

EXPLORING THE DYNAMICS OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND ITS ROLE  
IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF SELECT GOVERNMENT  
SCHOOLS IN CHHATTISGARH

DISSERTATION

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## DECLARATION

Date: 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2022

I, Diwakar Soni, hereby declare that this M.Phil. Dissertation entitled '*Exploring the Dynamics of Community Participation and Its Role in School Improvement: A Case Study of Select Government Schools in Chhattisgarh*' is based on my original research work, and to the best of my knowledge, has not been submitted in whole or in part in this University or in any other University for the award of any degree.

Signature of the Scholar

Diwakar Soni

## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled '*Exploring the Dynamics of Community Participation and Its Role in School Improvement: A Case Study of Select Government Schools in Chhattisgarh*' is the work undertaken by Mr. Diwakar Soni under the supervision of Prof. K. Biswal as part of his M. Phil. degree. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiner(s) for evaluation and award of the degree of M. Phil.

Signature of the Supervisor

Signature of Department, Head

Prof. K. Biswal

Prof. K. Biswal

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Statement of the Problem

Education is of fundamental importance to humans for the fulfilment of their basic needs (Noor, 1981). An all-inclusive education brings prosperity in society in terms of higher literacy, better standards of living, healthy competition between citizens, better opportunities for social and economic mobility, more community participation and skill enhancement. In fact, community participation in school education as a development strategy has been emphasized since decades now. Participatory governance models have been increasingly adopted across countries, particularly in the developing world, as a major strategy for promoting school effectiveness.

With renewed emphasis on decentralised governance of education in the country, community participation has been gaining importance in school improvement policy and programme interventions since the early 1990s. For example, the NPE 1986 proposed the setting up of Village Education Committees (VECs). The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 has made provisions to ensure the meaningful participation of key stakeholders, particularly local Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), parents, students and communities in education. The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) was a significant tool to implement the RTE Act, which created structures at the village/ward, block, cluster and school levels and assigned them the responsibility to get engaged with the educational activities.

Most people now agree that involvement of the community is vital to support educational needs of the students. Governments, local, national as well as international, also feel that it is a key component for bolstering the education system. Research in the field has also found that community involvement in education can bring positive social change for socially excluded individuals and communities through desired interventions (Mozumder et al., 2006; Niranjana Radhya, 2014; Pailwar & Mahajan, 2005; Savitha et al., 2014, 2016; Sharma, 2017). At the same time, some other scholars consider it to be a problematic process, which can work well only after some modifications are made in its formulation as well as in its implementation strategy (Banerjee et al., 2007, 2010; Narwana, 2015; Rao, 2009).

After a consistent focus on providing equal access, India has improved its enrolment rate to 97% as of 2018 (ASER Centre, 2019). But, merely providing access to education is not sufficient; quality of learning is also crucial (UNESCO, 2013). Many reports have indicated the need of community participation and other local level interventions to improve the state of school education (Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission, 2013; Pankaj et al., 2018; SPO, 2006). Therefore, the need to look deeper into the concept of community participation, specifically its role in school improvement. Accordingly, the focus of the current study is on exploring the dynamics of community involvement in education and its role in school improvement.

## **2. Focus and Scope of the Study**

The study is going to explore the dynamics of community participation in the select government schools in Raigarh district in the state of Chhattisgarh. For the purpose of this study, three schools of Raigarh district funded and managed by the state government have been chosen; two of which are middle schools and one is primary school. The study is also going to address various aspects of school improvement in light of the community participation. As we will discuss later, there is no standard definition available for the concept of school improvement, therefore, for the purpose of this study, the study of school improvement has been kept limited to: building capacity of schools by exploring the functioning of decentralized participatory forums and better learning experiences of students.

## **3. Rationale of the Study**

The concept of school improvement has been gaining popularity as a potential intervention to enhance the effectiveness of schools. Considerable effort has been put by various governments to improve access to education and increase enrolments and, to a large extent, they have been successful as well. As per the data recorded for the year 2015-16, the Gross Enrolment Rate for elementary level in India was 96.9%. The GER at elementary level of education in Chhattisgarh was 100.87% (GoI, 2019).

However, merely providing access to education and increasing the rate of enrolment will not lead to school improvement. There are many other factors which determine the extent of improvement in schools. One of the key factors is the quality of learning outcomes, as higher quality leads to greater improvement, *ceteris paribus*. According to ASER 2018, the percentage of children of grades 3-5, who can read standard 2 level text in Chhattisgarh, is 45.5%, and only 34.4% of these children can do at least subtraction. Similarly, the percentage

of children of grades 6-8, who can read standard 2 level text is 73.9%, and only 29.1% of them can do division. It is apparent that performances of students in reading and arithmetic at both primary and upper primary levels are not satisfactory in Chhattisgarh. According to NAS Class V Report 2012, performance of students of the state was also lower as compared to overall national average in reading comprehension.

It is not only the academic learning that matters, instead “learning is primarily a social activity, and participation in the social life of the school is central for learning to occur” (Vosniadou, 2003, p.9). Therefore, social skills, overall cultural development, experiential learning and participation skills of children also need to be considered for the overall improvement. Other factors include (but are not limited to) effective teaching practices (Gebert et al., 2011; Baines, 2019); assessment of children’s performances (Hargreaves, 2005; Harlen, 2014); family and community participation (Govinda, 2004; McAlister, 2013). These components of school improvement should not be considered in isolation. There is a need to consider all of them in an integrated manner as all of these are part of the overall school system and, therefore, are connected with each other. “In effective schools, these components are woven into the school’s organizational fabric to create internally consistent and mutually reinforcing reforms; their success is explained by more than the simple sum of their parts.” (Preston et al., 2016, p.3). All these indicators suggest that there is a need of focused interventions directed towards school improvement in the state.

Community participation is crucial for school improvement. The focus of the study, therefore, is to understand where are we missing in the process of school improvement in the state, and how community involvement in school-based management practices deals with this issue. The study offers an opportunity to look deeper into the concept of community participation as a decentralised governance strategy and explore its strengths and weaknesses, particularly with respect to its influence on school effectiveness. That, not many studies have been conducted exclusively in the context of Chhattisgarh in the area of local participation and school improvement, raises the need for such a study.

## **4. Objectives and Questions**

### **4.1 Aim and Specific Objectives**

The broader aim of the study is to explore the dynamics of community involvement and its role in school improvement with a particular focus on select government schools in Raigarh district of Chhattisgarh.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. To explore the discursive element within and deliberative potential of the decentralized participatory forums of the school;
- ii. To explore the relationship between values, beliefs and cultures of the school community and its involvement in school improvement;
- iii. To find out how heterogenous, inclusive and democratic these forums are in their approach;
- iv. To discuss different perceptions of learning, and explore the ways through which community participation promotes quality learning among children; and
- v. To explore the relationship between community participation and child learning motivation, and between community participation and motivation for parental involvement in child's academic and non-academic activities.

### **4.2 Research Questions**

Following are the research questions based on the review of literature and the theoretical framework of the current research:

- i. Do communities/families get involved in the functioning of the school? If yes, then through which forums? What activities do they get involved for? Does the community possess the required capacity to participate in school-based management?
- ii. What are the decision points in school-based management where community participates?
- iii. How is the participatory decision-making being promoted/encouraged through these forums like the SMC and the SDMC?
- iv. What are the community perspectives and understandings of learning? How do participatory forums, where communicative action can be promoted, encourage learning among students?

- v. Does community participation influence the way students engage in learning in and outside school? If yes, then how?
- vi. Do values, beliefs and cultures of the school community affect their level of engagement in school improvement initiatives and tasks?

## **5. Overview of the Structure**

The study has been divided into five chapters. The introductory chapter contains the statement of problem, scope, rationale and objectives of the study. This chapter gives an overall picture of the study and indicates how the structure of the study is going to be.

Second chapter contains the review of relevant literature. The chapter has been thematically divided based on topics: understanding learning; measuring learning; community participation in education; and school improvement. This chapter also discusses about the Habermasian notions of public sphere, communicative action and lifeworld which have been used as the theoretical framework to enrich and guide the study.

Third chapter discusses methodology of the study. Details of methods adopted for the study have been included here. Details about the location of study and sampling have also been provided. As the current study is a case study, a brief explanation about the same has been discussed. Delimitation of the study has been carried out by clearly explaining the terms like organizational ethnography, school improvement etc.

Fourth chapter discusses the findings and interpretations of those findings in relation to the reviewed literature. To avoid ambiguity, the chapter has been thematically divided according to the groups of respondents. This structure makes it easier to discuss operation and results of each method in a proper manner.

Fifth chapter concludes the study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 1. Introduction

The topics like learning, measurement of learning, community participation in schools and school improvement have been discussed in this thematically divided chapter from the viewpoints of various scholars. Given the importance of human learning in school improvement, its various aspects have been discussed along with the way it is and should be measured. Community participation in education, especially school education, is one of the heavily discussed topics in the education field. Therefore, there isn't available any standard measure based on which the concept should be judged; it is still an evolving topic carrying with it all the risks and opportunities of critical judgements from different directions. Same applies to the concept of school improvement as well. However, its link with the state and the post-modern realities makes it a much more complex topic than community participation. Nevertheless, no one can deny the fact that both school improvement and community participation are also intricately tied with each other.

This chapter also discusses as to how the theories developed by Jurgen Habermas are still relevant in the field of community participation in schools in particular and education in general. His interlinked theories of public sphere, communicative action and lifeworld have been considered in relation to community engagement. The theories are useful in: explaining the mechanism through which the community participation in education operates; devising measures to alter or improve the existing mechanisms; and enriching the ideas regarding individual personality and human learning.

#### 2. Review of Literature

##### 2.1 Understanding Learning

Learning is not exclusive to human beings, there are non-human animals which are capable of learning new things. However, the ability of humans to acquire a wide variety of knowledge and various forms of behaviours allows them a greater scope for being flexible and adaptive than any other species on the planet. As this study seeks to explore the role of

community participation in improving learning, it becomes important to discuss here the concept of learning as well as its various aspects. There are many learning theories in the field of psychology which help us to understand various dimensions and aspects of learning like behaviourist approach, which emphasizes the stimuli-response relationship to understand learning; the cognitive approach, which gives importance to human thought process rather than to external factors; Social Learning Theory; Social Cognitive Theory; and Socio-cultural Theory. According to Ormrod (2012), learning is the means through which we acquire not only skills and knowledge, but also values, attitudes and emotional reactions. She defines learning “as a long-term change in mental representations or associations as a result of experience” (p.4). She also points out that learning is a concept which can be best understood by studying it objectively and systematically through research.

Going further deep to explore the concept of learning, Illeris wrote a book, “*A Comprehensive Understanding of Human Learning*” in 2018, in which he has talked about the dimensions of learning, types of learning and barriers to learning, among other details. He defines learning “as any process that in living organisms leads to permanent capacity change and which is not solely due to biological maturation or ageing” (Illeris, 2007, p.3). According to Illeris, learning implies the integration of an external interaction process (between the learner and his or her social, cultural or material environment) and an internal psychological process (of elaboration and acquisition). Illeris insists on a holistic understanding of learning of which society and culture are vital elements.

Following a somewhat similar approach Vosniadou (2003) discusses the socio-psychological principles of learning mentioning both about developmental as well as individual aspects of it. As will be discussed later in detail, quality of learning is one of the biggest factors of school improvement. Quality learning, according to Vosniadou, comes from multiple sources and it is the responsibility of the teachers to widen the scope of learning for the students. She mentions social participation as one of the main sources which promotes learning among children. Along with social activities importance has been given to those activities which are real and useful in practical lives. Knowledge construction rather than knowledge gathering is crucial for students to learn properly. In this process, prior knowledge of the learners can be of great use to build upon. This process of knowledge construction develops cognitive, strategic and social faculties of children. As a result, understanding becomes more important than memorization; logic and reason becomes more important than spontaneity; interaction becomes more important than isolation. Indicating toward cognitive aspects of learning,

Vosniadou also talks about extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of the learners which determines the quality of learning.

## 2.2 Measuring Learning

In her review of the assessment system in England, titled “*Assessment, Standards and Quality of Learning in Primary Education*”, Harlen (2014) points out that why and how we assess our pupils has an enormous impact on their educational experience and consequently on how and what they learn. According to her, assessment and evaluation both describe a process of generating and interpreting evidence for some purpose. It is through the interpretation of these evidences that we produce a judgement about learning. Later in the report, giving equal emphasis to the concept of validity and reliability of an assessment, she talks about formative and formative purposes of assessment. While the former is used to help pupils while they are learning (in the process), the latter is used to find out what they have learned at a particular point in time. Calling formative assessment as *assessment for learning* and summative assessment as *assessment of learning*, Harlen describes the features of both the assessments, which give clarity as to how these tools can be used for determining the learning levels of pupils and how a class-room setting can be established for a better learning experience. The report also mentions factors such as increased demand for effectiveness and quality in education, need to monitor schools’ activities, evidence-based decision making etc. which make assessment as an important tool to be followed to measure learning.

