



Routledge Research in Educational Equality and Diversity

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION WITH SCHOOLS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

**TOWARDS EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE BASIC
EDUCATION FOR ALL**

Edited by
Mikiko Nishimura



ROUTLEDGE



Community Participation with Schools in Developing Countries

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2016–2030) set by the United Nations in 2015 restated the importance of universal primary education for all, and specifically discuss quality, equity, and inclusion in basic education. To achieve this, the role of community has been emphasized and participation has become a "buzzword" in international development over the past several decades. Despite the growing attention to community participation in school management, previous literature has shown mixed results in terms of its actual practice and its impacts on quality, equity, and inclusion in education.

This book deepens the contextual understanding of community in developing countries and its involvement in schools in general, and its impact on quality, equity, and inclusion of school education in particular. By presenting various case studies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and a post-conflict state in Europe, the book analyses commonalities and differences in the ways communities are involved and cast their impacts and challenges. The book contributes knowledge on the ways in which community involvement could work in developing countries, the detailed processes and factors that make community participation work in different dimensions, and remaining challenges that scholars and practitioners still need to be concerned and mindful about in the field.

This book will appeal to both researchers and practitioners who are concerned about the community participation approach for the SDGs.

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Towards Equitable and Inclusive Basic
Education for All

Edited by
Mikiko Nishimura

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4 Can communities mobilize for schooling and learning?

Bottom-up perspectives from Pratham in India

Rukmini Banerji

Introduction

What have been the experiences of communities mobilizing to ensure that “every child is in school”? Are mechanisms that fuel collective action for universal enrollment similar to or different from those that push for “every child learning well”?

For over two decades, Pratham – a non-governmental organization in India – has been working on these issues. Taking seriously the old saying “it takes a village to raise a child,” Pratham has experimented with school-led as well as community-led initiatives in education.

This chapter outlines three distinct phases of the evolution of Pratham’s bottom-up efforts. The first section describes the early phase, which largely focussed on achieving access. The next section features the following decade of Pratham’s work, which was aimed at expanding participation, engaging communities, and exploring the links between awareness, assessment, and action. The third section is devoted to analysing how to ensure effective learning and durable impact. For each phase, the key learning is described and analysed. In conclusion, the final section lays out some lessons from more than two decades of Pratham’s experience, and outlines the way forward.

Achieving access: Early Pratham work in urban communities, 1996 to 2000

Identifying gaps: Developing models

The starting point of Pratham’s work in Mumbai was the creation of a community-based pre-school network. The choice of pre-school as a starting strategy for community-based action was influenced by a number of factors (Chavan, 2000).¹ Although primary schooling was and is free in Mumbai, at the time, neither the city government – Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai – nor

¹ The early history and organizational development of Pratham in Mumbai is described and analyzed in detail by Madhav Chavan (2000).

the state government or central government had taken on the responsibility of providing or financially supporting pre-school education in the city.² Finally, spurred on by the growing practice in middle-class families of sending young children to nursery school and kindergarten, parents living in slum areas were also ready to do the same if affordable and accessible pre-school opportunities were available nearby. The obvious gap generated on the one hand by demand in slum communities, and on the other by lack of supply, made pre-school the obvious place for Pratham to start.³

There was also a bigger reason for starting with community-based pre-schools. A child going to pre-school is very likely to go on to primary school. Given the overall mission of Pratham at the time – “every child in school and learning” – it was assumed that universalization of pre-school education could be the key building block in the effort to universalize primary schooling in the city. Thus, expanding pre-school coverage to reach “every pre-school age child” in Mumbai was the strategy that dominated efforts in the early years of Pratham’s existence in the mid-1990s.

Establishing community-based pre-schools across the city

Pratham’s low-cost and replicable model of community-based pre-school provision led to a rapid expansion of the *balwadi* (pre-school) network across the slum areas of the city.⁴ In 1995, there were 200 Pratham *balwadis* catering to 4000 pre-school age children. By 1996, the number had risen to 350 *balwadis* reaching 7000 children between the ages of three and five. By 1998, the pre-school network had expanded extensively across the city; through approximately 3000 *balwadis*, close to 45,000 children in slum communities around the city had access to affordable early childhood education.

