

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

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## Key findings

Globally, community participation has borne close scrutiny as many countries have sought to harness the potential in different ways. This gives us a road map rich in experiences of the measures that did and did not work.

Most solutions proposed are with the intention of engaging the community without disrupting their day to day life. For instance, instead of parents-teachers meetings (PTM) happening in schools where parents may fail to turn up, they can be conducted in common spaces inside the village.

It is important to note that community participation is not panacea to the issue at hand. While designing and implementing nudges, it is essential to bear in mind the capacity of the community members and the socio-cultural backdrop to ensure positive and measurable impact.

## Nudging the way forward

In the [first part of this IFN](#), we discussed the hurdles to quality learning for elementary-level students, specifically in government schools in India. The government has already taken steps to address some of the issues, but there is still a long way to go. In this part of the IFN, we describe some successful and tested models from across the globe that can improve education outcomes.

[Case studies](#) on this subject reveal a wealth of documented experiences and efforts to nudge education programmes towards success. Notably, each nudge is designed in the context of the cultural and socio-economic landscape of the region. Learning from them, we can combine our knowledge and experience to develop a set of feasible, low-cost interventions that can set the gears for quality education in motion.

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| Mohalla (community) PTM          | Reading stories to parents          | Peer-to-peer learning               |
|                                  |                                     |                                     |
| Teacher training and re-training | Sessions on traditional occupations | Beautifying a common space together |

### 1. Mohalla (community) PTM

A time-tested way to ensure parental participation in a child's education is the parent-teacher meeting (PTM). However, this tool has been largely ineffective in the rural scenario. Parents are often unable to find either the time or motivation, or both, for such meetings. An interesting way to engage them could be for schools to run *mohalla* PTMs. Instead of asking parents to come to the school, the schools can organise such meetings in a shared community space after working hours. Taking a cue from the [Participatory Rural Appraisal \(PRA\)](#) toolkit, this strategy offers proximity to the parents and allows the community as a whole to engage in discussions. The school authorities, non-government organisations, and local authorities, such as *Basic Shiksha Adhikari (BSA)*, Block Education Officer (BEO),<sup>1</sup> and the panchayat, among others may call, coordinate, and moderate these meetings.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Reading stories to parents

A parent who reads a story to a child is a common feature in literate urban families. Such engagements develop children's interest in literacy. This practice is hard to cultivate at the bottom of the pyramid, where illiteracy and poverty are rampant. However, the opposite approach might work here. Encouraging children to read to the family will involve the family members and encourage students to read regularly – particularly if the material is tailored to the needs and interests of rural folk.

Teachers can initiate such practices at school and randomly pick a few students, asking them to speak about their experience in class, which would inspire others to start reading to their families. Other innovative measures, such as asking parents to share their experiences in *mohalla* PTMs could encourage more people to

1. BSA is district level officer for elementary education while BEO manages the block level duties.

2. AAP government in Delhi has [successfully](#) implemented Mega PTM under the scheme [Chunauti](#).

take up the idea. Ultimately, the schools should try to ensure that students are completing the activity and help them to overcome any challenges they might face.

### 3. Peer-to-peer learning

Peer-to-peer learning<sup>3</sup> is one of the best ways to further the agenda of effective education. This peer tutoring system (class IV and above) can help maintain a uniform level of learning in class and provide an informal alternative source of learning for weaker students. Teachers are best aware of the capabilities of each student in the class and can pair them up accordingly.

This system will give academically weaker children a leg up and lead to brighter students. Teachers should acknowledge the efforts of such students to inculcate a sense of pride and help this activity bear fruit. For the idea to work, teachers will have to motivate students and guide them through various challenges. If needed, support of a local NGO can also be leveraged for this activity.

### 4. Teacher training and re-training

Public school teachers come from a variety of backgrounds. Training them in a code of conduct will lead to a better participation of children in mainstream channels of education. This code would aim to engage with the community to advocate the importance of education in a proactive and respectful manner. The government must give due importance to teacher training and re-training programmes for all the academic and allied activities.

The government can utilise the annual household survey<sup>4</sup> to encourage the parents or the community to get involved in the school's activities. Teachers should go through a brief sensitisation training to ensure the effective use of this tool. Teachers can start by explaining why parents' involvement is important and then explain various ways in which they can be involved throughout the session. This can also be managed for a group of parents, together comprising 10-15 households.

### 5. Sessions on traditional occupations

A common challenge for people who are involved in traditional occupations like handloom weaving and agriculture, among others, is that the younger generation is not interested in taking them up.<sup>5</sup> Under the umbrella of community engagement, schools can be a platform for parents to volunteer and teach their children trade skills. This can be on gardening, vegetable farming, painting, or handicraft, among others.

For example, almost all public schools have a small yard or a garden patch, where students can learn vegetable farming or gardening from a skilled parent volunteer. Of course, such enjoyable lessons have to be tailored to fit the environment and the age of the participating students. A token compensation can be offered to the contributor so that the trainers do not view the task to be a hassle. School staff or a local NGO staff can guide the volunteering parent to help them structure these sessions. These sessions will not only encourage the younger generation to take up traditional occupations in the future but also make sure that they make an informed career decision.

### 6. Beautifying a common space together

Instead of a cleaning drive, beautifying a space with art or gardening facilitates a sense of ownership. Involving the students, as well as their parents, in a constructive and collaborative activity would be a step towards treating the school premises as a place where the community actively wants to send their children. This method has been tried and tested.

*For example*, Adelaide Hills Vocational College in Australia and a number of community groups in the vicinity came together to reduce the impact of graffiti on the community and provide opportunities for the young perpetrators to develop skills, understanding, and tolerance. The partnership engages young people with education and academic activities, where both students and the community participate. The partnership also increases their educational attainment levels, decreases dropouts, and reduces apathy towards education.

## Conclusion

A basic pre-requisite for any initiative is to have adequate teachers and staff in the school. Understaffing was common in most schools that we visited in U.P. Since educators are to be the driving force in these interventions, their availability is essential to secure success. The existing body of [School Management Committee](#) (SMC) can be a good starting point. School staff can make use of the SMC's monthly meeting to discuss ideas and attempts to implement them. There will, inevitably, be some teething issues but with the help of SMCs, a cautious start is possible. Schools with the help of the local authorities could also approach local NGOs to help school staff and SMC plan the exercises.

However, to state that all community engagement is positive is taking a rather simplistic view of the multi-faceted problem of rural education. While it definitely is an important part of delivering a well-rounded education, community engagement is not a panacea to solve what clearly is a complex issue. Community engagement initiatives must also consider the socio-cultural backdrop and capacity of the community members. A well-structured plan of action that clearly defines the role of the community will help all stakeholders involved to understand their expected roles and lead to better coordination among working groups. While there is no one-strategy-fits-all in this area, the trial and error method has often led to wonders before.

3. <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/benefits-peer-learning/>

4. Teachers conduct the HH survey each year to ensure all 6-14 year old kids are enrolled in the formal education system.

5. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=171634>