Status of Community Involvement in Primary Education in Bangladesh

M. Nazmul Haq
Institute of Education and Research
University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Edward Booth
Faculty of Education
University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia

Abstract

Primary schools in Bangladesh have been nationalised since 1973. Prior to that date primary education was largely patronised by community leaders and groups through gifts of land, cash donations and labour. The nationalisation of schools progressively disassociated the community and their material support from their primary schools. A current government policy objective is to regain community support to assist in the provision of primary schooling.

This paper examines the present status of community participation and the factors which may contribute to the more active participation of community in primary education. Data for the study were collected through personal interviews and focused group discussions with parents, teachers, local opinion leaders and government officers involved in school management in four education districts.

Results indicate that the nationalisation process of primary schools did detached the community from a sense of ownership of their local school. Currently most schools rely very little on their local managing bodies [SMC and PTAs] which play a symbolic rather a powerful and active voice for their school. Local people at all levels are still interested in schools and are ready to contribute in the form of management and supervision provided government is willing to acknowledge their contribution. It was recommended that wider level community participation could be enhanced by a wide range of socio-cultural activities and sports.

Introduction

The concept of formal primary education in Bangladesh and in neighbouring India was first recommended in Wood's Education Dispatch of 1854. During this period the British East India Company was the dominant political power in India (Qadir and Kundu, 1985). Before that time there were no formal graded schools. The Dispatch initially introduced the idea of mass education through an indigenous system of elementary schools. The indigenous school was low cost mostly community-managed by a small committee or a group or family who founded the school. The
Indian Education Commission of 1882, introduced the concept of having a local bodies control primary education in the remote rural areas (Qadir and Kundu, 1985).

In many cultures the education of children has been the responsibility of the extended family or clan. From the ancient period either the family or community developed an informal system of education. In this subcontinent education of children has always been provided by the local elite or a wealthy person in the community as a form of charity. 'Zaminders', businessmen or religious leader came forward to provide land and support the cost of primary education for the children in that area.

There are many primary schools, spread over the remotest areas of the country, each needing care, supervision and maintenance. Currently the government machinery has control of more than fifty thousand primary schools. It was the community that initially involved in the maintenance of its own school especially in the remote areas where government officials could rarely make one visit in a year.

Following Revolution, the nationalisation of primary schools in 1973 significantly dampened community initiative in primary schooling. Very little research has been done to gauge the overall impact of nationalisation on primary education. Government documents, educational literature and educationists have argued the positive impact of nationalisation of primary schools in quantitative terms. However, the general feeling among the administrators and educationists reported in this study indicates that the nationalisation of primary school has severely weakened the bond between community and school.

It has been argued that this has contributed to the production of low quality graduates in the primary schools (Gustavsson, 1990). No study has been identified to confirm this hypothesis. Experience shows that successive government policies have not encouraged community involvement in primary education. The current government policy has refocussed to encourage community participation in primary schools in an effort to regain the 'traditional educational spirit' and to enhance the financial participation in primary education. With this purpose in view, this study aims to determine the current status of community participation in the functioning of primary schools in a sample of communities.

Purpose

This study aims to determine the extent of community involvement in primary education and establish a rationale for activating the participation of local communities for the better functioning of the schools. Finally the study will help provide guidelines for enhancing community participation in the management and administration of their
local primary school.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following five research questions:
1. What was the contribution of the community to schools in the pre-nationalised period?
2. What is the present status of community involvement in primary schools?
3. What steps are needed to more actively involve the community in schools and to remove the obstacles to achieve this purpose?
4. What incentives are needed to revitalise the School Managing Committees and Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) committees in every primary school?
5. Does the community have a role in the academic supervision and management of primary schools, and if so, what could that role be?

Literature

Gustavsson (1990) considers the low level of community involvement and participation in primary education is considered to be one of the major constraints in the achievement of Universal primary education [UPE] in Bangladesh. Community participation in school education has gained considerable attention in both the north and south (Jones, 1991). In the wake of the failure of the present top-down approach to educational policy in the provision of primary schooling, the participation of local communities has been viewed as the key to improving both the level and quality of provision.

National attention to this concern has been recognised with the priority to the formation of SMCs and PTAs at the school level as part of the Third Development Plan (1985 to 1990). Strong gains were not made and the Task Force on Primary and Mass Education in 1993 reinforced this policy direction. "The local community should be encouraged to establish and manage schools through local initiatives, with support from the government for its development and continuation" (p66).

