

# Can Information Campaigns Raise Awareness and Local Participation in Primary Education?

*A central plank of public policy for improving primary education services in India is the participation of village education committees, consisting of village government leaders, parents, and teachers. This paper reports the findings from a survey in a rural district in Uttar Pradesh. Rural households, parents, teachers and VEC members were surveyed on the status of education services and the extent of community participation in the public delivery of education services. Most parents do not know that a VEC exists, public participation in improving education is negligible, and large numbers of children in the villages have not acquired basic competencies of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Based on the findings of the baseline survey, this paper also describes a set of information and advocacy campaigns that have been designed to explore whether local participation can increase, and future research plans to evaluate the impact of these interventions.*

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A wide circle of development thinkers, policy-makers, and practitioners believes that the participation of local communities in public services is instrumental in achieving better development outcomes. This has sparked the creation of new (or revival of existing) local agencies around the developing world. Yet, more often than not, these new institutions are constrained – they have no real authority to hire and fire public providers, no real resources to use at their discretion, and no real responsibility for service delivery outcomes. Nevertheless, there is a sense amongst policy-makers and practitioners that what these institutions might do is, provide a “voice” to the people, a forum for “collective action”, and facilitate “bottom-up” or “demand-driven” initiatives that make a difference. The hope is that local agencies will strengthen people’s participation in improving the functioning of basic services, and thereby lead to better delivery and outcomes.

In India, decentralised participation has been given central importance in the primary education sector through the roll-out of a massive government push for universalisation of elementary education (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)). Through habitation-level planning and community participation, it is envisaged that the village education committee will take decisions based on local needs and therefore will be able to effectively use the resources allocated for primary education at the local level. In the design and implementation of SSA, local action is an essential element in the process of ensuring universal enrolment, retention, and achievement of a satisfactory level of learning. The village education committees (VECs) are seen as the mechanism through which public funds for education services will flow to the village, through which planning, implementation and monitoring will be coordinated.

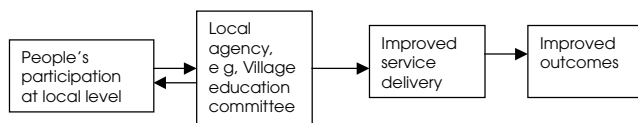
However, for local groups to lead any substantial change in school governance or functioning, it is essential that the groups

are active, well-informed and able to take decisions. The existence of committees, by itself, cannot be an effective tool for change, if people are unaware of the existence of these committees, do not know their responsibilities, the resources that are available and how decisions can be made. This information gap may be particularly salient, if members of the local agencies are not required to be formally elected, and the agency is constituted by existing public officials who chooses its members through an informal process. Despite institutional encouragement to do so, individuals or communities may not be active, either because they do not put a high priority on these services or because they are uncertain about whether their participation would make a difference. This is partly why, in recent years, activists and policy-makers have emphasised information, advocacy and awareness campaigns at the community level, as a way of encouraging people to participate more [Jenkins and Goetz 1999; Goetz and Jenkins 2001; Paul 2002]. The Right to Information campaign in India is also focused on the role of accessible information in improving services to citizens.

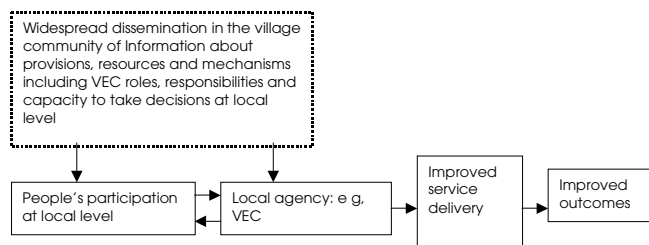
How much do people know about local agencies and committees, and about the local provisions and processes? Do they know what standards to expect and how to compare those standards with what is currently available? How aware are they of the current status of service delivery? How inclined are they to initiate local collective action to improve these outcomes?

In this paper we report findings from a survey of parents, teachers and members of village education committees, aimed at answering some of these questions. In particular, we asked them about what they know about provisions for primary schools in their village; about the processes for local participation; about what they know and expect of education services in terms of the actual learning achievement of their children; and about their participation in the process of service delivery.