Which approach of assessment to be followed for improved learning and which approach will provide better results are ongoing debates in the field of education. Carrying the debate further, Hargreaves (2005) discussed two conceptions of assessment i.e., assessment as measurement and assessment as inquiry and two conceptions of learning i.e., learning as attaining objectives and learning as constructing knowledge. These conceptions were the result of a survey she conducted to understand what teachers meant by assessment for learning. Written in the context of England, this article suggests how a dominant approach of assessment and learning becomes dominant not because it makes sense but because of the specific historical reasons. As the quality of students’ learning gets influenced by how we assess learning, it is important to follow those methods which suit students in schools and encourage them to improve their learning. According to Hargreaves, the approach of assessment should really satisfy the personal, professional and long-term and holistic purposes of young people’s education.

### **2.3 Community Participation in Education**

A few research papers have attempted to provide a clear picture of the nature and extent of community participation in education in India, which is also in sync with the actual ground realities. In a report, Niranjana Radhya (2014) talks about the efforts made by the Karnataka government to come up with the participatory governance structure which complies the provisions of RTE Act and also favours the communities at large. The state government established School Development and Monitoring Committees (SDMCs) in all government primary, upper primary and high schools in the state. She also discusses about the importance being given by the government to engagement with the community and other stakeholders during the process of establishing SDMCs. Mobilizing communities has been discussed as an important procedure to improve governance, accountability and transparency in schooling. The report contains examples of diversity of participation in the meetings of SDMCs and political commitment to implement its provisions, which are two of the most important factors for community participation to work effectively. The dynamics of participation of different stakeholders and their collaborative orientation & innovations helped them to combat many challenges that came into their way. A number of challenges to the functioning of the SDMCs identified in the report were:

- Though children were part of SDMCs as part of an effort to ensure child participation, they were not provided sufficient opportunities and space in SDMC meetings.
- The training and information dissemination often went no further than the president. As a result, while the presidents were aware of all powers in the SDMC, other members were not as aware. Women members had hardly any information.
- With regard to transparency and accountability, especially in use of funds, SDMC members were unaware of fund flow, its source, the purpose of utilization and how it was being used. There were no concrete measures taken to display the information related to use of funds and the record books were kept under the custody of the head teachers.

A study by Arvind (2009) examines a range of innovative participatory governance practices that have emerged in diverse rural settings to make the state more responsive and accountable to the education of marginalized children. According to the author, these practices have enabled a fuller realization of people's rights and have enhanced their ability to influence larger institutions and policies affecting the schooling and life-options of their children. It is

argued in the article that children of the communities at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder are the ones who are most vulnerable to forces which discourage education and skill enhancement. This paper considers that expanding and deepening community participation in the state's actions can help in addressing these issues. A grassroots level democracy, which is both deeper and direct, has been supported for truly empowering those who are involved in the process.

From this perspective, the innate problem-solving capacity that resides in common people can be nurtured and realized through the localized network of a socially integrated community. Empowered participatory governance can be realized by reconfiguring the space between people and formal state structures through the creation of intermediaries that have the potential to actualize people's participation in decision making practices. It supports the decentralized bottom-up approach rather than centralized top-down process. School can be seen as a civic space where people from different background engage. This paper examined, both theoretically and practically, some of the possible ways through which the potential of ordinary people, drawn from the lowest strata of the society, can be mobilized in an integrated fashion to influence larger institutional practices that affect schooling and life options of children. These participatory efforts were largely inspired by the local context and were mostly informal collective arrangements that evolved naturally, rather than passively relying upon a top-down institutional arrangement that fails to take into account contextual needs and specificities. The efforts represent people's potential to re-construct school as an organic extension of the rural community, enabling communities to press for accountability in ensuring effective school functioning.

These informal arrangements gain significance against the backdrop of the state's conventional framework that conceptualizes school as a stand-alone, rule-bound system alienated from the rural community's social realities. The study also brought to the fore the role of NGOs in creating spaces that challenged existing practices and instituted more equitable practices for leveraging voices that might have otherwise remained unheard. The author provides an approach which counters the neo-liberalist notion (education being controlled by the market forces) of education and enhances the dialogue between state and community. This approach strengthens the state-society relationship in such a manner that the state continues to be the major provider of equitable quality of education to all children and the task of everyday conduct and governance is devolved to the people for strengthening the local school's functioning. Therefore, in the context of the present study, active civic

engagement, collaborative working relationships, joint problem-solving capacity, shared decision-making, and interpersonal trust emerged as the core values for supporting school governance practices.

Fung et al. (2001) explore a range of empirical responses to the challenges that are posed by institutional forms of liberal democracy. These responses constitute real-world experiments in the redesign of democratic institutions, innovations that elicit the energy and influence of ordinary people, often drawn from the lowest strata of the society. One of these experiments concerns public education system of Chicago city in the US. In the late 1980s, the ill effects of centralized school bureaucracy came to the fore and the Chicago public school system was criticized by parents, community members and area businessmen alike. It was alleged that the system was failing to educate the city's children on a massive scale. As a response to this, these people formed a social movement to turn upside-down the hierarchical system of the city and to a great extent they became successful in that endeavour. The movement resulted in a law passed by the state legislature that decentralized and opened the governance of Chicago schools to direct forms of neighborhood participation. The reform law shifted power and control from a centralized citywide headquarters to the individual schools themselves.

The law established a *Local School Council*. Each council is composed of six parents, two community members, two teachers, and the principal of the school. This idea of a local council can be compared with the provision of School Management Committees (SMCs) under the RTE Act, 2009. These councils are empowered, and required by law, to select principals; write principal performance contracts that they monitor and review every three years; develop annual School Improvement Plans that address staff, program, infrastructure issues; monitor the implementation of those plans; and approve school budgets.

In a study based in Haryana, Narwana (2015) tries to analyse the concept of community participation in school education in the global and local scenario. The author has explained that while undermining the local character of the community served by the schools, the various community participation programmes like DPEP, SSA, *Lok Jumbish*, etc. have failed to customize the global notion of community participation to meet the local circumstances in India. The author considers the concept of community participation as one of the outcomes of globalization. When the term community is used in an Indian context, the heterogeneous nature of the population cannot be undermined. The problems of caste and gender, therefore, have to be kept in consideration. These issues, if not dealt strategically, have the potential of

making the whole concept of community participation dysfunctional. In the case of school education also, community is composed of people with different aspirations and needs that cannot be ignored. The author explains how in a district in Haryana the community participation turns out to be only the participation of men. VEC meeting registers revealed that female members generally remain absent. One of the major reasons was found to be the 'veil system' which was an important factor responsible for 'no female participation' and also shows the face of patriarchal society. Females keep themselves under veil in front of their elders. This veil system ensures that females don't speak or participate in front of the elders of the village. These rigid social traditions don't let them gain confidence to participate in public spheres. Thus, the analysis of the functioning of community participation within the local context raises some serious questions regarding the community and scope of community participation in school education.

One of the objectives of this paper is to look into the dynamics of community participation in school education and therefore the discussions will be incomplete without a mention of School Management Committees (SMCs). SMC is a principal platform for the community members to get involved in the school functioning. It empowers both community and school to adopt a transparent decentralised administrative as well as academic set-up for the schools. Chugh (2021) examines in detail the working of SMCs in India, its characteristics, its effectiveness, its significance and successful practices involving SMCs. SMCs, according to her, have strengthened the school-community engagement by promoting decentralized system of educational participation or what is being called as 'open government' system of education. SMC, thus, is a tool to promote democracy in India as it seeks to involve those who are at the margins and who otherwise would not have been involved in the decision making of the school. Chugh explains how the passage of Right to Education Act (RTE) in 2009 has provided a boost to right-based education in India, which in turn acts as a catalyst to open educational practices. It is only through RTE Act that SMCs have become such important structures with standardized mandates having potential of promoting democratic educational practices in the country.

## **2.4 School Improvement**

With the disadvantages of centralised authority and control over school education in India became apparent the focus of the government policies and practices shifted to establish a decentralised education system which gives more power to local authorities. The culmination

of this process was the enactment of RTE Act in 2009. The emphasis on decentralised school education system has also made schools as crucial focal points to initiate any reforms. This has resulted into various school improvement initiatives by different state governments. However, the concept of school improvement is not new. Various other countries have already practiced it through some way or the other. In fact, the field of school improvement has attracted a lot of debates and discussions since the last few decades. It has become a separate subject matter of enquiry within the discipline of educational studies. As this study tries to explore this area of enquiry through community participation it is important to look at some of the literatures relating to it.

Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) have outlined in detail the manner in which the concept and practice of school improvement have evolved since the past few decades. According to them, there are three phases of school improvement, two of which have been passed and the world is currently experiencing the third phase. It was during the 1970s and 1980s that the field of school improvement started taking shape as a separate area of inquiry. This phase of school improvement was characterised by initiatives which were non-systematic and non-coherent. These initiatives failed to consider learning outcome and classroom practice as important factors of school improvement. These factors were being given due importance during the second phase of school improvement which started in 1990s. During this phase, school improvement was being considered in connection with school effectiveness. Initiatives like managing the human resources in schools and preparing long-term school development plans actually contributed to school improvement. In the third phase, the emphasis is being given to pupil learning outcomes; building infrastructure to utilise knowledge base; building capacity through enhancing human resource and planning; and giving proper training to teachers. According to the authors, there are many areas which still require interventions and this can be done through four ways: by making school improvement context specific; by emphasizing on learning outcomes; by conceptualizing, operationalizing and developing the capacity to improve; and by continuously predicting the future course of actions needed to advance the field of school improvement. Although the authors suggest these measures on the basis of British educational program, the measures are very much relevant in other educational contexts as well.

Exploring the relationship between community participation and school improvement Govinda (2004) discusses the evolution of the role of community in school education and states that “.... participation of the community in school management is actually an instance

of ‘coming round full circle’.” (p.33). In other words, in the field of schooling, community has become as important as it was during the ancient times of the country. Although the era of industrialization and economic development prompted the states to take administrative as well as financial control over schools, the times have changed now as the focus is shifting again towards participation of communities and families. The rationale of engaging community for school improvement has been justified by Govinda through three motives: establishing the practice of democratic decision making and inclusive growth; minimizing inequalities and promoting social justice and equity; and, increasing accountability, productivity and efficiency. The question arises as to what all should be included under school improvement activities? Govinda talks about certain areas which could come under the field of school improvement: enrolment, retention and attendance of the children; school infrastructure and other facilities; mobilization of supplementary resources including finance; monitoring and supervision; and, improving efficiency and transparency. All these areas can be easily covered through the participation of community and families. However, there are issues as well. As will be seen later in the discussion section, the findings suggest that community can participate only in those areas of school improvement which match its capabilities. As Govinda says, “while school management committee can become the main body for decision making with respect to general management issues, questions of academic and professional management have to be independently dealt with by professionally trained personnel.” (*Ibid*, p.36). Similarly, there emerges a fragmented accountability structure in which it becomes difficult to comprehend as to who should stand accountable to administrative as well as academic activities in the school; whether it is the community or the public or the government itself.

Fullan and Watson (2000) explore the field of school improvement through the concept of school-based management (SBM). The basic premise of their paper is that educational decentralization in the form of SBM should not work solely on structural elements but also on day-to-day procedural and cultural elements so that the goal of school improvement is properly achieved— “while SBM has a structural element, it is culture that is the primary agent of change, i.e., a culture that focuses on that of continuous improvement.” (p.11). As will be seen later in the findings, much of the work taken up by the School Management Committees (SMCs) of the sample schools relate to structural elements. For Example, infrastructural needs, security of the premise, management of mid-day meal programme etc. According to them, SBM should be considered as a means to an end rather than an end in

itself. They suggested to reconceptualize SBM by making systemic changes which promote ‘collaborative cultures’ and ‘professional learning communities’ within schools. These changes create better opportunities for schools to interact, make decisions and diversify roles. These opportunities, in turn, help schools to improve. Thus, building capacities of school professionals is one of the important components for school improvement. However, their reconceptualized definition of SBM also includes participation of communities and parents in the functioning of schools. Schools with this reconceptualized notion of decentralization cannot be left on their own. There arises a need of helping hands. This help comes in the form of external infrastructural facilities. While it ensures trust on the decentralization process, it also offers a framework of external accountability and innovation. This explanation is much in contrast to that of Malen et al. (1990) who consider it to be “a formal alteration of governance structures” (p.4, as cited in Chugh, 2021, p.24).

The concept of school improvement is also being seen in relation to post-modern multicultural forces which have emerged as a result of globalization and modernization. These forces have altered the cultural and socio-political realities of the schools. This relation between school improvement and new realities has been examined by Hajisoteriou et al. (2018). The crucial task for school improvement, according to them, is to enhance the capacities of the schools so that they adapt to these changes in a smooth manner. They advocated that along with teachers, head teachers and students, parents and community members also act as stakeholders in the process of school improvement. Therefore, rather than on focusing on school improvement as a change of structures, it is the cultural change which is important for them. This view is very much similar to those given by Fullan and Watson (2000) regarding SBM. However, at this juncture, it can be argued that every school has its own specific culture which may or may not match with that of other schools. School improvement initiatives need to take care of these specificities. Thrupp et al. (2007) propose a ‘contextualization agenda’ for school improvement to match the specific needs of the schools. Similarly, Kyriakides (2007) was in opposition to one-size-fits-all model of school improvement which disregards the diverse socio-economic background of students. School improvement, hence, must cater to the needs and demands of multiculturalism which is manifested through globalization and modernization. And there are many ways to do that, such as emphasizing social justice through education (Gorski, 2009); promoting active citizenship (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2014; Niessen & Schibel, 2004).