The model was simple: first, the need for a pre-school center in a neighborhood had to be established. This was usually done either by a local Pratham team member with the help of people from that neighborhood. Or someone from the neighborhood approached Pratham to say that she would like to establish a pre-school center there. (Almost always the instructor was a local young woman.) If there were at least 20 children in that slum community in the three to five age group, a pre-school center could be started. A local, enthusiastic, and energetic

- 2 The massive countrywide central government-funded Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) program covers children in the 0 to 5 age group. Among other things, it is supposed to deliver nutritional supplements, health inputs, and early childhood care and education to children from disadvantaged families. Primarily conceived of as a rural program, its urban coverage in the 1990s was low and ineffective. Compared to other big cities in the country in 1994–1995, Mumbai was grossly underserved by the program. Thus, most slum communities in Mumbai did not have any government funds earmarked for pre-school provision.
- 3 Some of the material in this section was published in February 2005 in the journal *Seminar* in the issue “Reclaiming Childhood” (Banerji, 2005).
- 4 The word *bal-wadi* literally means “child’s place.”

young woman from the neighborhood became the *balwadi* instructor. She received training, materials, and ongoing support from Pratham. Pratham provided a nominal stipend on a monthly basis (Rs 250), but she was also free to charge fees from the children on the condition that no child would be turned away if the family could not pay.⁵ Children gathered together for two and a half hours at a mutually convenient time in a space that was close to where the children lived.

The low-cost structure implied that no rent was paid. This, in turn, meant that there had to be negotiations with the relevant persons to gain access to the use of public space. The *balwadi* had to be near the homes of the children, as the children were too young to walk far. The local *balwadi* teacher had to look for any appropriate available space in her neighborhood. Any public space that was not being used for some hours of the day, empty rooms or available space in school buildings, temples, verandahs of public buildings,⁶ open spaces in parks, offices of political parties, all were put to use as *balwadis*. If the *balwadi* was to be conducted in the teacher's home, family members had to agree to keep the space free for the duration of the "class".⁷ The no-rent policy meant that other members of the community or the family had to support the running of the *balwadi* – this in turn created neighborhood support links for the educational effort.

Beyond balwadis: Creating a community network

The growth of Pratham's *balwadi* network from 200 to almost 3000 *balwadis* and coverage from 4000 to 45,000 children in a space of three years was unprecedented, at least in Mumbai. More so, given that this was a non-governmental effort. The demand for *balwadis* was a combination of community mobilization and local enterprise of a social kind; the demonstration effect was palpable. If *balwadis* started in one slum, young women from neighboring slums came forward to enquire if *balwadis* could be opened in their localities, too. At that time the annual cost of running a *balwadi* was around Rs 6000. As the demand and organizational ability at the community level grew, Pratham had to find funds to support this growth.⁸ As Pratham activity spread across the city, more and more

5 Based on the rupee-dollar exchange rate in 1998, Rs 250 would be roughly the equivalent of \$5 a month.

6 I have visited a *balwadi* in a police station.

7 In a typical Mumbai slum home, the family has one room which is used for all activities. There is an arrangement for cooking in one part of the room and usually a bed on which all the bedding is stored during the day. To conduct a *balwadi* for 15 to 20 children in this space, all other family members have to leave the house and no other household activities can be conducted during that time. Thus, while conducting a *balwadi* at home is convenient, it has to have the support and cooperation of all family members.

8 The unstinting and unconditional support and leadership provided by Mr. Vaghul, the Chairman of ICICI bank and of the Pratham Mumbai Education Initiative Trust, was invaluable. The mobilization of financial resources that were needed to back the community mobilization on the ground could not have happened without the Trust and trustees.

young people at the local neighborhood level got involved in community mobilization, interacting with young children and learning organizational skills. More pegs were put down in localities and communities all through Mumbai, which were useful later in weaving an “education” net to cover all slum communities. Knowledge about problems and needs at the ground level grew. Acquaintance with community and local-level resources deepened into stronger ties. Insights about workable strategies developed through the network as Pratham activists experimented with different models of community mobilization.