**Figure 1: Local Mechanism for Service Delivery**



**Figure 2: Local Mechanisms for Service Delivery and the Role of Information**



This survey was carried out in one district – Jaunpur – in Uttar Pradesh (UP), during the early months of 2005. The VECs exist in every village in Uttar Pradesh. They consist of the elected head of village government (the gram pradhan), the head teacher of the government school, and three parents of students enrolled in government schools in the village.<sup>1</sup> In the current government flagship programme on elementary education (SSA) (and before that, in its predecessor, the district primary education programme (DPEP)), the VECs have been given a prominent role in improving school functioning and school governance through community participation and decentralised decision-making.

To preview the main findings of the survey – a large fraction of children (in the age group six to 14) in the surveyed villages could not read simple texts or do basic arithmetic operations and were unable to write a simple dictated sentence correctly. However, parents, teachers and the VEC members seem not to be fully aware of the scale of the problem. Neither had they given much thought to the role of local committees, and/or to the possibility of local participation in improving outcomes. Many parents do not know that a VEC exists, sometimes even when they are supposed to be members of it. The VEC members are unaware of the key roles they have been assigned in the educational system. Public participation in improving education is negligible, and people's ranking of education on a list of village priorities is low.

To stimulate an active participation of village people in improving education, direct steps should be taken. It cannot be presumed that the mere presence of a VEC can create a basis for community-based activism that would substantially transform the educational scenario in these villages. It is therefore, natural to ask whether some form of the village-based campaign, that informs people about the provisions, resources and the existence of the VEC and the roles it might play, can stimulate participation and activism to the point where it begins to affect the state of education in the village.

In this paper we also report on a project that implements information, advocacy and public action campaigns in the selected villages. Using an experimental design, we seek to evaluate the impact of these campaigns on local participation to improve

school functioning and to strengthen learning outcomes of the children. We describe the interventions that have been launched, the early lessons from this experience, and the impact evaluation study that is currently underway.<sup>2</sup>

Section I of the paper briefly describes the survey that was undertaken. Section II reports the survey findings on what people know, what they expect, and how they participate in local service delivery. Section III describes the interventions that are currently underway to provide information and advocate public action to improve learning achievement of children. This section also outlines plans for evaluating these interventions. Section IV offers concluding thoughts.

## I The Survey

A survey of parents, teachers, VECs, and children was undertaken in the rural district of Jaunpur in the eastern part of the state, during March-April 2005.<sup>3</sup> The sample was selected as follows: First, from a total of 22 rural blocks in the district of Jaunpur, four blocks were randomly selected (Maharajganj, Shahganj, Sikrara, and Ramnagar). Second, 280 villages (out of 313 villages in these four blocks), were randomly selected.

In each of the 280 villages ten randomly selected households were surveyed about the status of education services, parents' perceptions about children's learning achievement, and the role for public action for improving outcomes. All headmasters of government primary schools, and all VEC members in these villages were also surveyed. Data on school resources and functioning were also collected through direct observation of the interviewing teams. The final sample consists of 2,800 household interviews, 316 school interviews and observations, and 1,029 VEC member interviews from the 280 villages.<sup>4</sup>

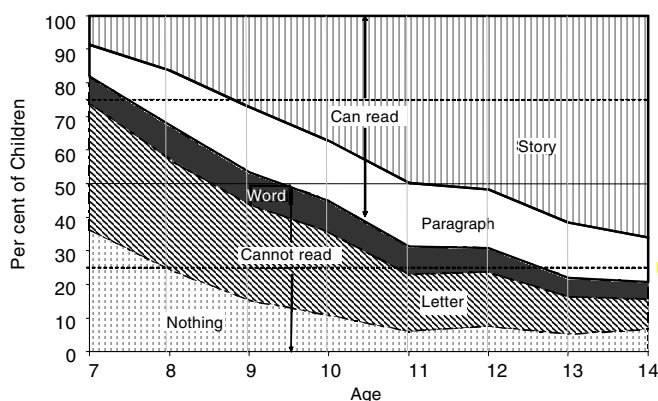
Data on children's learning levels were collected through a testing tool developed by Pratham. All children between the ages of seven and 14 were tested from 30 randomly selected households in each village (including the 10 households from which the other information mentioned above was collected). The final sample consists of 17,608 children from these 280 villages.