As far as components of school improvement are concerned there is no uniform classification available. Purkey and Smith (1983) classify these components into organizational components, which are related to administration of school; and process components which are related to everyday activities within the school. On the other hand, Preston et al. (2016) provide a specific categorization by listing out eight components of school improvement which can make a school effective. They also provide a comprehensive framework centred around two core components: leadership and rigorous curriculum. These core components act as a platform which holds the remaining components together. The success/failure to implement this framework decides whether the students get the opportunity to attach and engage/get alienated. The other six components help in promoting: performance accountability of the school system; use of student learning statistics for better performance; quality of class room instruction; better learning connection between teachers and students; culture of learning & professional behaviour; and community participation and parental involvement in schools. This literature has focused more on high school education rather than primary and secondary education (the subject matter of current research). Nevertheless, there are many meaningful inputs in this literature which can be extracted and applied in the current research.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Existing theories in social sciences have unique importance, especially in case study researches. The theory enhances and guides the content of the case and “should be seen as an integral part of the case.” (Harland, 2014, p.1116). The theoretical framework adopted for this study finds its base in the theories and concepts propounded by German Philosopher Jurgen Habermas. Habermas’s writings have inspired many intellectuals and scholars of diverse fields like sociology, media studies, political science and education. Habermas grew up in a time when the state routinely curtailed human rights and liberties, and when propaganda was used on an unprecedented scale to promote lies, distortions, and half-truths. We may trace the origins of his deep concern with ideals of freedom, truth, and justice back to the persecution and political propaganda of 1933-1945, as well as the world community's demand for justice, which was unprecedented in history. Affirming his faith on the potential of critical social theory, especially of Habermas, to address contemporary educational problems, Terry (1997) tries to examine Habermas’ ideas of knowledge and linguistic communication with regard to issues of education. In his theories, the process of acquiring

knowledge is strongly associated with social interaction as the latter acts as a prerequisite for the former; it acts as a learning process embedded in a given social context which helps acquiring the desired knowledge.

As the current research offers to explore the field of community engagement in school education and the associated changes it might bring in the field of school improvement, Habermas's theories of '**communicative action**' and '**public sphere**' become the most relevant ones. Habermas' idea of 'communicative action' forms part of a cluster of ideas on social capital and social network. In 'communicative action, 'actors in society seek to reach common understanding and to coordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus, and cooperation rather than strategic action strictly in pursuit of their own goals' (Habermas, 1984, p. 86 quoted in Bolton, 2005).

### **3.1 Communicative Action**

Habermas argues that the communicative action is a critical inquiry which takes into consideration the every-day speech and actions of all those who take part in the practice. Deliberation, argumentation, listening, discourse and mutual understanding are some of the variables which are inherently related with this theory. According to him, when the actors, who are engaged in discussions and deliberation over an issue, reach a point where they understand each other, where they contribute to the discussion in an open and honest way, they are likely to reach the stage of communicative action (Terry, 1997). Talking in the context of school improvement, Govinda (2004) suggests similar situation where there is a need for people "to imbibe a new 'world view' that underscores mutual trust and confidence" (p.37). Similarly, talking in the context of intercultural education, Shields (2004) observes that the collaborative policies on intercultural education "work explicitly to replace deficit thinking with deep and meaningful relationships" (p.128).

Habermas uses the concept of 'crisis' in his communicative action theory. Crisis occurs, according to Habermas, when modern world fails to fulfil individual wants and when social institutions influence individuals. He argues that people engage in interaction in order to respond to the crisis, which he refers to as "communicative action". Habermas also gave emphasis to language to complete the process of interaction (Mabovula, 2010). All these processes indicate that people have certain orientation when faced with a particular social situation, according to which they act. Based on orientation to success and orientation to reaching understanding, Habermas gave three types of social action: based on orientation to

success there are two types of action, instrumental and strategic action; based on reaching an understanding there is only one action which is communicative action. Therefore, it is only through communicative action that a mutual cooperation between people can be reached, and language acts as a medium through which this task is accomplished. According to Habermas, however, there is a variation in the use of language in these three forms of action. The use of language in instrumental action is directed towards realisation of certain goals. In strategic action the language is used to influence others deliberately with a motive of self-benefit. This is what Habermas (1984) referred to as “one-sided” use of language (p.95). In contrast to this, communicative action “is a medium of *uncurtailed* communication .... that takes all the functions of language equally into consideration” (*Ibid.*).

The theory of communicative action also prompts the reader to link it with social capital. Bolton (2005) tried to explore Habermas’ theory of communicative action in connection with social capital. The proximity of the theory with the terms like common understanding, group and cooperation, brings it much closer to the idea of social capital. However, according to him, since the theory remains weak in establishing connection with household production (important for determining social capital), it “has great limitations as an approach to social capital.” (p.21).

The decentralized participatory structures of school governance have the provision of meeting and discussing on the issues affecting schools and its people. These structures seek to create the authority which is easily accessible to the people. However, changing the power-sharing framework in any public system is never an easy task. As Mabovula (2010) states, “the act of coming together and agreeing (communicative action) takes the place of revolution as a mode of change.” (p.1). Whether these structures are inclusive enough so that they can facilitate communicative action to the participants is one of the subject matters of the current study. Thus, Habermas’ idea of communicative action as a key element of social capital presents a practical and pluralist approach through which community participation and school improvement can be understood.

### **3.2 Public Sphere**

The idea of public sphere originated from the curiosity of the political thinkers, like Jurgen Habermas, John Dewey and Hannah Arendt, to explore the features of the contemporary political public life (Bernstein, 2012). The concept of public sphere is now one of the most widely discussed topics in social sciences. Habermas has contributed much towards the

contemporary knowledge of the concept by analysing its nature and history in a comprehensive manner. He defines public sphere as “network for communicating information and points of view . . . the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions.” (Habermas, 1992/1997, p.360). ‘Public sphere’ is the place where people meet and form opinions. There is an inherent notion of freedom present within the public sphere. People have freedom to form opinions and criticize others’ opinions. Thus, heterogeneity and rational criticism are the two specific qualities of public sphere (Tiwari, 2006).

Bernstein (2012) discussed the idea of public sphere as propounded by Habermas, Arendt and Dewey. According to him, there exists a normative core within the idea of public sphere which is still relevant to this date. This normative core validates the principle through which public sphere operates. This principle is characterized by three elements: accessibility in general; absence of privileges; and discovery of rational justifications and broad norms. As far as Habermasian notion of public sphere is concerned, its transformation (which also includes its alteration and disappearance) in the modern world is a noted reality. However, for the democratic politics to survive, as Habermas observed, it is important that the public sphere is revitalized. As Bernstein states, “revitalization of a critical public is the very heart of political democracy.” (*Ibid.*, p.774). The normative core of the Habermasian notion of public sphere includes: presence of rational communication within publics; opinion formation through rational means and its exchange in public; arguments and counter-arguments over these opinions; interests as sphere different from the sphere of opinions; and, nation-state and public are two separate entities.

Habermas’ theory of public sphere is based on the separation of civil society and state. This theory is incomplete without the concept of civil society. The need of the public sphere arises because the civil society needs a platform to counter-balance the state. He sees a need of interconnections between civil society and such a public sphere, which might include a diverse variety of informal associations, a responsible mass media, and ways through which a broad social agenda can be formalised inside the political system (For example, establishment of School Management Committees under RTE Act to discuss education policy question). Ranson (2012), linking public sphere and school improvement, opines that the governance structures of civil society are important to recognize the socio-cultural differences in the schools and take necessary action through mediation. Governance “strengthens the practices that secure institutional performance; it mediates the social and cultural conditions that

engage young people in their learning; and it constitutes the practices of participation and deliberation which secure that mediation.” (p.42). These structures and associations, according to Habermas, also epitomize the problems present in the private sphere of an individual, according to which they provide solutions mostly through institutionalized means. As Habermas (1996) says:

Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life sphere, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres. The ‘discursive designs’ have an egalitarian, open form or organization that mirrors essential features of the kind of communication around which they crystallize and to which they lend continuity and permanence. (p.367)

Thus, public sphere, private sphere (lifeworld) and civil society can all be seen as phenomena which are interconnected through communicative action (Welton, 2001). It is also important to keep in mind the different types of public sphere as described by Habermas. As far as school management committees are concerned, it can be seen as occasional public gatherings which have a ceremonial element within them which may enable long-term communicative action and contemplation (Welton, 2001). However, the question that remains to be answered is that to what extent can community participation in school education in India through SMC be understood as a public sphere? This is one of the areas which the current study tries to explore.

### **3.3 Lifeworld**

One more related theory which analyses learning of the individual in a comprehensive manner is the theory of ‘Lifeworld’. The reproduction of the social sphere, according to Habermas, is a battle between social systems (administrative, economic, and bureaucratic) and the life-world in which we spend our daily lives. At one side is the *system integration* aspired by the systems and on the other side is the *social integration* aspired by lifeworld of the people (Regmi, 2021). The system's purpose is to colonise the life-world, and language, as a method of attaining rational consensus, is the fundamental mode of social interaction through which this colonization can be resisted (Terry, 1997).

Habermas considered rationalization of lifeworld as an important process in the modern society. It is the process through which the claims of the lifeworld, which were hitherto grounded on faith and norms, are validated through discussion and criticism. This validation is done through communicative action. This process leads us to, what Habermas calls, an *'ideal speech-situation'* where the discussions take place without any coercion; where the participants are active rather than passive; where transparency in communication and unbiased opinion is the key; and, where dialogue is preferred over monologue. Bolton (2005), therefore, considered the theory of communicative action as complementary to the concept of lifeworld. Similar to what has been seen in the section discussing communicative action, he also attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to make a connection between lifeworld and social capital. According to him, "lifeworld is an important source for investment in and manifestation of social capital." (*Ibid.*, p.17). He also paid much attention to the fact as to how Habermas mentions about 'social networks' while discussing the theory of lifeworld; and how despite this, there is no substantive connection between social capital and lifeworld. One reason for this, according to him, is that Habermas has given much importance to "individual decisions rather than focusing on community aggregates" (*Ibid.*, p.24).

According to Habermas, we need to understand the relationship between the individuals and their lifeworld if we truly want to understand their learning behaviour. Lifeworld, when mediated by communicative action, performs three functions, i.e., cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization, which are important to understand the overall development of the individual. Cultural reproduction is the process which takes place through the support of the knowledge stock of the lifeworld. This knowledge stock is "a collection of ideas, experiences, and rationalisations of all the members of the society and their ancestors", which keep on transmitting from generation-to-generation (Regmi, 2017a, p.691). Social integration is the process through which solidarity is achieved among the lifeworld members; and this is done with the help of "a web of communicative actions that thrive only in the light of cultural traditions, and not systematic mechanisms that are out of the reach of member's intuitive knowledge" (Habermas, 1987, p.149). Therefore, it is within the ordinary arena of the lifeworld that the key to social integration lies; and this arena is characterized by "the norm-binding forces prevalent in ethnic, linguistic and religious groups." (Regmi, 2021, p.49). Socialization is the process of the lifeworld through which an individual member attains prosperity. It also signifies the individual member's capability through which they make their contributions to the lifeworld. It is the coordination between these three processes

that defines the quality of learning of an individual. This coordination comes through communicative actions. Indeed, lifeworld is nothing but a form of ‘network composed of communicative actions’ (Habermas, 1996, p.354). It gives way to the social foundations of individual learning (Regmi, 2020). In this sense, there is no clear-cut boundary between the sphere of school (cultural reproduction) and that of family (socialization). The current study examines how community participation in school education influences individuals’ orientation towards learning in this way.

#### **4. Conclusion**

After having discussed about human learning in detail it has become clear that there exists no standard understanding regarding the concept. All the authors discussed above provide a different account of what they understand about the concept. However, a thing which is common among them is that there is no single source of human learning. There are multiple sources through which one can learn. Other than the dimensions and scope of learning, the literature has also highlighted the importance of measuring learning through assessment. Though the *assessment of learning* is a dominant form of assessment to measure learning, many scholars have favoured the use of *assessment for learning* to get holistic account of what people learn. The latter form is favourable also due to the fact that assessment of learning actually influences the quality of learning.

Literature on community in education has also been viewed from different angles. Critical assessment of the concept indicates that much is needed to be improved as far as community participation in India is concerned. While the Haryana based study has shown the flaws within the system, the Karnataka based research provides a glimpse of how the use of participatory governance structures can actually alter the fate of schools through school improvement. School improvement is a different field of inquiry altogether. However, both community participation and school improvement mutually reinforce each other.