From the beginning, Pratham’s operating style was based on the conviction that immediate local action was the best path forward: to understand and plan the direction and nature of future action, it was critical to start something on the ground and build from that base. For building credibility, it was essential to demonstrate sustained action and commitment for solving problems in communities. The creation and development of the *balwadi* network, in a very short period of time, was extremely useful in establishing Pratham’s credibility in communities around Mumbai. The experience of creating the mammoth *balwadi* network in the 1995–1998 period, the expansion of coverage as well as the organizational features of the *balwadi* model, acted as a critical springboard for further community action.

Community-based pre-schools continue to be an important element of Pratham philosophy and functioning. In the first five years of Pratham’s existence, these experiences generated many lessons. In terms of coverage and access, teams learned a great deal about how to create, sustain, and support a mass-scale network. Creating the basic building blocks was essential for future growth. Pratham continues to believe that “every child in pre-school and learning” is an integral part of the drive to universalize elementary education. Start early, build basics, and create partnerships for success.

The widespread links with families and communities meant that the pre-school community network was a platform on which other demands could be voiced. While some provisioning for pre-schools had taken place at the community level, recent migrants to slum areas wanted help with enrolling their older children into school. For the family, migration often comes with dislocation and discontinuity of many types. Typically, the man of the house comes to the city first. He gets a foothold and then, in some cases, the family follows. Matching the needs of the family, especially in terms of children’s education, with what is available in their neighborhood often needs additional help to what the family can muster.⁹

Pratham’s mainstreaming efforts included two main initiatives – pre-schoolers transitioning to Grade I, and older out-of-school children via “bridge

⁹ The Mumbai municipal corporation, even 20 years ago, ran elementary schools in eight languages, matching the home language with the school language and ensuring that all paperwork and formalities were in place. More importantly, thanks to the dislocation caused by migration, children may have been out of school for a considerable period of time and therefore effort and time is needed to prepare for entering school. Inspired by rural work of the Hyderabad-based M.V. Foundation, Pratham embarked on an urban “bridge course” model in Mumbai to help primary school-age children enter or re-enter school.

classes” entering primary school. These activities brought Pratham closely in touch with municipal schools all over the city. Schools also began to request help inside the school, especially for additional attention that was needed for children who were lagging behind (who were also often from families where the parents did not have much schooling).¹⁰ By 1998–1999, there were at least one or two community volunteers from Pratham attached to almost every one of the 1200 municipal schools in the city. These volunteers were trained to work with children who needed additional support and paid a small stipend. The schools would organize how children could be “pulled out” of their regular classes to do a session with a volunteer assigned to them. This was a daily part of the school timetable.

The direct community connection between the neighborhood where the children came from and the local municipal school provided a much-needed bridge between families and schools, as well as between parents and teachers. The importance of this bridge cannot be underestimated in any universalization effort for bringing schooling to all. Although by the turn of the century most Indians, like others in the developing world, realized the importance of schooling, to ensure that all children enrolled in school and attended school daily, strong links between home and school still needed to be built, sustained, and strengthened over time.

Enabling engagement: From assessment to action, 2000 to 2010

By the early years of this century, Pratham’s work had spread to other urban areas around the country. Interestingly, it was not the early childhood work that spread to other locations, rather it was the community–school bridging activities that received the attention, particularly of governments that were looking for effective strategies for universalizing enrollment. Modelled originally on the M.V. Foundation’s pioneering work in bringing former child labour children back to school, Pratham’s urban bridge courses mobilized out-of-school children in the community and got them ready for school. As children transitioned from community-based bridge classes to formal schools, often Pratham instructors accompanied them and stayed with them in school for several months to ensure sustainability.¹¹

- 10 Pratham’s remedial program in Mumbai municipal schools in this period was called the Balsakhi program. The term *balsakhi* stands for *bal* meaning children and *sakhi* meaning friend. Each municipal school in Mumbai had one or two Pratham *balsakhis* who worked through “pull-out” classes with children in Grades 3 and 4 and helped them to gain basic literacy and numeracy skills. This program was evaluated by researchers from MIT, and was the first in a long series of randomized control trials carried out by the MIT team on Pratham programs. For details of the Balsakhi program evaluation see Bancrjee et al. (2007b).
- 11 Pratham was invited to participate and partner in government efforts under the Janshala program, especially in urban areas of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh for mainstreaming out-of-school children. The word *Janshala* can be broken into two components: *jan* meaning people and *shala* meaning school (Janshala Programme, 2003).