## II Findings of the Survey

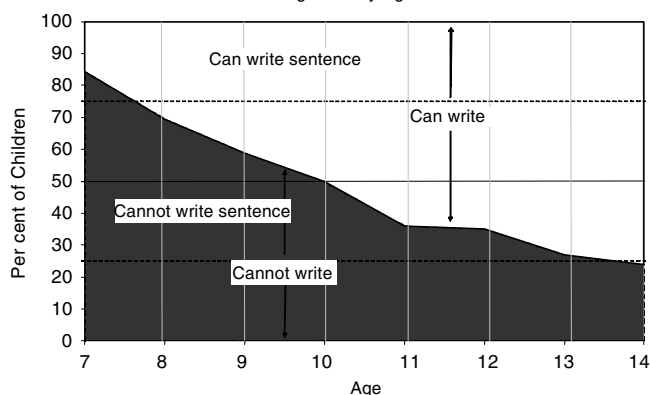
The survey provides new data on both actual outcomes of education service delivery as well as perceptions. In this section, we first describe children's basic learning outcomes, and their contrast with the stated perceptions about children's learning by parents, teachers and VEC members. The evidence suggests gaps between perceptions of adults and the actual learning outcomes of children. Furthermore, through responses to a range of questions, parents show that they have not paid much attention to the role of the public participation or collective action in improving outcomes. Quite strikingly, the vast majority are completely unaware of even the existence of a VEC, let alone being informed about its roles and responsibilities.

*Actual levels of learning:* Children's basic learning level was assessed using a rapid assessment instrument developed by Pratham. Children were asked to do a set of tasks at increasing and progressive levels of difficulty and were categorised at the

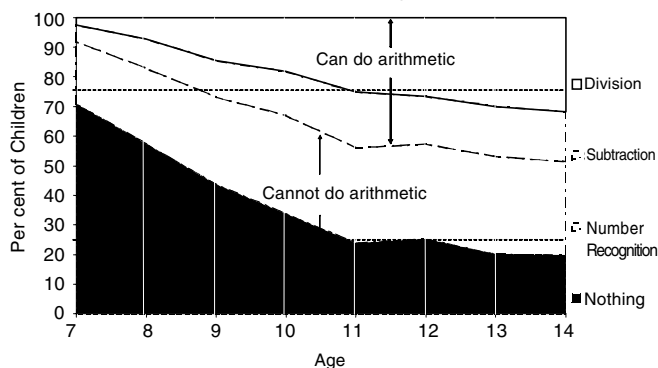
**Figure 3**  
Read Level by Age



**Figure 4**  
Writing Level by Age



**Figure 5**  
Maths Level by Age



highest level at which they perform. Table 1 describes the different levels in the assessment tool.

Figures 3, 4 and 5 show the actual learning levels of children. The reading graph clearly shows how the reading levels of children vary by age (Figure 3). For example, in Jaunpur, close to 70 per cent of children at the age of eight cannot read easy paragraphs (at standard 1 level), this number is about 50 per cent by age 10. But even at 12 years of age, there are 30 per cent of children who cannot read sentences. The story is similar for maths and writings (Figures 4 and 5).

There are significant differences in learning outcomes by the type of school especially in the lower grades. Figure 4 suggests

that close to 60 per cent of children in standard two and five in government schools in Jaunpur cannot read paragraphs or stories. The corresponding figure in the private schools is much lower at 30 per cent. Differences between private school and government school basic learning outcomes continue in higher grades, but the gap is narrower for children in standards six to eight.

The visible differences in learning outcomes in government schools and private schools are generated by a set of interlinked factors that are more difficult to observe. Children who attend private schools are likely to be systematically different from those that are in government schools, both in terms of income and family education background.

Two important points need to be emphasised here: first, children in private primary schools perform much better than children in government primary schools. But the level of learning even in private schools is also low. For example, in private schools, only 50 per cent of children in standard two to five are able to read a story at standard two level of difficulty. This low performance is despite parents who are motivated and schools which do not have teachers who do non-teaching work. Second, the even poorer performance of government school children is a cause for serious concern. Ninety three per cent of children, even in a district like Jaunpur are enrolled in school. Now the real challenge is to enable them to learn and to ensure that the school system can guarantee learning.