The chapter has also discussed how the theories propounded by Habermas carry much relevance in today’s world as far as participation of the community is concerned. His ideas like public sphere, rationality of communication, discourse, communicative action etc. seem very much relevant to the field of education. His theories and ideas have given a new perspective to look at decentralized school governance in India.

## **CAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **1. Introduction**

This chapter discusses methodology followed and methods adopted in the current research. Starting with the details of research location, this chapter highlights the important data presented by NAS Report and ASER regarding Raigarh district, due to which it has been chosen for the study. Bounding the case is an important feature of a case study research. Therefore, boundaries have been specified by restricting the study till elementary level of schooling. Among the participants were head masters, teachers, parents and students. This study is a qualitative study which follows an interpretive and exploratory approach as it involves gaining detailed insights about values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences of the school community regarding their participation in school improvement. The requirement of in-depth details and the use of organizational ethnographic approach to collect primary data make the case study method as a preferable choice for this research. A clearly defined context-phenomenon relationship also makes it easier for the researcher to choose case study method. This chapter also covers briefly the academic debates regarding case study method and organizational ethnographic approach in qualitative research.

As far as tools for data collection are concerned, the study has made use of informal conversations, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation. Brief details about the methods have been included to make the reader familiar with the methods as well as the context in which they are being employed. A few details regarding data interpretation and analysis have been discussed by introducing the cyclical approach to qualitative data analysis given by Creswell (2013). Lastly, the chapter discusses how triangulation is necessary for the case study to increase reliability of the data.

#### **2. Methodological Approach**

Raigarh district in the state of Chhattisgarh has been chosen as the location of the study. One of the justifications behind it is that both NAS Report (Class V, 2012) and ASER (2018) have presented unfavourable results regarding the performance in learning by the state as well as the district. Also, not many studies have been conducted in the field of community participation in the district. As this study follows a case study method, “defining the case and

bounding the case” (Yin, 2018, p.30) becomes crucial. This study looks into the role of community participation in the elementary level of education and how does it influence school improvement. It covers two middle schools (M1 and M2) and one primary school (P1) funded and managed by the state government in the district. All these schools are located in urban areas. In fact, the primary school was located within the premises of one of the middle schools. As far as number of students and teachers is concerned, M1 had 107 students and 7 teachers including head master; M2 had 66 students and 4 teachers including head master; and, P1 had 52 students and 3 teachers including head master.

The researcher conducted contact visits to various government schools to identify the potential participants. The selection and choice of the schools was also dependent on whether the research is being permitted to be carried out or not. A formal approval from the school authorities including head masters, and in one case the block education officer (BEO), was gained by the researcher in order to carry out the research process. Informed consent was also obtained from the participants which included teachers (T), head masters (HM), students (S) and parents (PR).

The study has adopted the interpretive epistemological approach which would necessitate interpretation of meanings arising from the investigation of the community participation as a social phenomenon in the select schools of Raigarh district of Chhattisgarh. This approach combines positivist, post-positivist and constructivist views of understanding the world/a specific phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The approach involves collecting and interpreting objective data along with contextual factors, experiences, culture, values, beliefs and perspectives of the community to answer the research questions. The study therefore follows an exploratory inquiry adopting mixed methods. The nature of the study is predominantly qualitative as it

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Positivism’, in its broadest sense, is a position that holds that the goal of knowledge is simply to describe the phenomena that people experience. In a positivist view of the world, research is seen as the way to get at truth, and to understand the world well enough to predict and control it. This approach believes in empiricism. The ‘post-positivism’ approach, however, rejects the central tenets of positivism. This approach argues that the way scientists think and work and the way people think in their everyday life are not distinctly different. To a large extent, scientific reasoning and common-sense reasoning are essentially the same process; there is difference between the two in degree. The post-positivist view of the world recognizes the importance of multiple measures and observations, each of which may possess different types of error. Therefore, the need is to use triangulation in the research design across these multiple sources to get a better understanding of what is happening in reality. ‘Constructivism’, a set of approaches, refers to a position that people’s knowledge and meaning making capacity are the result of an interaction between their experiences and ideas in a given context. It refers to an epistemological position in which knowledge is regarded as constructed, and these are constructed on the basis of experiences. One of the variants of this set of approaches, called ‘social constructionism’, emphasizes on the acting and thinking individual and describes the construction of knowledge as the result of social interaction in contexts, which form the foundation of shared knowledge (Gerstenmaier et al, 2001).

involves gaining in-depth insights of the experiences of people involved in the process of community participation and school improvement through open-ended and opinion-based interviews. Besides collecting data using semi-structured interview, participant observations, focus group discussions, informal conversations, review of relevant documents, etc. have also been used as main methods for gathering data. At the same time, quantitative data have also been collected to profile the community and the sample schools, and to understand the participation of the community in various decision-making points in the school-based management for improved performance.

We have discussed about the concept of school improvement in the previous chapter; we also noticed that there is no standard definition available for the concept. The concept is very dynamic and context specific. For the purpose of this study, the study of school improvement has been kept limited to: building capacity of schools by exploring the functioning of decentralized participatory forums and better learning experiences of students. The capacity building of schools includes promoting quality school infrastructure with better security; providing easily accessible resources to students as well as teachers; enhancing child learning motivation and parental participation in children's academic efforts. The meaning of better learning experiences includes those aspects which enhance the way a child takes part in the learning process in the school. The Habermasian perspective has been used so that not only psychological aspects but social and community aspects of learning can also be explored. It includes absence of discrimination based on various factors, reduced teacher absenteeism, diversified learning activities, quality of class room instruction, interactions with locals and experts, experiential learning through practical events etc.

The decentralised participatory forums to involve community in school functioning also include, along with the official SMCs and PRI structures, the local informal community gatherings and meetings; training sessions conducted by school authorities; training sessions conducted by government. An account of the way in which the community engages itself in debates and discussions in proximate development forums of a school like the SMC/SDMC and PTA for school improvement has been provided.

### **3. Case Study Method**

Given the objectives and research questions of the study, the type of data that has been used to provide a detailed account of the participation of the community in school-based management for improved performance is primary qualitative. The study uses the 'case

study' and an appropriate variant of ethnographic methods. Case study method is preferable for this research because it tries to get into the minute details of the issues and concepts under question. As Schoch (2020) says, a "Case study research involves a detailed and intensive analysis of a particular event, situation, organization, or social unit." (p.245). Case study is preferable here for one more reason: context-phenomenon relationship. Context has to be relevant to the phenomenon for the case study to be an appropriate choice for the researcher. This study explores the dynamics of community participation and its role in school improvement (the phenomenon) in government elementary schools of Raigarh district (the context).

Case study is one of the qualitative research methods, and the data collected through these methods, unlike quantitative ones, are open to individual interpretations. In this sense, each case study portrays a unique picture which emerges out of the context-specific experiences of an individual researcher. The use of interpretive approach can be justified by the fact that no two contexts are ever the same; therefore, the use of deterministic and rule-bound models of research would not be useful (Harland, 2014). However, both qualitative and quantitative methods can inform the case research; it is not bound by the use of single method only. Identifying the case and its spatial and temporal boundaries is the most important task that a researcher needs to fulfil. In that sense, case study is less about methodology and more about the choice of the researcher as to what to study (Schoch, 2020). The current case study is a 'single explanatory case study' (*ibid*, p.247) which explores community participation in school improvement (the case) in three different government schools (sites) which were used for collecting data.

#### **4. Organizational Ethnography**

Given the theoretical framework, and with the primary objective of providing a narrative of community participation in school improvement in a specific socio-economic and cultural context, exploratory ethnographic method of organisational ethnography (OE) has been used in the study. OE is appropriate as it facilitates investigation into the social relations that take place within the school organisation, and between the school organisation and the community, given the overall goal of school improvement. It will be appropriate here to discuss in detail about ethnography first. The origins of ethnography may be traced back to anthropological investigations of small groups in distant nations, which concentrated on social and cultural issues. Ethnography is not merely going to the research site and collecting

data using interviews and surveys rather it is that extended period of time which the researcher spends within the community he/she is studying with an objective of gaining trust, interacting, observing and building relationships (Jayathilaka, 2020). While studying communities and people's lives, ethnographic research uses a cultural lens. This cultural orientation can also be used to study an organization or relations within it. It is carried out through the use of OE. The current study focuses on school as an organization and tries to explore relations through community participation. Schools must be seen as an organization having people who represent unique contexts and share a socio-cultural space. As an organization it has an ultimate goal of school improvement. This complex goal oriented socio-cultural set-up may better be studied through the use of OE.

OE can be "defined as the art of exploring the complexities of everyday organizational life through immersion" (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009, as cited in Jayathilaka, 2020, p.94). Rather than studying an organization in its entirety organizational ethnographers concentrate more on person, practice or fact specific to an organization (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009). Within a school, as is the case of current study, relations between teachers and students; between teachers and parents; and, between students and students, are the subject matter of OE. For example, organizational ethnography is better suited to study the interaction between parents and teachers in a School Management Committee (SMC) meeting which takes place due to the presence of specific socio-cultural contexts; agenda concerning the future activities of school. However, the importance of OE goes much beyond being a method. Gaggiotti et al. (2017) consider OE as more than a mere method; they consider it something which helps in developing a sociological and organizational imagination. According to them, "the sociological and organisational imagination link individuals and groups, roles and societies, past and present." (*ibid.* p.3). They further add, "the imaginative ethnographic project can thus be seen holistically as an emancipatory endeavour that simultaneously involves seeing and understanding, problematising, practising and learning." (*ibid.* p.4). Therefore, even if the goal is to not to study organization in its entirety, the researcher should locate his/her endeavour within a broader social context; organizational ethnography strives to fulfil the same. Various other scholars (Ciuk et al., 2018; Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009; Pader, 2006) testify to the same thought.

## **5. Tools for Data Collection**

As the current study is primarily qualitative in nature, tools which have been used for collection of primary data are as follows:

### **5.1 Focus Group Discussion**

Focus group discussions are a type of qualitative inquiry that generates data through a group discussion led by the researcher. Focus groups have become a popular approach in social science research since their reintroduction in the mid-1980s because, like individual interviews, they can be altered in a variety of ways to fulfil different purposes. The use of the participants' conversation as a means of data gathering is a distinguishing feature of focus groups. There is no necessity to attain a consensus or make a decision; rather, the participants' discussion pertaining to the research issue is what is of interest (Given, 2008).

Two of the principal objectives of this research are (a) to find out how heterogenous, inclusive and democratic the decentralized participatory forums of the schools are; (b) what are the different perceptions of learning and how community participation promotes quality learning among children. For the purpose of gaining diverse view-points of people regarding these issues, two focus group discussions (FGD1 and FGD2) were conducted involving parents of the children studying in schools M1 and M2 respectively. For the current research the FGDs were used as a first step of data collection from the parents followed by in-depth interviews for further data “because the two often work well in combination.” (Given, 2008, p.353). Informed consent was obtained from the participants as well as the HMs of both the schools before conducting the discussions.

Sampling is one of the most important elements for a focus group to succeed (Morgan, 1988). A purposive sample of participants was chosen, which included only those parents who were already the members of the respective SMCs of the schools. A total of 11 individuals participated in both the discussions: 6 (4 females and 2 males) from M1; and 5 (4 females and 1 male) from M2. To avoid distorted responses, those parents who already took part in in-depth interviews were not recruited for the discussions. While recruiting participants, it is important that their interests coincide with researcher's needs (Given, 2008). Therefore, it was ensured, by maintaining a basic homogeneity of the groups, that participants “feel comfortable talking to each other about the research topic” (*ibid.* p.353). Rather than being entirely determined by the demographic and socio-economic features of the participants, the

homogeneity of the groups was primarily based on participants' prior understanding about their children's performances in schools, SMC meetings, and agenda discussed in those meetings. This is somewhat similar to what Wilkinson (1998) termed as "essentialist epistemological framework" (p.186) which indicates that the researcher's job is primarily to access or extract prior existing views, opinions, ideas and understandings.

The duration of each discussion was approximately 40 minutes. The discussions were conducted within the premises of the respective schools for the sake of convenience and familiarity of the participants. The proceedings of the discussions were moderated by the researcher and were, with the permission of the participants, recorded using voice recorder of a mobile phone. For evaluation, the recordings were later transcribed.

A focus group interview schedule was prepared on the basis of the theoretical framework being followed and the review of literature in the field of community participation in school education, school improvement and aspects of human learning. This schedule was to guide the proceedings in a way that data could be collected using participants' discussion (Given, 2008). The motive was to maintain a free flow of interaction in which the participants could give their views and opinions in an open manner without the fear of being judged. Diversity of view-points was given importance rather than consensus.

Analysis of data collected through this method was based on the ethnographic orientation which was very much in-sync with the requirements of the current qualitative study. The principal advantage of this orientation is that it provides the opportunity to the researcher to observe and interpret the everydayness and the ordinary. As Wilkinson (1998) also suggested, it provides "a detailed interpretative account of the everyday social processes of communication, talk and action occurring within the focus group." (p.196). However, this approach is not much useful when there is a repetition of what people articulate in a particular discussion. The solution for this was suggested by Given (2008) in 'group-to-group validation.' (p.354). For the current study the researcher dealt this issue by comparing the data obtained from both FGD1 and FDG2 and selecting those which are common.