While mainstreaming activities continued, especially in the northern cities of India with children who had been so far “left out” of school, the focus on improving learning for children who were in school but getting “left behind” was gaining speed. It was slowly becoming evident in India that, although the majority of children were enrolled in school, a significant proportion were having difficulty in keeping up with the curricular expectations of different grades. Further analysis also led to the conclusion that if a child does not acquire foundational skills such as basic reading and arithmetic early in the primary school years, then meaningful progress in the education system becomes a problem in subsequent years. Millions of children were moving through primary school, reaching grades 3, 4 or 5, and still were unable to read or do simple arithmetic computations. This meant that if something was not done to help such children catch up quickly, they would spend years in school but not benefit from the opportunity.¹²

By the early 2000s, school enrollment levels were rising and were high across the country. This was the combined result of parents realizing the importance of sending their children to school and the ability of the government to provide schools. The visible problem of children being out of school was increasingly getting solved. However, the relatively invisible reality that a child could be in school and not learning needed much more work.

In order to tackle this challenge, Pratham began to carry out a series of interventions with children of age seven, eight or higher. Within a few years, a method was developed that helped children become readers in a period of a few weeks. First called “Learning to Read (L2R),” and later named “CAMaL” (in Hindi, the word meaning “amazing;” in English, an acronym – Combined Activities for Maximized Learning) or “Teaching-at-the-Right Level (TaRL),” the approach enabled children to cross the foundational skill hurdle in a cost-effective and durable way. While Pratham began to help children in schools and communities, the question was how to scale up this solution so that it could benefit a large number of children across the country.

The need to spread the effective solution to the problem of learning was accompanied by a movement of Pratham teams from urban to rural areas. Up to this point, Pratham’s work in cities had been carried out by local youth who were paid a small stipend. But as the work spread to rural areas, it was decided that volunteers would be mobilized. If people wanted “every child in school and learning” for their communities, then they would have to come forward to do it. Once volunteers were identified, we could share the know-how that we had in terms of solving the problem.

The attempt at catalyzing communities for schooling, and more importantly for learning, began an interesting process of discovery and thinking for Pratham teams. We realized quite quickly that unless a problem was visible, people were not able to engage or react. It was clear that unless we were able to make the learning problem more visible and concrete, it would be difficult to mobilize around the issue of

12 In many states, India had a “no detention” policy which meant that children were automatically promoted from one grade to the next until Grade 8.

children's learning. This was the background against which the process of creating village report cards for teaching and learning was initiated (Banerji, 2015). The village report card activity was essentially a census of all school-going children in the village. It served multiple purposes: first, it was a good way for an outsider to get acquainted with the village and understand the local context, as well as the actual status of all children's schooling and basic learning.¹³ As the activity started in each hamlet, people gathered around curiously. The simple testing tool received a lot of attention. The process of actual assessment was so straightforward that it was easy to persuade others to do the testing, and so the entire activity turned into something that a lot of people could participate in. The testing task was an eye-opener for everyone. If a child was going to school, everyone assumed that he or she would be learning. When the testing indicated that was not the case, it challenged commonly held assumptions. The counterintuitive situation caused a lot of debate and discussion. An invisible problem began to slowly come into the light (Banerji, 2014).