*Perceived levels of learning:* The survey asked parents, teachers and VEC members, in their opinion, what proportion of children in the village are able to read, write, and do simple arithmetic. For example, different people (villagers, headmaster, VEC members) were shown the subtraction problem and asked "out of 10 children in your village how many children can do this?" Figure 7 illustrates the differences between adults' perceptions and actual performance of children. Surveyed villagers and the

**Table 1: Different Levels in the Assessment Tool**

Level	Level Title	Level Description
<b>Reading levels</b>		
4	Story	Can read one page story (at standard two level of difficulty)
3	Easy paragraph	Can read a set of four simple sentences (at standard one level) But cannot fluently read one page story
2	Words	Can read simple words But cannot read paragraph easily
1	Letters	Can recognise letters But cannot read words
0	Nothing	Cannot even recognise letters
<b>Writing levels</b>		
1	Can write	Can correctly write a simple dictated sentence (four to five words in the sentence).
0	Cannot write	Cannot correctly write a dictated sentence
<b>Maths levels</b>		
3	Division	Can do division numerical problem (three digit by one digit)
2	Subtraction	Can do subtraction numerical problem (two digits with borrowing), but cannot correctly do simple division problems (like those described above)
1	Number recognition	Can recognise numbers (1-100) but cannot do subtraction problems (like that described above)
0	Nothing	Cannot recognise numbers (1-100)

VEC members feel that 60 per cent of children are able to do subtraction problems. The actual situation is that only 40 per cent of children are able to these problems. Interestingly, the opinion of headmasters who are likely to be well-acquainted with children, is not different from other adults. Therefore, most people (parents, teachers and VEC members) have a much more optimistic picture of children's learning levels than is actually the case.<sup>5</sup>

Even going with the adults' responses alone it is clear that local villagers (including the headmaster who is in the school) feel that anywhere from a third to a fourth of all children in the village cannot do simple arithmetic operations that are expected of elementary school age children by the end of standard two. Yet as we will see in a later section, relatively few people in the village are engaged in attempts to improve the situation.

This gap between perception and reality is even starker when parents are asked about the performance of their own children on the given reading, arithmetic and writing tasks. Continuing with the example of arithmetic, Figure 8 shows that close to 40 per cent of parents of children who actually cannot even recognise numbers think that their children are able to do subtraction problems. Only in 30 per cent of the cases, perceptions match reality.

The data suggest that parents of children who are unable to read or do simple arithmetic operations are less aware of what their children are able to do than the parents of better performing students. It is possible that this partly reflects the fact that children of illiterate parents tend to perform worse (for example, because they get no help from their parents) and illiterate parents have a hard time judging what their children have learnt. Un-schooled parents may not know how to judge learning or what is expected of children at each standard in a primary school.

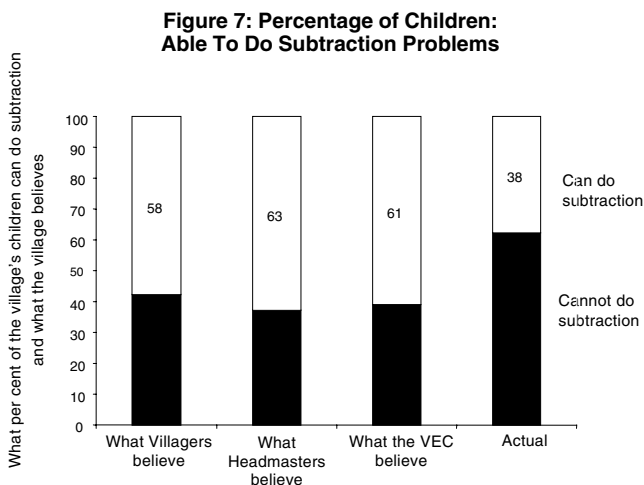
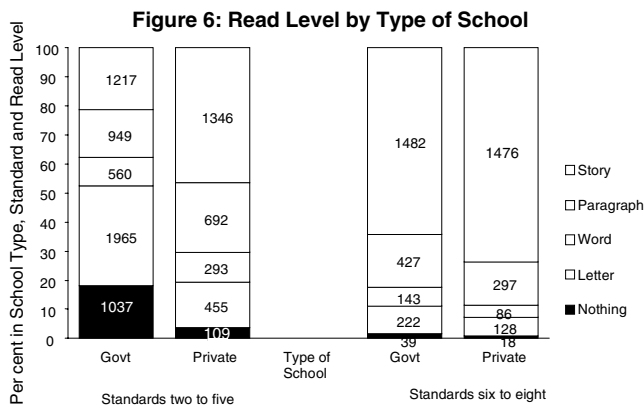
*Participation in school functioning:* The strategy of empowering VECs and encouraging decentralised planning and decision-making assumes local participation in the school related activities. Further, in policy-making circles it is expected that parents are, will be, and ought to be active in the life of their children's school.