## **5.2 In-depth Face-to-face Interviews**

As the motive was to let the respondents share their opinions, views and ideas, semi-structured interviews were conducted. All participants were interviewed for approximately 30 min. each. These interviews were conducted only once. In order to ensure that no verbal information is lost, all interviews were recorded using voice recorder of a mobile phone and

were fully transcribed. Researcher, thus, conducted a total of 11 interviews with teachers (6 from M1, 3 from M2 and 2 from P1), 3 interviews with head teachers (one each from M1, M2 and P1), 16 interviews with parents (excluding those who have already been part of the two focus group discussions) and 30 interviews with students (15 each from M1 and M2). Students from P1 were not interviewed as they were comparatively too young to answer the questions of the researcher; and this might have resulted into distorted responses. Thus, a purposeful sampling was adopted to choose the participants for the interview; the goal is “to find individuals or cases that provide insights into the specific situation under study, regardless of the general population.” (Schoch, 2020, p.249).

An interview guide was prepared consisting of open-ended questions to expand the scope of themes being discussed. Therefore, the sequence of interview questions was not the same for everyone but they followed the same structure (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018). These open-ended questions provided a much-needed flexibility to the researcher to probe the respondents to gain detailed insights. Issues like, community participation in schools through SMCs; decision taken in those meetings; the way these meetings are being made inclusive; the way discussions take place in those meetings; learning experiences of students; and, parents’ perspectives of learning, were referred to by the interview guide. This helped the researcher in “delimiting in advance the issues to be explored.” (Patton, 2002, p.343). At this stage, it becomes crucial to consider the differences and similarities between FGDs and individual interviews.

Focus groups and individual interviews are frequently used by qualitative researchers, although the parallels between these two methodologies are at least as essential as their variations. Most importantly, they both have a greater tendency to base the interview's matter on the researcher's priorities, and they both provide the researcher a potentially significant role in shaping how the dialogue will progress. The most noticeable distinctions between individual interviews and focus groups stem from the two closely linked characteristics of both methods: the overall study population in a typical project and the volume of information provided by each participant. One way to make sense about this is to compare the categories of information that a series of focus groups would produce with that of a series of individual interviews. Focus groups often provide access to a wider range of research participants, whereas in-depth interviews typically offer greater details about each individual. Therefore, Interview method is more beneficial when the purpose is to learn more

about each participant in depth, whereas focus group method is preferable when the purpose is to listen to a variety of people (Given, 2008).

### **5.3 Observation**

Observation is one of the most important qualitative research methods which can be used in combination of other methods. In this study as well, it has been used in addition to interviews and FGDs. It will be important to consider its definition for a better understanding. According to Given (2008), observation “involves collecting impressions of the world using all of one’s senses, especially looking and listening, in a systematic and purposeful way to learn about a phenomenon of interest.” (p.573). In qualitative research it becomes crucial to employ those methods which do not produce researchers’ bias in the results. Observation method is a great tool in this regard. “Qualitative observational research attempts to capture life as experienced by the research participants rather than through categories that have been predetermined by the researcher.” (*Ibid.*). The current study tries to explore beliefs, values, experiences, behaviour and perspectives of the participants, for which this method is highly useful. This is because, “observational research assumes behavior is purposeful, reflecting deeper values and beliefs.” (*Ibid.*). As the current study is epistemologically inclined towards constructivist approach of research, observational method can be of great help as it emphasizes “meanings that the participants attach to activities and events.” (*Ibid.*). Talking about the strengths of the observation method, it can be said that, the method, with its attractive research design, is useful for those areas of research about which very little is known. It is preferable when social processes are studied, especially in a long-term basis. The results and interpretations of this method provide a deeper insight about the phenomena under study. As far as weaknesses are concerned, the method is, of course, not suitable for all types of researches. Phenomena such as cognitive events, infrequent occurrences, fragmented occurrences etc. cannot be easily captured through this method. Also, this method is highly resource intensive and requires investments in terms of time.

Majorly two types of observation methods are used in qualitative research: participant observation; and non-participant observation. Although, there are other categories as well. The term ‘participant observation’ was coined by Bronislaw Malinowski in 1920s, which was later utilised by scholars of Chicago School. In the participant observation method, the researcher becomes an important part of the everyday life and activities of the people. It is within the natural context of their social life that the valuable data is collected. This method is

most suitable for situations where researcher wants to extract the hidden meanings or those phenomena about which not much is known. On the other hand, non-participant observation method is one in which there is no direct interaction between the observer and the observed. The principal reason due to which researchers engage in non-participant observation is the lack of access to the target group. As will be seen in the current study also, the researcher was not allowed to speak or interrupt during the training sessions of the SMC members which is why he chose non-participant observation to observe all those who attended the sessions, including the trainers.

For the purpose of this research, the observations were carried out in two different forms representing two different contexts. First, as a participant observer the researcher observed the activities and interactions of the teachers in the staff rooms of the schools. To facilitate this the researcher built up the rapport with the teachers by having consistent and open interactions with them during the initial visits to the schools. This helped the researcher gain trust of the teachers and, subsequently, access to the staff room behaviors. This whole process provided the researcher an “opportunity to gather ‘live’ data from naturally occurring social situations.” (Cohen et al., 2007, p.396). Second, as a nonparticipant observer the researcher observed the proceedings of a three-day training session of SMC members of school M1. As this research followed a multi-method approach, use of observation as a method helped in validating the results obtained through other methods. While collecting data, observation and other methods were used in a concurrent manner to keep proper track of the data being collected (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018).

#### **5.4 Informal conversations**

Informal conversations with key actors/community members were carried out by the researcher during the time when they were present in the schools for various meetings such as training sessions, parent-teacher meeting, exam orientation etc. These conversations helped the researcher get acquainted with parents who were also happened to be the ‘potential research participants’ during FGD and interviews. State and district specific data from the reports of ASER, U-DISE and NAS have also been used in the research to get information about the state of community participation in the selected schools and its compliance by them.

## 6. Data Analysis

The data thus collected using these tools and methods have been analysed to suit the requirements of the research questions as well as the broader objective of the research. Analysing data is not a one-time task that takes place at the end of the research process, rather it is a continuous procedure which “occurs during the literature review, data collection and formal analysis and in particular, when writing up.” (Harland, 2014, p.1117). In fact, he considers writing “to be the most essential part of the analytical process.” (*ibid.* p.1117-1118). Similarly, Creswell (2013) suggested that data analysis, data collection and report writing “are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project.” (p.182). In this sense, almost every stage of research, which is rich in data, involves some amount of analysis.

Creswell (2013) gave a cyclic approach to qualitative data analysis consisting of several steps. Analysis of data for this particular research follows these steps. First, the analysis starts with describing in detail the various aspects of the case highlighting research location, research approach, number of participants, types of participants, research methods and concepts drawn from literature (Creswell, 2013). This particular step familiarises the readers with the limits and boundaries of the case. This is what Yin (2018) termed as “defining the case and bounding the case” (p.30). The second step is all about managing the data through proper organizing. One way of doing that was organizing data “according to the source from where they were collected” (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018, p.8). At this stage, it is important that the data makes proper sense to the researcher as the raw data seem quite haphazard immediately after the end of data collection. In the third stage, the researcher explored the whole database by reading it several times; and added key concepts and ideas in the form of short notes and memos across specific data. The task was to identify common assumptions and ideas from the data so that they can be categorized. In the fourth stage, these identified data were then classified and labelled into codes. These codes were categorized and aggregated into common themes. This was also suggested by Stake (1995) who termed it as ‘categorical aggregation’ (p.74). Next stage includes detailed description and interpretation of these themes and developing generalization to connect them to the larger goal of the research and the theoretical framework being followed. Here, the researcher tried to make sense of the ideas and meanings emerging from the interpretation of the themes.

One more thing which needs to be kept in mind while analysing data, especially case study data, is triangulation. Triangulating data from multiple perspectives increases the reliability of research. Alternate options and different interpretations should be considered to obtain a fruitful understanding of the data. As the current research follows a multi-method approach, the data collected from these methods and their descriptions and interpretations have been triangulated to increase the trustworthiness. Research questions have acted as the guiding principles that supported triangulation. As Stake (1995) also suggested, “What one does in the field, from gaining access to triangulating data, needs to be guided by the research questions” (p.50).

## **7. Conclusion**

A well-planned methodology, which clearly demarcates the strategy to collect, interpret and analyse the data through skilfully using different methods and approaches is the heart and soul of the research. As far as case study is concerned, the lack of generalizability of the data makes it less preferable among the quantitative researchers. As Harland (2014) says, “neither the researcher nor reader can truly replicate the study, they can only learn from it.” (p.1116). However, qualitative research is incomplete without a case study. Case study is one of the qualitative research methods, and the data collected through these methods, unlike quantitative ones, are open to individual interpretations. In this sense, each case study portrays a unique picture which emerges out of the context-specific experiences of an individual researcher as well as the reader. As Harland indicates, when the case research is published, “the researcher will come to realize that what each reader will learn from the case may be different, even if there is a strong conceptual or theoretical message in the work” (*Ibid*).

Major part of the current research had been carried out within the school premises. School as an organization, therefore, had a big role in enriching the data of this research. An approach of organizational ethnography (OE) had been followed to carry out research within the schools. Research within an organization is much different than the traditional research. Observations of Ciuk et al. (2018) are noteworthy in this regard. They considered that both the intensity and the time-span of research in organization are less because the organizations represent “less immersive cultures.” (p.271). As will be discussed in the next chapter, the evidence of these cultures was experienced by the researcher during observation of staff-room behaviors. Responses like suspicion, non-welcoming attitude and indifference affirm to

this evidence. These responses also affirm to the fact that social settings within the organization are fragmented. As Ciuk et al. mentioned:

It is important to acknowledge that organizations are fragmented and fragmentary cultures. Although they do define much of our identities and ways of life, they do not monopolize or occupy our social imagination the way that the larger cultural context might do. (p.271)

Focus groups, interviews and observations were adopted to collect primary data for the current research. Their origin, scope, rationale have been discussed in the previous sections. However, it is also important to consider their disadvantages as well. The primary disadvantage of the FGD is that the validity and reliability of the results are very low and there is always a risk of biasness on the part of the researcher as well as the moderator. In-depth interviews also face the similar problem of biasness. However, in the current research, the use of triangulation has lowered the risks and disadvantages to a certain extent.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. Introduction

Based on the methods, data collection and analysis discussed in the previous chapter, findings from and accounts of parents (PR), teachers (T), headmasters (HM) and students (S) have been described in this chapter with an objective to explore their perspectives regarding the dynamics of community participation in sample schools and its role in school improvement. The researcher has divided the following sections according to the accounts provided by the groups of participants of this study. Group-wise interpretations and findings have been presented in these sections to provide specific details. As multiple methods have been employed to extract data from a group of people, a group-wise presentation of the findings will reduce the confusion that may arise due to inter-mixing of responses. Every section has been included with a discussion section to provide comments and opinions and to connect the findings to the theoretical framework and the literature. The same has been suggested by Schoch (2020) who discusses about considering reporting and interpreting as separate activities in a case study. This format for presenting the data and findings was chosen in order to highlight the parallels, ambivalences, and contradictions among the participants' responses.

#### 2. Data from observations

For the purpose of this research, the observations were carried out in two different forms representing two different contexts. First, as a participant observer the researcher observed the activities and interactions of the teachers in the staff rooms of the selected three schools. There were 14 teachers, including 3 head teachers, working in these three schools (M1, M2 and P1) out of which 5 were males and 9 were females. Second, as a nonparticipant observer the researcher observed the proceedings of a three-day training session of SMC members of school M1. The SMC meetings in the schools could not be organized at the time of data collection, due to which the researcher did not get the opportunity to attend the SMC meetings. Attending the training session by the researcher was an unplanned occurrence during the research. However, the insights which were gained during the session are very much relevant to this study.

## 2.1 Interactions with teachers

Access to staff room interactions was necessary during the initial phase of the research. Here, the motive was to participate in interactions with teachers and observe their behaviour, beliefs and ways of doing their work. To facilitate this the researcher built up the rapport with the teachers by having consistent and open interactions with them during the initial visits to the schools. This helped the researcher gain trust of the teachers and, subsequently, access to the staff room behaviors. The objective of this participant observation was to uncover hidden information and beliefs which wouldn't have been possible to reveal otherwise. As Moeran (2007) also says that in the field "people are always trying to manage impressions and to put across an image that may in fact be rather different from their 'real' selves." (p.10). Initially, the data were recorded in the form of fieldnotes which were later elaborated according to the researcher's insights on what had been observed.

One observation which was common in all the three schools was that of the absence of head teachers for most of the days. It was very difficult for the researcher to have meetings with the head-teachers during the initial phase of the study. Later also, they had very less time to interact. The main reason behind their absence was that of extra burden of non-academic duties. Although, the extra non-academic burden was an issue not only for the head-teachers but also for the rest of the teachers. The other teachers also seem diffident while talking about the school records related to students' performances and SMC meetings. T10 even asked the researcher "to not to disclose the information anywhere else" (T10, School P1).