From the hundreds of village report cards that Pratham teams completed over the next few years, a big lesson emerged: engagement and understanding were needed before steps could be taken for action. In fact, in 2004, Pratham conducted an intervention in villages in Jaunpur district in eastern Uttar Pradesh.¹⁴ The idea was to understand what it took – information and persuasion – for ordinary people to take action to improve the delivery of education in the village. In one arm of the intervention, general discussions on education were facilitated in the village. These discussions first happened for hamlets or habitations, and then together for the full village. Parents, teachers, village council members, and everyone in the community were invited to these meetings. People discussed what the status of education was and what could be done about it. In a second intervention, the habitation-level and village-level discussions were anchored in the village report card exercise. The findings from the schooling and learning census were discussed and possible action was debated. The third intervention went a step further; in addition to the village report card activity and discussions, the Pratham team demonstrated activities that could help children with reading and arithmetic. Using a randomized control trial methodology, researchers from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) studied schooling indicators and learning outcomes across intervention villages and appropriate control villages over a period of six to eight months. Learning outcomes improved only in the villages where action had been demonstrated. In the other villages, there were no other changes – not in school functioning, children's attendance, or learning levels.

The study provided several insights into both collective decision-making and individual action at the village level, at least in the context of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The findings suggested that engagement required participation in some actual tasks (in this case it was the testing process). Participation then led to

13 Each child was assessed using a simple reading and arithmetic tool, which was orally administered one-on-one with each boy or girl. This tool later became well-known and recognized as the ASER tool. See Banerji (2013a, 2019).

14 For Jaunpur RCT details from 2005–2006, see Banerjee et al. (2007a; 2010a; 2010b).

engagement, which in turn led to a better understanding of the problem on hand. Understanding was further deepened by the discussion, debate, and analysis that ensued. But to take the further step of action, it was important to see an effective solution first-hand. Often this process led to individual action – volunteers, especially youth volunteers, coming forward to teach children in their neighborhood. But collective action to push institutions like schools to do better were not forthcoming. This could be due to the fact that there were no available mechanisms through which local communities could influence key decisions in the school (like hiring or firing of teachers, or extra expenditure on items that parents thought were important). It could also be that those who had “voice” and power had already voted with their feet and sent their children to private schools. The Pratham intervention at the time had been designed as a community-based initiative, so at least in that phase, no school-based activities were initiated from the intervention side.¹⁵ Finally, if collective decision-making in the past in any other matter in the village had not led to a fruitful solution, then people were, by and large, reluctant to commit to collectively taking action for bringing about change.

Listening closely to conversations in the village-level meetings also generated learning about the relationships between ordinary people and the state. For example, while most people had a good idea of their entitlements (such as midday meals, school uniforms, textbooks, scholarships for their children), few had any sense of how as citizens they could demand better teaching and a higher level of outcomes for their children. In eastern Uttar Pradesh, a feudal mindset prevailed, where the “state” was seen as the ruler who should provide for its “subjects.”

Coming out of this phase of village-level work, Pratham’s efforts moved in two interconnected but distinct directions, both aiming for large-scale participation. If the village report card activity clearly led to engagement and discussion, then what would it take to extend this logic to the whole country? The first strategy led to the initiation of ASER – the Annual Status of Education Report, a nationwide, household survey-based assessment to understand schooling status and basic reading and arithmetic levels across India. The basic logic and architecture of the ASER effort was based on the years of work at the village level. ASER has similar simple tools and easy-to-do and easy-to-understand processes, but instead of being a census, as the village report cards were, it aims at a representative sample of children at the district level. To enable local participation, dissemination, and discussion for action, members of a local organization or institution carried out ASER in their district. Over the years 550–600 organizations have partnered in the ASER effort each year, with almost 25,000 volunteers annually, reaching out to over 300,000 households and between half a million and three quarters of a million children each time (Pratham, 2004–2014, 2016, 2018). A citizen-led

15 Following the Jaunpur intervention and evaluation study and learning from its findings, Pratham began to engage systematically with governments so that the instructional approach could become an integral part of the teaching–learning process. At least in the mid-2000s in a state like Uttar Pradesh, it was clear that community-based activities would not directly impact the functioning of the school.

exercise of this size, depth, and persistence had not been seen in India before; in the ASER effort data was collected using standardized and reliable methods, so that the report could be released in a timely and predictable way at the same time every year. Most importantly, it was data that could be understood by everyone (Banerji, 2013b).

The annual release of ASER reports at central, state, and district levels ensured that children's learning issues moved to the center of all education policy and practice discussions. The widespread participation at different levels helped in moving the needle on this topic.