While public expenditure on education increased from 1.5 per cent (1989) to 2.2 per cent in 1992, the demands of more than 18 million learners in over 80,000 institutions to achieve Universal Primary Education by 2000 is still daunting.

An indication of what can be achieved with this policy direction has been well illustrated in the experience of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) through its Facilitation Assistance Program on Education (FRAP). The scheme reports Latif, (1991) identified the
support of the importance of community participation and local resource mobilisation to assist primary schools with supervision, management and some resources. When the ATEOs received encouragement from the BRAC supervisor in the form of physical and moral support, the SMC and the PTA which were previously non existent or inactive gained strength and community support increased. The outcomes were measured in enhanced student enrolment and attendance.

Methodology

The data for this study was collected through a range of strategies in six districts. Personal interviews with a total of 275 parents, teachers, community opinion leaders and SMC/PTA members as well as government officials involved in primary education. In addition to the individual survey-interviews, two focus group interviews were organised with the community leaders, various levels of education officers and the SMC/PTA members at Cox's Bazar and Sylhet. In order to determine the feelings and reactions of the wider community about school, two public meetings were organised in the catchment areas of two schools in an urban and rural area.

In addition to the structured interview and focus group discussions, observations of the schooling activities at each site (enrolment, attendance and other physical provisions) were made by the field assistants. The purpose of these selected observations was to gain a wider understanding and indicators of the interest of the community in the school and it's performance, building facilities and the teachers' effort and commitment.

The school sample for the study was selected from six districts of Bangladesh in 1994. This component involved an interview sample of 180 parents, 36 community leaders, 36 school level implementors (Head Teachers, SMC/PTA members and TEOs) and several educational planners.

The main sampling unit selected was the school. The 18 primary schools were selected on the basis of their geographic and residential (urban/rural) location. The six districts were selected on the basis of their geographic location so as they were representative nature of socio-economic development and status of literacy among the people living in the country.

One thana from each district was selected on the basis of it's overall economic situation and the reported literacy levels across the thana. The DPEO (District Primary Education Officer) and the respective TEO (Thana Education Officer) then selected three representative primary schools based upon their urban/rural location and on their academic/literacy status. All the sampled surveys and observations were completed in the catchment area of the selected schools except for the
focus group and public meetings which were undertaken in a rural area of Cox's Bazar and in the urban area of Sylhet Sadar Thana.

The two communities included in this study were separate from the school studies and represented both rural and urban people. Their backgrounds were predominantly farming, fishing and small trading. A 'tribal' community from Chittagong Division was also included in the sample to ensure representativeness of the wider national perspective. The parent population for the study was somewhat random depending upon the selection of students from each class. There was no choice of sex of the parents, rather it was whoever was available in the house at the time of interview was considered the parent. In the case where there was no parent an elderly person in the household was taken as the informant.

Findings

The principal objective of this study was to ascertain ways of further involving local communities, including the SMC and PTA, in enhancing the development of primary education. The data and their interpretation are outlined in the following sub sections. In order to answer the first three research questions the opinion leaders, parents and Education Officers were interviewed. The fourth and fifth research questions were answered through the responses of SMC/PTA members and Thana Education Officers (TEOs).

School Scenario

The main source of data were 18 primary schools surveyed in 1994. These were situated on very small plots of land (average of 0.11 acres). The roll documents of the selected schools demonstrated that the attendance rate of the students was higher than the reported national average. Attendance during the drier months of January, February and March, was relatively higher than at any other time. Participation rates for girls was up to 20 per cent lower than for boys. Girls' attendance was somewhat poorer in grades three grades(Table 1). Further analysis of the number of students and teachers indicated that the average teacher student ratio was 1:83 which was higher than the reported national average of 1:56 (UNICEF, 1993).

Table 1: Average student enrolment per class and attendance rates in 18 selected primary schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys [%]</th>
<th>Girls [%]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with government officials, teachers, and other people provided most of the historical and qualitative data. These sources indicated that before nationalisation of the primary schools in 1973, the enrolment and attendance rates were very low (Qadir and Kundu, 1985). At the time, it was reported by the TEOs and Head Teachers in the focus group discussions that, most of the primary schools were managed, financed and supervised by the local people. This level of managerial responsibility was abandoned following the intervention of the national government in the management, financing and central administration of primary school.