Teachers from school M1 were struggling with a unique problem regarding the medium of instruction. The setting was such that in both the high school and primary school the medium of instruction was Hindi. But in middle school the medium of instruction was English. Much of the time and energy of the teachers of this school got wasted in debating this unique problem as they had been recruited for Hindi medium schools. In fact, the teachers were planning among themselves to put this proposal in one of the SMC meetings.

School M2 was unique in itself. The total strength of students in the school was 63 out of which not more than 15 were present on any day during the whole duration of data collection. Once it so happened that, as the students' strength was so low, T8 called all the students in the staff room itself and asked them to write about their daily routine, while keeping himself busy with some other non-academic tasks, paying no heed to what the students are up to. One teacher refused to talk to the researcher by saying "my duty got over two hours ago and I am

still here working on tasks assigned by District Education Office, I can't talk to you now. (School M2).

## **2.2 Capacity of the community to participate**

The researcher witnessed a three-day event which was organized in school M1 by the district education office to train SMC members. Though the training of SMC members is not a frequent occurrence, it provides a much-needed boost to both teachers and SMC members to carry on their collaborative endeavour. It rejuvenates the trust of community on school, and instils a sense of responsibility in school. The overwhelming presence of ten out of eleven members (out of which eight were females) of the SMC during all the three days made the teachers excited about the event. Apart from the parents, one local academician and local councillor also attended the sessions. Other than teachers from school M1, teachers from one more school also participated. The sessions used to start with lightening of incense sticks by one of the parent members in honour of goddess Saraswati. The average duration of all the sessions during the three days was one hour and thirty minutes.

The initial momentum to the discussions was provided by teachers who discussed the importance of parents' participation in schools through SMC. Teachers also discussed about government policies and initiatives to encourage the members to participate in them. One of these initiatives was '*Angana Mein Shiksha*' program by the state government which was launched with an objective to provide an opportunity to small children to learn while staying at home with the help of their mothers. For this training was being provided to both teachers and parents. Topics like re-admission of drop-out children, limited use of mobile phones by children at home, education of girl child, gender disparity in education and importance of SMCs, were taken up by the teachers. A teacher also gave a personal example of struggle from poverty to put emphasis on the discussions. Teachers encouraged parents to monitor and inspect the school activities from time-to-time. Community members also participated in the discussions by asking questions and giving opinions. The researcher noticed an absence of hesitation in many of the members, although there were few who still hesitated to say anything. One parent member mentioned that she notices her child to prepare time table and studies accordingly. Other member posed a question to the teachers regarding irregularities in giving homework to the children by them.

The researcher noticed during the session that the teachers were taking signatures of the members on SMC registers. By reading the contents of the register, the researcher got to know that the signatures had been taken for the next three months at once. When asked, one teacher said that “the schedule of this session coincided with that of this month’s SMC meeting, therefore we have taken the signatures of SMC members.” (T4, School M1).

### **2.3 Discussion**

Though the training sessions are conventionally supposed to be a monologue, this session involved a dialogue between teachers and parent members. Some parents participated actively in the discussions, while others were completely silent. It was apparent during the session that the members came with an orientation to learn something new from the teachers. It was also apparent that some community members had the capacity to discuss about issues; to give opinions; and to listen properly to other participants. However, as per the observation findings, the trainers mentioned what additional capacity needs to be developed in the SMC members. The literature also cautions us regarding this. As Chugh (2021) says, “The most significant aspect of effective community participation rests on capacity building of SMC members that can help them emerge as accountable stakeholders.” (p.44). Preston et al. (2016) also considered that there should be a system of accountability involving consistent oversight and feedback.

One thing which was missing during the whole session was a discussion on school development plan (SDP). As data collected for this study through other methods guide us, no member of the SMC is even aware of what SDPs is, let alone taking part in preparing them. Discussing and preparing SDPs collaboratively can be a huge addition to the capacity of the community to participate.

As far as taking signatures of the members is concerned, it is, in researcher’s opinion, an illicit behaviour which should be avoided at any cost. SMCs have to meet once in every month, it is stipulated by law. Fulfilling the bureaucratic requirements by taking only signatures and carrying out the formality should not become the norm of the SMCs. Studies (Oxfam India, 2015; Jha et al., 2014; Rao, 2009) conducted in this field also suggest the same.

### **3. Listening to parents' voices: subjects and procedures of decisions taken at SMCs**

An attempt was made by the researcher to explore the subjects and procedure of the decisions taken during the SMC meetings. This was done through interviews and FGDs involving a total of 27 individuals from all the three schools (M1, M2 and P1). The tenure of a person's membership of SMC is 3 years in Chhattisgarh, but it varies from state to state (Chugh, 2021). Parent members of SMCs of schools M1 and M2, according to the respective school records, were in their second year of membership; and those of school P1 were in their 1<sup>st</sup> year of membership. This included a year in which the schools were closed for several months due to a global Covid-19 pandemic. Children of majority of these members were studying in these schools for two or more than two years.

#### **3.1 Findings from the interviews: from 'incident' to 'hesitation'**

A total of 16 members (11 females and 5 males) representing three schools participated in the interviews. Despite being members of the committees for one whole year, five participants had never attended its meetings even once.

Regarding areas on which decisions have been made by the SMC of school M1 in consultation with the parent members, most of the participants found school security as important. School security had been a priority for both parents as well as school authorities because of an incident happened within the school premises last year. As PR1 said, "murder of a boy from class ninth committed by an outsider has changed everything for this school as far as security is concerned". (PR1, School M1). As the school P1 was also located within the premises of school M1, security of school was a priority for its members too. Majority of the participants mentioned that they provided suggestions to improve the boundary walls during the meetings of SMC. Consequently, the issue was also given a place in School Development Plan.

Participants representing school M2 found quality of mid-day-meal food and covid cleanliness protocols as important issues on which they had been consulted. As PR7 mentioned, "hand-washing, social distancing and wearing masks was discussed in almost every meeting after the lockdown got over." (PR7, School M2). Participants also mentioned that they were often invited to taste the food being prepared for the students under mid-day-meal programme.

Four participants had mentioned that they felt hesitant while speaking in front of the teachers in the SMC meetings. It was found that their hesitation was due to lack of awareness about their role as well as the purpose of SMCs. This low level of awareness was in turn the result of their low level of education. As PR5 (studied till class 3<sup>rd</sup>) said, “I do not know what to speak in front of the gurujis, they are much more qualified than I am.” (PR5, School M2). When asked regarding children’s participation in studies or sports, all the participants mentioned that sports are seldom discussed in the SMC meetings. As far as academics are concerned, majority of the participants were of the view that they had been encouraged in the past through the SMC meetings to participate in children’s homework. PR3 mentioned the “importance of mother in child’s study” (PR3, School M1) as one of the areas on which deliberations have taken place during SMC meeting.

### **3.2 Findings from the FGDs: from voting to infrequent meetings**

The remaining 11 members representing schools M1 and M2 participated in two separate FGDs. In FGD1 there were 6 members (4 females and 2 males). In FGD2, there were 5 members (4 females and 1 male). Of these members, the researcher found four to be extremely difficult to be involved in the discussions as they had never attended any of the meetings. But eventually, they agreed to be a part of the discussions. Interview schedules were prepared to guide the discussions.

During FGD1, all the participants, including those who have never attended any meeting, stated that they were being given prior information about the schedule of the SMC meetings. This helped them in managing their timings at work in advance. However, not all were at the same page when it comes to information about the agenda of these meetings. PR18 said, “most often we go just to put our signatures on the register” (PR18, School M1). But, whenever the subjects are taken up for the discussion, according to majority of the participants, proper voting happens. Subjects like attendance of children; security of school have recently been discussed according to them. When asked about what the school leaders usually do to make parents attend SMC meetings regularly, the participants described some measures like use of local language; home visits; and refreshments. However, no such measures were taken by the leaders of school M2, as mentioned by some of the participants of the FGD2.

Things were little different for the participants of FGD2 (representing school M2). According to PR23 (studied till class 10<sup>th</sup>), “the meetings are not frequent, and we are always called on a

short notice with a window of one or two days only.” (PR23, School M2). Interestingly, all the other participants were affirmative about this statement. As far as the agenda of the meeting is concerned, according to most of them, covid safety measures dominated in the past few meetings.

The FGDs were also used by the researcher to explore the influence on engagement level of community in school improvement initiatives of their underlying values, beliefs and cultures. In FGD1, only one parent member mentioned the need to talk to teachers and other parents during the SMC meetings so that her child’s score in studies can be improved. Two members mentioned the clash of timings between their work and the SMC monthly meetings. Members also talked about the need of education to confront teachers and understand what they say. The infrequency of SMC meetings and improper decision making has led some parent members think that nothing substantial happens in those meetings. Similarly, in FGD2, only two members said that they attend meetings not just to listen to others but also to suggest changes. Members also discussed about improper scheduling of the meetings which eventually leads to non-participation of some of the members.

The researcher also initiated a discussion to know members’ opinion regarding attitude of teachers towards them. All the participants of both the discussions mentioned that the teachers always encourage us to take part in the meetings and to visit school in a regular manner. However, they also agreed to the fact that the way teachers approach parents to call them to attend the meetings should be more efficient to decrease the infrequency of the meetings. This reveals that while the parents have full trust in the government process, majority of them think that there is a need to improve the process in terms of making the meetings more inclusive; expanding the scope of topics being discussed in the meetings.

### **3.3 Discussion**

Trust plays an important role in community’s participation in schools. The findings also indicate towards this issue and link back to what have been discussed in the literature. It was due to lack of trust in parents that they felt hesitant while speaking in front of the teachers. As Chugh (2021) says, “it is only when stakeholders feel valuable and heard that there is trust and willingness to interact freely with organizations. This trust can materialise through actions such as the sharing of aims and objectives leading to positive impacts.” (p.44). Although it is not desired, nor even possible, to share each and every activity of the school to the community members, there are some information, like the use of funds received by the

school and role of community in school development plan, which must be shared by the community. It is noteworthy that while participants knew about various subjects on which decisions have been made by the SMCs, they had very less knowledge about how the funds are being utilised. They also had scarce knowledge about preparation of school development plan, the prime responsibility of the SMCs.

SMCs provide a wider platform to parents, teachers and local leaders to collaborate and deliberate actively. This brings us closer to the concept of discourse as explained by Habermas. He considered the concept of discourse as a hallmark of democracy. Discourse provides a basis on which procedures of democratic decision-making, like deliberation is developed. Drawing on Habermas' theory of discourse, Wiklund (2005) identified four principles through which the deliberative potential of an institution can be assessed: first, the principle of generality, which states that all affected parties or parties with similar interests can take part in discourse equally; second, participants have the rights to speak either for or against a particular topic; third, there should be power neutrality in the sense that the only power that will prevail in the discourse will that be of the power of argument; and fourth, participants shall reciprocate and be impartial while taking a stance. But the potential of SMCs is not being utilised properly. Only a few areas are there where deliberative potential of SMCs emerges. The notion of preparing SDP involving all the stakeholders is an example of the deliberative potential of the SMCs. The problem is that the deliberations within SMCs are fragmented and conditional. Data from the parents have highlighted how important it was for the school and parents to discuss on school security after the murder incident. In this case, the deliberations on security of the school were conditional to the incident as security was never discussed before. Similarly, discussing covid protocols in the SMCs became mandatory as nobody could avoid it due to the severity of the issue. Here, deliberations were conditional to the pandemic as health issues were not discussed otherwise. This conditionality of deliberations reduces the deliberative potential of the SMCs as endorsed by the RTE Act.

#### **4. Teachers' perspectives on forums of community involvement and school improvement**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 teachers and 3 head masters of the schools M1, M2 and P1, to get their perspectives on the way community engages with schools through participatory forums like SMCs, which give avenue for school improvement activities as well. Researcher's motive was twofold: first, to explore the values, beliefs and cultures of the

school community which influence its participation in school improvement initiatives and tasks; second, to explore ‘what’ and ‘how’ of people’s participation through decentralized participatory forums of the schools.

#### **4.1 Factors influencing school improvement**

Almost every teacher, including the head teachers, believed that the burden of working after the duty and other non-academic burdens act as the biggest obstacle for school improvement activities. According to some participants, there are various reasons which determine the importance of community involvement in school improvement initiatives such as: to increase transparency in the process; to induce discipline among school community; to encourage deliberations on issues concerning the school; to reiterate the fact that parent community is the group which acts as a link between school and society; to establish the fact that parents are one of the important pillars of the school; and to bring satisfaction to the minds of parents. As T3 said, “involving parents gives them satisfaction as they are able to talk about the issues which concern them, either related to school, their child, or something else.” (T3, School M1). However, what happens in reality is something very different from the roles stated above. When asked about the usefulness of SMC in school improvement, almost all the participants of all the schools mentioned that the absenteeism among parent members is the biggest struggle which our SMCs face in the process of school improvement. As T6 stated, “the economic condition of parents is such that if they attend the meeting even for one day, it will cost them their daily wage which they can’t afford.” (T6, School M1). But there are positive sides as well. According to T7, “members of SMC act as agents of school to monitor children outside school.” (T7, School M2), given the fact that this school was facing a problem of recurrent absenteeism among students. Similarly, T11 (School P1) mentions about the successful monitoring of mid-day-meal food in her school by parent members of SMC.