The second strand of the strategy was Pratham's Read India campaign. Launched at the ASER annual event in January 2007, the campaign aimed to engage youth volunteers in a massive way across India to help younger children in their village or community learn to read and do arithmetic. In its volunteer form, the campaign ran for the next 5–7 years, but reached its peak in the summer of 2008 when almost half of all villages in India carried out a minimum one-month summer camp for children.

At the village level, the effort moved in the following way. For example, a full-time Pratham team member would be responsible for approximately 20 villages. This Pratham team member carried out activities like village report cards to make communities aware of children's learning levels and subsequently mobilize village volunteers to work with children.

However, the lessons from the volunteer-based Read India campaign were mixed. While it was clear that short-term mobilization of a large number of community and local volunteers was feasible, the pace and durability of impact on children's learning varied considerably across time and context. Pratham's measurement system in those days was also more decentralized, so comparable data was often harder to analyse in real time. Volunteers gave consistent and daily time to children in holiday periods, but when their own examinations came around it was harder for them to volunteer on a daily basis. Stronger, deeper roots in the community and more intensive efforts were needed to translate the instructional effort into durable learning for children over time.

Organizing for outcomes: Are learning communities possible?

By 2018, for the elementary school age group of 6 to 14, India had seen enrollment higher than 95% for over 10 years. However, the learning crisis was accepted as a major problem both globally and nationally.¹⁶ Although the goal of "every child in school" has almost been met everywhere, the objective of "every child learning well" was still far from being a reality. Year after year, the ASER data showed that about half of all children, even after five years of schooling, did not have the foundational skills of reading and arithmetic. The expectation (based on curricula and textbooks) was that children ought to acquire these basic skills by

16 At global level see World Bank (2018); at national level see draft new education policy by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (2019).

the end of Grade 2. A set of studies, including the ASER Centre's 2017 *Beyond Basics* report,¹⁷ indicated that even for the age group 14 to 18, enrollment in educational institutions was high (more than 80%) but a majority of young people were not as yet “ready” for further schooling, work, or life. Business as usual in schools would not produce the transformational change that was needed. A change in what is to be taught, how it is to be learned, and who should participate and support this change had to be reconsidered.

For over five years (between 2012 and 2017), Pratham instructors had demonstrated that children could become fluent readers and able to do basic operations in arithmetic in a short period of time (a few hours a day over 30 to 50 days.) This catch up was particularly useful for children who were in Grade 3 or higher and spent these years in school without picking up foundational skills. These learning gains had also proven to be durable over time.¹⁸

This solid success led the organization to think ahead about two interrelated key issues:

- First, what could be done to sustain and strengthen the learning that children had gained? Pratham's TaRL model was most effective for children in Grade 3 and above. The impressive gains that had been chalked up in Pratham's Learning Camps using the TaRL method between 2012 and 2017 were mostly focussed on this age group. (In 30–50 days, more than 70% of children who came into the program became fluent readers and confident in basic arithmetic.) In this domain, how can technology help children to learn?
- Second, what is possible to do with younger children earlier in their journey through the education system, so that there are safeguards against falling behind? How can foundational skills be built in pre-primary or in early grades so that the need for later remedial action is eliminated?

In the 2018–2019 school year, Pratham initiated the latest version of its “direct” Read India program – called *Hamara Gaon* (our community). The aim was to focus on specific communities for a period of three years and try to search for answers to the questions above. The goal would be to ensure foundational skills for all children from Grades 1 to 5 (and in some cases to Grade 8) and to figure out how to create a learning environment in the community such that parents, siblings, neighbors, and others could all engage in supporting children's growth and development. It was clear that the next frontier would be not just participation, but engagement and involvement of families and communities in children's learning. In order to do this, it was necessary to figure out who could engage, how they would engage, and a mechanism to understand whether the engagement was successful.

17 ASER Centre *Annual Status of Education Report, 2017. Beyond Basics: A Survey of Youth in Rural India*. <http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/305.html#ic0vp>

18 Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) tracking in Unnao and Sitapur.