One of the direct ways in which parents can participate in their children's education is by ensuring that their children attend school regularly. We asked parents how many days of school had their child missed in the last 14 calendar days (12 working days). Table 2 provides some answers.

Out of the last 12 working days, on average children have attended school on a little over six days. Only one out of 10 children has attended school for at least 10 days in the last two weeks. There is no significant difference between the number of days missed by children in the public and private schools. Regular attendance in school is clearly a problem in rural Jaunpur. For children of elementary school age, this suggests a lack of serious commitment on the part of parents to ensure that children attend regularly.

Among the families surveyed, there are practically no cases of parents contributing funds or their time for any activities in the school or to any activities that were aimed at improving school functioning. Almost all parents interviewed (98 per cent) also report not knowing how much money is provided to their child's school from the government for its maintenance.

*Knowledge among villagers about VECs:* Household respondents were asked whether there was any committee in the



village to deal with issues related to education services. A startling 92 per cent responded that they did not know of any such committee. Only 2 per cent could name actual members of the VEC (Figure 9).

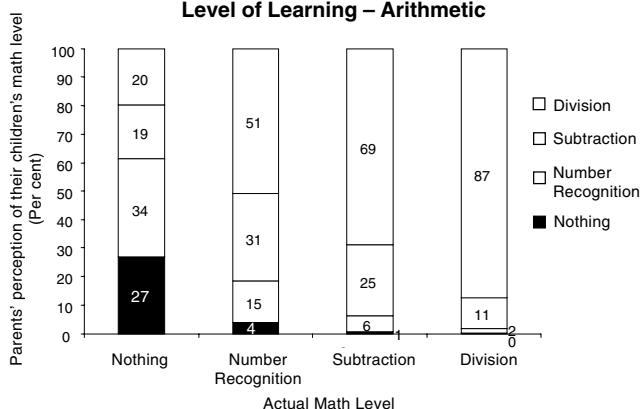
The percentage of people without any knowledge of VECs remains as high as 92 per cent even when we look only at parents whose children are enrolled in the government schools. It is hard to escape the irony of the fact that most parents are not aware of the institutional mechanism designed to encourage their participation.

It is worth noting that ignorance of, and lack of participation in local committees is not limited to the field of primary education alone. Very few households participate in any local governance at all. Only 14.2 per cent of respondents know of a household member having ever attended a gram sabha (village meetings), that were institutionalised as part of a countrywide decentralisation initiative in 1993. The overwhelming reason

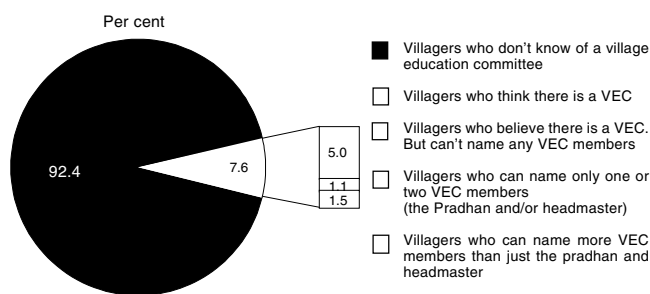
**Table 2: How Often Did Children Who Are Enrolled in School Actually Attend School in the Past Two Weeks?**

	Standards Two to Five		Standards Six to Eight	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Per cent of parents who reported children attended school:				
All days	0.8	0.4	0.3	0.3
At least 10 days	10.6	11.4	7.2	10.9
At least six days	71.8	73.6	62.9	68.5
Average number of days	6.6	6.6	5.7	6.1
Total responses	1496	1322	806	670

**Figure 8: Parents' Perceptions and Children's Actual Level of Learning – Arithmetic**



**Figure 9: Has Anyone Heard of the VEC?**



given by respondents (over 90 per cent) is that they do not know when or where the gram sabha is held.

Of the households who do participate, education seems to be low on their priority list. Of those who have attended any gram sabha, only 5.8 per cent mention education when asked about which issues were covered in the last meeting.<sup>1</sup> So those village members who are active in local governance issues appear to be relatively apathetic towards education as a public issue.

Apathy towards education is not reserved for those who participate in village decision-making. This characterisation can be applied to all segments of the community. When parents were asked what they consider the most pressing issues in the village, education ranks fifth on the list of village problems, with only 13.9 per cent of respondents including it at all, as shown in Table 3.