Making the researcher informed about the reality of his school, HM1 stated, “involving community through SMC is becoming like a formality. The process has become limited to taking parents’ signatures on the register, that too if they attend. Nothing more.” (HM1, School M1). Lack of education among parents, according to him, is the biggest reason behind it. Lack of education leads to lack of interest and lack of awareness which in turn lead to non-participation. This brings us to the question whether community is capable enough to improve schools, or to be at least a part of the decisions regarding school improvement. On

this, all the three HMs have given different responses. According to HM1 (School M1), majority of the members who take part in the SMC meetings are not capable because of their lack of education. They do not understand some of the technicalities involved in the process. For example, understanding the details of the use of various funds in the school. HM2 (School M2) suggested to take a middle path as not everyone can be capable of fulfilling this responsibility. She suggested *inform-invite-involve strategy*, i.e., informing about the school improvement initiatives to all those who participate formally or informally through proper channels of communication; inviting interested community members to talk about it openly by conducting group activities and workshops; and involving only those who are fit and capable to complete the task in the stipulated time. HM3 (School P1) indicated that despite being non-educated, some parents show curiosity to know about their children in particular and about the school in general. Their curiosity can be used as a tool to make them aware about what and how things happen within the school.

#### **4.2 Forums to involve community**

Teachers' perspectives were sought to understand the mechanisms through which community participates in the schools. The researcher tried to extract details regarding SMCs and other forums which act as an important link between community and school. Other than SMCs, when asked about the availability of alternative forums for people's involvement, many teachers mentioned about 'Mata Unmukhikaran' as a platform to have discussions with mothers of children studying in the school. As T9 said, "this program helps in encouraging mothers to participate in their children's study at home. Mothers have the capacity to create an environment at home in which children can study peacefully." (T9, School M2). Other than this, according to some teachers, 'Paalak Sampark' also provides a great opportunity to connect with the parents. However, some of them consider that it should be made a compulsory event for each school. There are also informal ways to connect with the community. As T2 says, "we do not miss the opportunity to talk with parents during resource distribution such as books, uniforms, scholarships etc." (T2, School M1). During the time of data collection, the researcher witnessed such an informal meeting between parents and teachers when the school authorities decided to distribute 'chikki' (a sweet made of peanuts and jaggery) to all the students in accordance with the nutritional guidelines of the education department. Those who were not part of the formal SMC, got involved through this informal event.

As was clear from the previous accounts of parent members of SMC that they sometimes feel hesitant to talk to teachers or to take part in the meetings for one reason or the other, responses were sought from the teachers as to what have been done on this front so far. Interestingly, the teachers mentioned some measures that they have adopted to promote community's involvement in schools such as: first, launching door-to-door campaign; second, induce trust in the members through school children by passing on useful information; third, providing incentives to participants in terms of refreshments, stationaries or other useful resources; fourth, scheduling meetings and events according to the convenience of the parents; fifth, using local language during the meetings; and sixth, gaining trust of the community members by actively involving local academicians and political representatives in conversations with them. Next stage after people start to participate in school functioning is that of performance. Performance in terms of providing suggestions, giving opinions as well as counter-opinions, deliberating on subjects, creating inclusive environment and coming up with new ideas. It actually matters as to how do the members perform during the meetings or events because their performance only will determine the discursive element and deliberative potential of these forums. As T5 recalls, "parents were actively involved during discussions of school security after the unwanted incident of murder happened in our school during the year 2020" (T5, School M1). According to her, many suggestions provided by the parents to secure the premises were included in the school development plan to pass it on to the higher authorities.

Researcher also tried to identify what needs to be changed in these forums or what needs to be done to expand the scope of community participation in schools. The participants gave many suggestions. HM1 (School M1) suggested that the government should determine minimum qualification to become a member of SMC, given the fact that much of the official tasks are handled by the committee itself. T8 (School M2) suggested that there should be an active collaboration between schools and other government departments like health department and police department. In fact, during the time of data collection, the researcher witnessed an awareness campaign in School M1 against sexual harassment, organized for children by the local police department. Suggesting on expanding the scope of discussion between teachers and parents, T4 (School M1) opines that regular discussion on anti-social activities like gambling and intoxicants should become the priority in today's environment. T1 (School M1) suggests for the regular and compulsory training of SMC members so that they become active participants. Currently, as per the school records, these trainings are

irregular and fragmented. Other than training, T10 (School P1) suggests that awareness campaigns regarding community participation should be made regular so that parents become more conscious about the purpose of SMCs as well as about their role in them.

### **4.3 Discussion**

Collaboration between school and family can be considered as one of the important components of school improvement (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018). However, it is the difference between norms and reality that clearly defines the concept of community participation for school improvement. The amendment made in the RTE Act in 2010 gave additional responsibilities to the SMCs such as: creating awareness among the community people about the rights of children under the act; monitoring children's attendance, especially of marginalised sections; monitor the private tuitions given by the teachers; and monitoring the academic and non-academic duties of the teachers (GoI, 2010). As is clear from the findings, barring monitoring children's attendance, SMCs were weak in fulfilling the remaining responsibilities. In fact, one of the SMCs faced the problem of over-burdening of non-academic duties, however the issue was not even discussed in any of the meetings, let alone taking actions against it. There was an absence of communicative action as conceptualized by Habermas. As Terry (1997) suggests that the phase of communicative action can be reached only through open and honest discussion and mutually understanding each other's problems and issues, which was clearly missing in the SMCs. Besides, the informal contexts, as per the findings, also provide a space for discussions and exchange of opinions. Therefore, along with paying heed to the formal space of SMCs and other platforms, one should also be mindful about "informal contexts of communication found in the public sphere, in civil society, and in spheres of private life." (Habermas, 1996, p.352).

The 2010 amendment also gave a threshold to identify the underlying values and beliefs of the school community vis-à-vis their involvement in school improvement. A belief like 'government schools are unnecessarily burdened by non-academic tasks' does influence the community's involvement in school improvement in a negative way. However, the values like, discipline, transparency, communal harmony, importance of guardians, enhances the level of engagement in school improvement. There is also a need, according to the accounts of Hajisoteriou et al. (2018), to synchronize these values and beliefs with social justice, because school improvement is intricately tied with social justice education. "School actors whose values and beliefs are inconsistent with redistributive definitions of social justice may

disrupt the implementation of social-justice education initiatives and, in turn, inhibit school improvement.” (*Ibid*, p.10)

Involvement of community in schools through SMCs is also facing a struggle of bureaucratic pressure. HM1’s statement about SMC becoming a formality indicates that the functioning of the committee is intricately tied to the bureaucratic requirements of producing timely data and reports. Majority of the work is performed by the teachers, while the parent members become the silent spectators. They only come to mark their attendance (Chugh, 2021). Govinda (2004) also indicates that the school governing bodies work under tremendous contradictory pressure and demands which create dichotomies. He also presents his apprehension towards these decentralized participatory forums in schools. According to him, “such extreme localization of authority may make school the locus of unwarranted power struggle undermining the basic concern of improving school efficiency.” (*Ibid*, p.36).

Lack of education among the parent members leads to lack of awareness about their role in functioning of the school. This subsequently results in less participation in SMC. This is how lack of education becomes an obstacle for expanding the discursive elements within SMCs. This, however, is not to ignore those members who are non-educated but still are curious to actively participate in school’s functioning as well as their children’s studies. Lack of education is not always the end of participation of community in schools. Findings suggest that parents and teachers often take the opportunity to discuss important issues during non-formal events. Although such discussions do contain discursive elements but their deliberative potential is less as they are not executed in collaboration with the other parents. The question now arises is to what is being done to overcome the non-participation of some of the members. Data from teachers suggest that, among other measures, going door-to-door creating awareness in the minds of parent members is an option. However, many teachers have also expressed that they mostly fail to sustain this campaign for long time due to other responsibilities. Data from FGDs have revealed that luring them with incentives to participate in meetings is also a short-term strategy. A strategy of inform-invite-involve suggested by one of the head masters is also not appropriate as it is selective in favour of only those who are educated. The forums like SMC are capable to facilitate communicative action as these forums are supposed to be inclusive and democratic in nature. However, as the findings indicate, much is still needed to be improved to achieve communicative action.

## **5. Community participation and the scope of learning**

This section explores the relationship between community participation and learning. In-depth interviews with students of school M1 and M2, and FGDs with parents were conducted to identify different perceptions of learning and to explore the influence of community participation on quality of learning.

### **5.1 Understanding students' engagement with learning**

30 students (from class 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>) representing schools M1 and M2 participated in in-depth interviews. Through these interviews the researcher tried to identify the influence of community participation on students' learning both inside and outside school. The selection of participants for this exercise was done through a mixed sampling approach. Initially, through purposive sampling, children of only those parents were chosen who were the members of SMC. 10 students (5 each from schools M1 and M2) were chosen through this method. Subsequently, the remaining 20 students (10 each from schools M1 and M2) were chosen through random sampling. The objective was to identify the influence of community participation on students' learning as well as on their perceptions of learning. Objective was also to establish a connection between child's studies and parental involvement.

Parent members of SMCs have a wider exposure to school activities as compared to non-member parents as the former are supposed to meet once every month and discuss issues related to school and children. Recalling previous data from interviews of parents indicates that mothers' participation in children's studies at home was given much importance as a principle in SMC meeting discussions. SMC members are supposed to implement this principle in their respective homes as well as share it with others. The researcher, through purposefully selected sample of 10 students, tried to understand as to what difference does the community participation through SMCs make in learning of students both in terms of its orientation and scope.

Surprisingly, the researcher found no major difference between learning interests of these students and that of the remaining 20 students. Questions were asked to the students about their interests, hobbies, past achievements and parents' occupation with an objective of gaining some insights about the scope of learning in their lives. Barring 2 (who were taking football coaching at district stadium) out of 10 children of SMC parent members, no one had any identifiable interests or hobbies. On the other hand, 8 out of 20 children of non-member

parents had interests and hobbies like reading English books, reading poems, watching science videos, drawing, paper craft, yoga, singing and dancing. Involvement of community, therefore, had no substantial influence in expanding the scope of learning of the students. In fact, learning interests of the latter group of students were found to be much more diversified. It was also found that there is a significant difference between the economic position of members and non-members. 9 out of 10 SMC members are either daily wage labourers or domestic workers. While some non-members also work as daily wage labourers and domestic workers, the occupations of rest of them range from freelancing, shop owner and newspaper editor to teacher, full time job in a private company etc. In fact, the students who, according to the school records, are doing well in studies and are the toppers of their respective classes, are children of non-member parents.

Researcher also tried to get insights about students' learning orientation by asking question: *'other than studies what else is important in a student's life?'*. Responses of children of SMC members were: focussing on hobbies, taking care of parents, being economical while spending money and establishing friendship with others. Responses of children of non-member parents were: focussing on extra-curricular activities, improving general knowledge, improving computer knowledge, giving importance to self-emancipation, giving respect to others, maintaining proper discipline, taking care of health through yoga and sports, meditation, being ready to change with time and improving self. Differences in orientations between the two groups of students can be seen clearly. Sources of orientation of the latter group of students are much wider and diverse than the former group.

## **5.2 Discussion**

The literature indicates that the sphere of learning of an individual is not limited. There are multiple sources through which an individual learns. Diversity of sources of learning actually improves its quality (Vosniadou, 2003). Importance of learning quality was also highlighted by Preston et al. (2016) when they talked about improving the quality of instruction through practices like, collaboration among students for group tasks; improving classroom environment; formative assessment; and promoting dialogue and active learning among students. While the findings have revealed the diverse scope of learning within the students, a back-support to it through community participation was missing. A viable connection between participation of community and promoting quality learning in schools could not be established given the realities. However, it is worth mentioning here that promoting quality

learning is not the sole responsibility of community, schools are also responsible for that. The events of sports and extra-curricular activities seldom happened in the schools under study. Impeding opportunities to learn like this leads to students being unable to interact with the external social and cultural world (Illeris, 2007). The data suggest that, in all the schools under study, motivation for parental involvement in child's academic and non-academic activities was intact but the lack of education and lack of economic resources among the community members acted as potential impediments on the way of quality of learning.

To properly understand the learning behaviour of individuals, it is important to understand the relationship between individuals and their lifeworld. Lifeworld is the basis of social foundations of individual learning (Regmi, 2020). Lifeworld performs three functions, i.e., cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization, which are important to understand the overall development of the individual. These functions can be best reflected in learning orientation of individual, as discussed in the previous section. But these functions become active only when they are mediated by communicative actions. Involvement of community in schools is supposed to perform this communicative action so that the full potential of lifeworld can be achieved. But, as the findings suggest, community participation had no significant influence over students' learning orientation. And the main reason behind this was the lack of communicative action within SMCs in particular and schools in general. Picture will become clearer when learning will be discussed from community perspectives in the next section.