The government encouraged the creation of SMC and PTA bodies in each school to support the functioning of the school but without a great level of success. Only in few cases the SMC and PTA were found to be active. However, when they were identified, it appeared that they did not appear to participate in the activities identified in the government circular. The truth was that the committees rarely took part in school activities.

Nationalisation Scenario

The pre-nationalisation policy on the management of primary schools was sought from senior government officials and older community members. On the basis of discussion with community people in the public meetings it became clear that the feeling of 'owning a school' by a family, group or community was very important in the past. A wealthy citizen or local elite often provided the necessary funds for the building and operation of a their local primary school. This group also had control over the employment of the teachers. Although control of primary schools is now with the national government, many of the participants in the focus groups as well as at the public meetings expressed their willingness to donate money and resources to their local school if the government would provide some form of recognition for such donations. The implication of such findings is that much needed assistance from local communities is possible if government can develop a system of receiving and recognising the donation from local people.

Nationalisation of primary schools brought about a feeling of relief among some of the responsible owners of the schools ie., community committees. Similarly, teachers also feel their status upgraded, now they are government servants. However with a National shortage of funding per pupil in the primary sub-sector, this enhanced feeling among the people and teachers has changed and an attitude of
indifference is now more pervasive towards primary schools.

This change in the sense of ownership is unfortunately responsible in part for the poor condition of many school buildings and the quality of primary school education. In order to regain the active involvement of community in the affairs of their school a clear strategy of receiving and recognition of their donations and services needs to be developed.

Parental and Community Contribution to the School

It is argued from the data that there is a capacity for the community to be more actively involved in primary schools. The respondents were asked to outline the steps needed to involve the community in school activities and to remove the obstacles from such involvement. Parents and guardians identified that they were the key people to keep contact and make the link between the school and community. It appeared from the discussion of the focus groups of SMC and PTA members that the community has a feeling of moral obligation to the school and that people were willing to donate things to the school as well as look after school property while teachers are away. Parents reported that they were willing to take care of school, if asked, to enhance it's upkeep and appearance.

It has been argued in the literature that the quality of education is related to the level of interest that parents or guardians take in the school. Data from the study schools indicate that 48 per cent of the parents had visited the school or spoke to the teacher at least once or more per week. Another 18 per cent had visited school at least once or more per month. Besides visitation of school a large number (90 per cent) of parents were found to have kept regular contact with the school and their children's teacher. It was a clear indication of their interest in the school and their children's schooling. The focused group discussions identified that cooperation from the community was closely related to the performance of the school.

The participation in school related activities was the most frequently cited contact with the school. While only 18.9 per cent indicated that they had contributed materials, money or furniture to the school, a greater number (30 per cent) had provided some form of labour to assist the school. Parents and their families are an integral part of the community and their feelings and reactions are a portrayal of the collective mind of the community. These respondents were involved with primary schools in various ways (Table 2).

Table 2: The way parents take part in school and its management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation mode</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parents gave advice to the SMC and PTA members, took an active interest in the matters of the school and provided voluntary and financial support. An interesting finding of this study was that parents have indicated clear ways of improving the quality of school education. According to their various opinions frequent visits, motivating other parents to send their children to school, providing time and money for educational materials can bring a substantial change in the quality of school education (Table 3).

Table 3: The way parents can help raise the quality of education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The activity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Through frequent visit to school</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By motivating other parents</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donating educational materials</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming SMC/PTA member</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing financial support to school</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was the general experience in the data that the influence of community leaders and the elite on the general population is considerable. The way they think or behave toward the school strongly moulded the attitude of the other people who lived in their community.

The government primary school particularly in rural areas depends to some extent on the funds and support of community leaders. Through formulation of SMC and PTA bodies these leaders can play a vital role in enhancing school affairs. However, the interviews suggested that the elite do not take uniform interest in school. Some were very enthusiastic about their local school while others were indifferent. Those community leaders who took an interest were quite vocal about the quality of the teachers' work, the students' attendance and overall quality of school management.

The level of community leader involvement in the sample schools is documented in Table 4. It was found that 75 per cent worked for the school for up to ten days in the last six months. The remaining elite offered service to the school for an increasing amount of time.

Table 4: Community leaders service to local primary school
(in days)
Days | Frequency | Per cent
---|---|---
Up to 10 days | 18 | 75.0
11 to 20 days | 2 | 8.3
21 to 30 days | 3 | 12.5
31 and above | 1 | 4.2

83 per cent of local leaders expressed a great interest in the cultural activities of the school. They are reported to enjoy taking part in sports activities, social functions and cultural shows (Table 5). The participation in school sponsored social cultural activities would appear to be a very effective means of gradually involving local leaders in the educational activities of the school. The interview data indicated that the participation of the local elite will encourage wider community participation.

