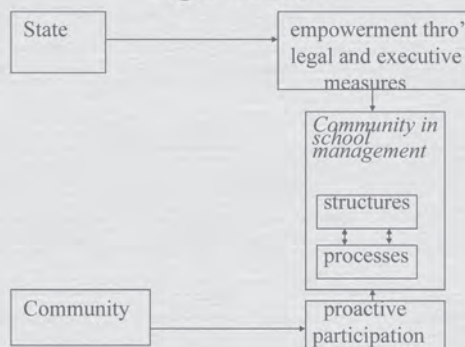
What does such a map do?

- ✓ It gives reliable information that can be understood by all, even illiterates – presents a visual data base
- ✓ It is a means of establishing relationships in the community with respect to the local school
- ✓ It acts as a social instrument for influencing parents

Institutionalising participation

- ✓ Determining the role of Stakeholders from the community and the school in school management
 - Parents,
 - Teachers and school authorities and
 - local community leadership
- ✓ Need to avoid conflicts – enhancing transparency
- ✓ ***Sustaining interest and Continuity of Action – How do we do?***

Need for Convergence and legitimisation



Some persistent tensions and emerging issues

- ☞ Communities are not homogenous units
 - Dealing with divisions within the community – addressing issues of historical inequities
 - Communities are often divided on the basis of caste, race, religion, language and economic considerations
 - How do we bring them all on a common platform?
 - How do we ensure representation for the marginalized groups in school governance?

Some persistent tensions and emerging issues

- ☞ Under low state of educational development – extreme localization of authority may make the school the locus of power struggle – promote obscurantism - improving of school may take a back seat
- ☞ Handing over school control to local boards – lead to gradual deprofessionalisation of school management - subsequent erosion of authority of school heads

Some persistent tensions and emerging issues

- ☞ Mobilization of finances by community members
 - Policies for passing over the burden to already burdened citizen?
 - Does not payment of taxes entitle to cost free, publicly provided education?
 - Expecting that community members contribute financially to the school is likely to aggravate existing inequities in the society

Community participation is indeed part of the solution but ...

Educating all children in a place where traditionally only some have benefitted from schooling and through top-down prescriptive measures is more than an “educational project”

It is an attempt to change the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of the people. It involves a process of Social Transformation.

It can only be achieved through committed and persistent action, with faith in the capability of the people to change reorganize themselves.

We have to be ready for long term consistent engagement

THANK YOU