### **5.3 Community perspectives on learning**

As has been seen in the previous sections, the researcher conducted two FGDs to gain insights of parents regarding various issues. Understanding learning from the perspectives of community members was also one of the topics discussed in these FGDs. The objective was to discuss different perceptions of learning and explore whether quality learning is promoted through community participation.

Opinions were sought on whether learning takes place only in schools or there are other ways to facilitate learning. Every member of the two FGDs opined that there are various ways through which one can learn, learning does not happen only in schools. Learning takes place, according to participants, while talking to friends or elders; on the cricket ground when collaborating with other players; in market during shopping; and while watching educational videos on tv. The participants' views also indicated that there can be different meanings when

it comes to learning. While the immediate response of some members, explaining the meaning of learning, was ‘studying well and getting good marks in exam’, in others’ opinion learning had much deeper meaning: ability to take up the responsibility; developing the overall personality towards others; ability to manage studies with other activities; focussing on hobbies; ability to change with time; and doing new things which help us improve as humans. Barring some, everyone wanted his/her child to focus not only in academics but also in extracurricular activities and sports.

Merely forming an opinion about learning doesn’t work, it needs to be reflected in concrete actions. Regarding this, questions were asked from the participants as to what actions do you take to increase the scope of your child’s learning and what barriers do you face in the process. Sending their child regularly to school was one of their two overwhelming responses through which they justified their action to widen the scope of their children’s learning. However, this was not the only action through which they wanted to widen the scope of learning, they mentioned about other actions like encouraging children to: watch informational videos; go out of homes to play; read English books; develop hobbies; join drawing class; join music class; and join computer class. Their second overwhelming response which was apparent during the discussions was that of lack of economic resources which acted as a barrier to their actions. Regarding the role of SMCs in promoting quality learning, almost every member was of the view that discussions related to promotion of learning should be made compulsory in every SMC meeting as this issue is seldom discussed. However, there were few who recalled that some topics like, increasing the role of mothers in child’s homework; professional learning communities (PLC); and reading and mathematical skills, have been discussed in the previous meetings.

#### **5.4 Discussion**

Vosniadou (2003) considers quality of learning as one of the most important factors of school improvement. Quality of learning, according to her, can have multiple origins. There are both socially derived activities as well as practically useful activities which can help improve learning. The focus should be on knowledge construction rather than knowledge gathering. As the findings show, community has also suggested unconventional ways and forms of learning. However, the actions to promote quality learning have not been reflected on the agenda of the SMCs or other forms of community participation in the schools under study. The overwhelming responses of the participants of FGDs suggest that the community is

facing an interconnected issue of limited scope and limited resources; one influencing the other. The problem here is that the SMCs have not been successful in resolving this issue. This leads us to the accounts of Fullan et al. (2000) which warn us regarding the failure of School-based Management (SBM) in establishing linkages with student learning. As a solution they talked about a reconceptualized SBM which, among other things, promotes professional learning community of teachers. As the findings of this research also suggest, PLC is a beginning towards a great achievement as far as learning of children is concerned.

## **6. Conclusion**

Multiple methods were employed to extract primary data from the participants. Findings of different groups of participants have been discussed. Group-wise division of the findings and interpretations has been carried out to emphasise specific details as well as to avoid inter-mixing of responses. Observation method was used mainly to explore the staff-room behaviors in the selected schools. this method was also employed to judge the capacity of the community to participate in the school. Interpretations like the current state of community's capacity to participate and suggestions like using SDP to enhance the capacity have been discussed.

To know the points of decisions at SMCs and the procedures to take those decisions from the perspective of parents, interviews and FGDs were conducted. The findings indicated that trust plays a crucial role in sustaining the connection between community and the school. The findings also highlighted as to how the conditionality of deliberations in the SMCs reduces their deliberative potential. There are certain crucial pieces of information which need to be shared with the community to enhance their participation in the schools.

Details regarding forums of community involvement and school improvement were collected from the teachers using in-depth interviews. Their values and beliefs regarding community participation were given priority while collecting data. It was learned from the findings that difference between norms and reality determines the connection between community participation and school improvement. The reasons of variations in norms and reality were also discussed. Besides emphasizing the significance of formal platforms like SMCs for communication and discussions, the findings indicated towards the importance of informal contexts in which people communicate.

Quality of learning is one of the components of the school improvement as conceptualized for the purpose of the current study. To explore the role of community participation in promoting

learning among the students, interviews and FGDs were conducted. The influence of community participation on quality of learning and different perceptions of learning were identified using these methods. The findings have indicated as to how the lack of education and lack of economic resources among the community members acted as potential impediments on the way of quality of learning. Findings have also suggested that community participation had no significant influence over students' learning orientation. Habermasian notion of lifeworld has been used to enrich the understanding of learning among the students. FGDs were conducted with parents to know what community thinks of students' learning. Though the accounts of parents suggest unconventional and interesting ways and forms of learning, the SMCs did not include these in their discussions or decisions. The issue of limited scope and limited resources among the members of the community also aggravated the problem of low quality of learning.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The study started with an aim to explore the pattern of operation and activities of the decentralized participatory forums of community involvement of select government schools. A review of relevant literature suggests, and it also becomes the rationale to conduct this study, that studies conducted on community participation in schools exclusively in the context of Chhattisgarh are very few. Additionally, no study has been conducted in Raigarh district connecting the community participation with school improvement. Relying on various literature and theoretical framework to enrich the understanding regarding community participation, school improvement and individual learning, the researcher tried to explore these areas by carrying out a valuable qualitative research based on primary data. Also, the concept of community participation as a decentralised governance strategy and its strengths and weaknesses, particularly with respect to its influence on school effectiveness have been comprehensively explored using insights from teachers, parents and students.

A strong connection between community participation and school improvement was found in the study. However, mere witnessing the connection between the two is an important but not the sufficient condition to take action for school improvement. The focus of the study throughout the process, therefore, also has been to understand where are we missing in the process of school improvement, and how community involvement in school-based management practices deals with this issue.

One of the research questions of this study was, to know through which forums and for what activities do the parents get involved in the functioning of the school through SMCs. The underlying objective was to explore the discursive elements within and deliberative potential of these forums. Perspectives of the teachers were sought regarding this. Other than SMCs, a separate platform named 'Mata Unmukhikaran', to have discussions exclusively with the mothers, was found to be effective in encouraging mothers to involve in children's studies at home. 'Paalak Sampark' and other informal ways were also available for the teachers to get in touch with the parents but they felt that it was somehow unfair to not have compulsory parent-teacher meetings as it happens in private schools. Findings suggest that parents and teachers often take the opportunity to discuss important issues during non-formal events. Although such discussions do contain discursive elements but their deliberative potential is

less as they are not executed in collaboration with the other parents. It was also clear from the data that, lack of education among the parents was an obstacle for expanding the discursive elements within SMCs. This, however, is not to ignore those members who were non-educated but still were curious to actively participate in school's functioning as well as their children's studies. Lack of education is not always the end of participation of community in schools.

This was all about the teachers' accounts of the state of parents' participation in schools. However, to further enrich the research process to fulfil the underlying objective, the findings were supplemented with interpretations of data extracted by exploring the parents' accounts regarding the decision points of SMCs in which they participate. It is noteworthy that while participants knew about various subjects on which decisions have been made by the SMCs, they had very less knowledge about how the funds are being utilised. They also had scarce knowledge about preparation of school development plan, the prime responsibility of the SMCs. The data also suggest that many parents felt hesitant to talk to the teachers. Lack of trust can be one of the reasons for that. As Chugh (2021) says, "it is only when stakeholders feel valuable and heard that there is trust and willingness to interact freely with organizations. This trust can materialise through actions such as the sharing of aims and objectives leading to positive impacts." (p.44). The data also suggest that the deliberations within SMCs were fragmented and conditional. One of the arguments of this study is that this conditionality of deliberations reduces the deliberative potential of the SMCs as endorsed by the RTE Act.

Exploring the ways through which participatory decision making is promoted through the SMCs becomes the next logical step after gaining some insights about the decision points in which parents participated. Here, the underlying objective was to find out how heterogeneous, inclusive and democratic the participatory forums were in their approach. To fulfil this objective, focus group discussions among the parents were conducted. Giving prior information of the meetings to the parents was like a norm for the teachers. Everyone received intimation prior to the meetings though not in a manner suitable to all of them. However, as far as knowledge of the agenda of the meeting is concerned, it was not known to most of the parents. In these terms, SMC meetings seemed less inclusive. Nevertheless, the democratic element of the meeting was intact as decisions on the subjects were taken through proper voting. When asked about what the school leaders usually do to make parents attend SMC meetings regularly, the participants described some measures like use of local

language; home visits; and refreshments. These measures, according to the researcher, carry the potential to expand heterogeneity as well as inclusiveness of the SMC meetings.

Quality of learning is a crucial component of school improvement. Therefore, in the context of this study, what people perceive of learning and how community participation promotes quality learning among children, also becomes crucial. Data regarding this were also collected through FGDs of parent members of SMCs. Findings indicate towards multiple sources of learning; it is in-sync with the literature discussed earlier. The participants' views also indicated that there can be different meanings when it comes to learning. While the immediate response of some members, explaining the meaning of learning, was 'studying well and getting good marks in exam', in others' opinion learning had much deeper meaning: ability to take up the responsibility; developing the overall personality towards others; ability to manage studies with other activities; focussing on hobbies; ability to change with time; and doing new things which help us improve as humans. As can be seen, community has suggested unconventional ways and forms of learning. However, the actions to promote quality learning have not been reflected on the agenda of the SMCs or other forms of community participation in the schools under study. One of the arguments of this paper is that the community is facing an interconnected issue of limited scope and limited resources; one influencing the other. The problem here is that the SMCs have not been successful in resolving this issue. This leads us to the accounts of Fullan et al. (2000) which warn us regarding the failure of School-based Management (SBM) in establishing linkages with student learning.

Child learning motivation and parental involvement in children's studies also determine the quality of learning. Regarding this the researcher interviewed the children of the sample schools to explore how they engage themselves in learning in and outside schools. Parent members of SMCs have a wider exposure to school activities as compared to non-member parents as the former are supposed to meet once every month and discuss issues related to school and children. SMC members are also supposed to implement this principle in their respective homes as well as share it with others. However, as the findings suggest, community participation had no significant influence over students' learning orientation. And the main reason behind this was the lack of communicative action within SMCs in particular and schools in general. It was due to this reason that the learning interests of children of SMC members were not extraordinarily different from that of other children. The events of sports and extra-curricular activities seldom happened in the schools under study. Impeding

opportunities to learn like this leads to students being unable to interact with the external social and cultural world (Illeris, 2007). The data suggest that, in all the schools under study, motivation for parental involvement in child's academic and non-academic activities was intact but the lack of education and lack of economic resources among the community members acted as potential impediments on the way of quality of learning.

One of the objectives of the study was to explore the relationship between values and beliefs of the school community and school improvement initiatives. The difference between norms and realities in the selected schools define this relationship. The 2010 amendment to the RTE Act gave a threshold to identify the underlying values and beliefs of the school community vis-à-vis their involvement in school improvement. SMCs were found to be weak in fulfilling the responsibilities stipulated by the act. The act also stipulate that the meetings should be held once every month. However, the findings suggest otherwise. A belief like 'government schools are unnecessarily burdened by non-academic tasks' does influence the community's involvement in school improvement in a negative way. However, the values like, discipline, transparency, communal harmony, importance of guardians, enhances the level of engagement in school improvement. There is also a need, according to the accounts of Hajisoteriou et al. (2018), to synchronize these values and beliefs with social justice, because school improvement is intricately tied with social justice education. "School actors whose values and beliefs are inconsistent with redistributive definitions of social justice may disrupt the implementation of social-justice education initiatives and, in turn, inhibit school improvement." (*Ibid*, p.10).

All in all, in the context of this study, the concept of school improvement can be seen through two different lenses: first, as capacity building of the community through decentralized participatory forums; second, as improving learning experiences of the students. Capacity building potential of the participatory forums of the selected government schools is evident from the procedures followed and decisions taken during both formal and informal meetings between parents, teachers and other community members. The presence or absence of discursive elements and deliberative potential in the procedures and decisions of these meetings has come out to be a great overall measure of the capacity building of the community. Although, obstacles in the form of fragmented discussions, conditionality of deliberations and lack of education faced by the community in the process need to be tackled through communicative action. Regarding providing quality learning experiences, the dual problem of lack of limited resources and lack of limited scope faced by the community has to

be tackled. This can be done by giving importance to lifeworld of the individual which emphasizes on both social as well as cognitive developments of the individual. Though community participation in the sample schools through SMCs had no significant influence over students' learning orientation, this needs to be overturned by augmenting the role of parents in their children's studies. Thus, both values and beliefs of the community need an overhaul. And again, communicative action can be a suitable remedy for this purpose.

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