Table 5: Interest of community leaders in socio-cultural activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural activities</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports activities</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social function</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural program</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational program</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National programs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Local leaders expressed their involvement option with the school in different ways (Table 6). Nearly half of them would prefer to be engaged as a SMC or PTA member. About 14 per cent want to be involved as a volunteer and eight per cent as an adviser or financier. The data indicated a potential interest in their local school, but had yet to be appropriately encouraged or respondents had not used their own initiative to get involved.

Table 6: The way community leaders want to be involved with school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Way of involvement</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming SMC/PTA member</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By any means</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As volunteer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As adviser</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As financier</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By indirect way</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not want to serve</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

Primary schooling had been conceptualised by many in the community as one of the minimum qualitative components of life. Pre 1973 primary education was sustained at the grassroots level through the community support and the charity of some rich and philanthropic individuals. The government's lack of policy and expenditure has been identified in the different education commission reports over the last hundred years.

The nationalisation of all primary schools in 1973 was intended to improve both quality and access through the universalisation of primary education. Government policy in part worked to these outcomes but at the same time replaced the traditional mechanisms of local elite patronage for primary schooling and wider community support. It was said that the schools now 'belong to the government'. Financial strain from a rapidly expanding enrolment encouraged by nationalisation has heavily taxed the available 43.4 per cent (1994-5) of the education budget devoted to the primary sub-sector. This allocation is a reduction from just under half of the education expenditure allocated in 1982/3. The overall reduction in services per child has had a negative impact on the quality and quantity of primary schooling for many children.

A large number of primary school teachers and education officers in the focus group interviews and attendants in public meetings expressed the view nationalisation started a disengagement process at the local level as communities were no longer willing to undertake local school initiatives.

On the other hand a large number of parents were found in the study were willing to take a strong interest for their children's education even though their educational background was limited. This was a good sign for the development of community interest and these parents, guardians and community leaders may potentially be utilised for financial support as well as supervision, management or maintenance contributions to the school.

In focus group interviews the SMC and PTA members as well as Head teachers reported that if the parents and community leaders were given appropriate recognition from the educational authority or local administration they could be used to further the cause of primary education in their community. This view was supported by a few Head Teachers of "developed schools" who said that the secret of their successful was through the effective use of community people. The study indicated that community leaders did not "turned down their faces" and loose interest in the school but did not direct funds which were
previously provided prior to the nationalisation of primary schools. Many reported that they regularly visit the school for various reasons, gave help to the teachers to help run their school and tried to keep the educational environment supportive.

Socio-cultural activities were reported to be an excellent vehicle to bring people closer to school. Respondents mentioned that these kind of activities interest people and motivate them to support the cause of the school. An emerging need from this discussion was that sense of "attachment to the school" was needed in most cases. Therefore, it would be helpful if more local people can be attached to school for various socio-cultural activities.

It would appear from different data sources that government primary school rely very little on the expertise of the local managing bodies. In some cases it was found that SMC members do not even know that they were members of the school body! The data indicated that most meet only occasionally and their resolutions were made only on paper. One of the focus group described SMCs as "committees on the paper".

Recommendations

Policy level:

As many of the communities researched in this sample study still have positive aspirations toward their local primary school, effective encouragement from the responsible government officers of school communities through their locally elected management committees and supportive PTAs may commence a change process.

Active encouragement of existing and new support organisations and individuals through the provision of community recognised incentives, awards and recognition were suggested by many respondents.

Many community members and teachers felt that local management committees SMC could make a collaborative contribution with Education Officers in the supervision of teachers. These committees could also take greater responsibility in the human resource management with some discretion for local leave, employment of local [female] teachers and the capacity to operate joint accounts where there had been local fundraising.

At an operational level:

Use of school facilities for both the school and its compound for school and community organised cultural and sporting activities.

School upkeep and cleaning be a joint responsibility between the
children, school and community.

References

Contact:
M. Nazmul Haq
Institute of Education and Research
University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh EMail: duregstr@bangla.net
Fax: 8802865583

1 A paper presented at the combined conference of the Education Association [Singapore] and Australian Association for Research in Education, Singapore, November, 1996