Typically, in schools in India, activities are anchored firmly in the grade level curriculum and textbooks. Few teachers venture into topics or content outside the prescribed syllabus. The goal of much of the school learning seems to be to aim for individual excellence, especially to score well in tests and examinations. Often if a student is not academically at grade level, he or she has no-one to turn to. Further, if teachers in school are not well equipped, then children have no other avenue for learning. It is also evident that, rather than focusing only on bookish learning and individual performance, in life and at work it is important to have experience of learning how to engage productively and effectively in groups. Usually, schools in India do not prepare children for such experiences. Keeping these realities in mind, Pratham has begun to focus on how to help children work together in groups in the community. Just like groups who play together in their neighborhoods, for a certain time in the day after school, groups also learn together. The idea is that children can help each other and that projects can be done together. Depending on the projects or tasks, others in the neighborhood (like older siblings, parents, grandparents, or neighbours) help these groups. Community-based children's groups are emerging as an active ongoing initiative in all of Pratham's programs in the past two years or so.

The second emerging strategy revolves around the early years (age four to eight) and mothers. Pratham's learning improvement programs for younger children have a clear focus on bringing mothers into the center of the activities, and continuing to engage and interact with young mothers in an ongoing basis. Preliminary evidence from the early years programs shows that active engagement of mothers leads to a significant increase in learning outcomes. In Pratham's early childhood programs, mothers meet periodically. They are made aware of the activities going on in the pre-school, and they are guided and encouraged to carry out similar activities with their children at home. Internal data from evaluations done in Pratham's early childhood programs, where mothers have an active role, show that in comparison with other situations where there are other kinds of pre-school exposure, or no pre-school, children's performance on cognitive tasks and readiness activities is higher, and also that mothers are more aware of what children do in the early childhood centres.¹⁹

Finally, Pratham teams have been experimenting with periodic community events such as math fairs, science fairs, and school-readiness fairs that include activities in which all ages can participate.

Ongoing assessments for the current phase of work will also lead to a better understanding of how learning communities develop, and how such villages are different from usual villages.

Concluding thoughts

In reflecting on the past two decades or more of work with schools and teachers, families and children, it is worth thinking about the challenges that communities

19 Internal evaluation data can be shared on request.

face in dealing with education systems. With universal enrollment becoming a reality, educational aspirations have skyrocketed in families across the socio-economic spectrum, perhaps even more so in households where parents do not have much education. The expanding private sector has been fuelled in large part by these rising expectations from parents who want the opportunity for their children to excel as individuals and to socially differentiate between those who are still sending their children to government schools. While parents understand what schooling entails, those who do not have much exposure to education are not able to understand what it means to support children's learning (other than more expenditure on inputs). High aspirations for education, recent universalization of schooling – all contribute to the overall perception that schools will solve educational challenges.

Pratham's work in the past few decades has largely centered on broadening these perceptions. It is based on three major elements: first, parents and others in the community need to understand where their children currently are in terms of basic learning (reading and arithmetic). Hence efforts such as village report cards and ASER are all designed to help communities acquire a broad-based understanding of the problem. Implicit in this strategy is the assumption that solutions can be devised once problems are understood.

The second pillar of Pratham's work has been to engage citizens in both the assessment and the action. Here, the underlying assumption is that major societal transformation cannot be done by institutions or governments alone; widespread citizen involvement and engagement is essential.

The third key element is that there needs to be a compelling demonstration that change is possible. Whether it is collective action or visible change in learning outcomes, people need to see that transformations can happen in their own context.

In more than two decades of working in education, Pratham has learned that instructionally the most productive periods are when learning goals are aligned and understood both by schools and communities, and when both schools and communities collaborate or at least work in tandem with each other. In recent years, one of the biggest successes in education in India, and indeed elsewhere in the developing world, is the achievement of universal school enrollment. Underlying this success is the fact that parents understood the importance of schooling and governments were able to provide facilities to make it happen. Big transformational changes happen when the push and pull of demand and supply move in the same direction, and parents, practitioners, and policymakers have the same objectives. Both in India and elsewhere, the time has come for this convergence to move beyond universal access to schooling and focus on learning for all.

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