Although unaware of the VEC per se, households seem to believe that responsibility for education lies at the local level – not with any committee or local group but primarily with parents and with teachers. Table 4 shows the responses of households to the question: “who are the top three people/institutions in the country responsible for ensuring quality of education for children in the village?”

*VEC functioning:* In Uttar Pradesh, the VEC consists of an average of five members: one member is the school headmaster, another is the pradhan (head of the village panchayat) and three are parent members. Table 5 indicates that approximately one quarter of the non-headmaster-members are unaware of their position on the VEC. And of those three out of four who are aware of their membership, roughly two-thirds are unaware of SSA, the programme under which the VECs were constituted. One of the four non-headmaster VEC members is the pradhan.

The remaining three are parent members. Table 5 suggests that on average, less than one parent member per VEC knows that money for education comes from SSA.

### III Information and Advocacy Campaigns to Improve Local Participation and Action

#### Questions Raised by Baseline Findings

The baseline findings indicate that there are large gaps in knowledge of the current status of primary education in the village and a general lack of awareness about what can be done to improve matters. Many people do not know about the existence of a local institution like the VEC and therefore are unaware about the possibilities of decision-making at local level through the committee. To the extent they are aware of weaknesses in the delivery systems (e.g., children's low levels of basic learning, irregular attendance in school), their collective involvement in improving the situation is very low. Overall, local participation (at individual or collective level) in the activities to improve school functioning or strengthening learning is negligible.

The baseline findings raise a lot of questions for policy and practice: How can local participation be increased? Can local participation be facilitated through village-based campaigns that inform communities about local provisions, mechanisms and resources that are available for improving the current situation

**Table 3: When Asked What Three Most Pressing Issues in the Village Are, What Do Villagers Respond?**

Issue Rank	Issue	Per Cent of Villagers Who Include Issue			
		As Their First Priority	As Their Second Priority	As Their Third Priority	In the Top Three
1	Roads	19.7	13.6	6.3	39.7
2	Drinking water	15.7	11.9	4.4	32.1
3	Electricity	14.5	11.0	5.0	30.5
4	No problems	22.1	17.3	25.2	22.1*
5	<b>Education</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>13.9</b>
6	Irrigation	4.1	3.6	3.4	11.1
7	Drainage	4.6	4.3	0.3	9.2
8	Poverty/unemployment	3.3	2.2	1.5	6.9
9	Other	1.3	1.3	3.8	6.3
10	Agricultural problems	2.3	1.8	1.2	5.4
11	Toilet/sanitation	1.9	1.8	1.2	4.8
12	Housing	1.0	1.2	0.9	3.1

\* “No village problems” in the “Top Three” column should be interpreted as “no problems in the village”.

**Table 4: When Asked Who are the Top Three People/Institutions Responsible for Ensuring Quality Education for the Children of the Village, What Do Villagers Respond?**

Rank	Persons/Institutions Responsible for Education	The Per Cent of Villagers Who Identify Person/Institution as “Responsible for Education”			
		First	Second	Third	Top Three
1	Parents	75.1	18.3	2.9	96.1
2	Teacher or headmaster	20.9	66.4	5.1	92.3
3	The children themselves	0.9	4.8	35.3	41.0
4	Don't know	7.1	6.1	18.0	30.4
5	Pradhan or panchayat	1.6	2.9	12.4	16.8
6	State government	0.6	0.9	6.5	8.0
7	Other	0.1	0.2	1.4	1.7
8	VEC	0.1	0.2	1.1	1.5
9	Nobody	0.2			0.2

**Figure 10: Interventions**

Intervention 1:	Intervention 2:	Intervention 3:	Intervention 4:
Creating a platform for information dissemination	[1] + creating village report cards on children's learning with local participation	[2] + village volunteer based action on improving reading	No Action

of primary schooling at the village level? Will knowing more about the VECs and their role in helping schools improve, help in increasing local participation and decision-making?

To what extent should we focus on a slightly different angle, namely, making villagers more aware of the inadequacy of what the schools are doing? While the average villager and teacher is broadly aware of the low levels of learning in the schools, as noted above, this is less true of parents of low-performing children. If these parents had a better sense of their children's current status would they become more active in seeking solutions for improvement?

Overall, can information and advocacy make a difference in a setting where there is nominal decentralisation of decision-making but where schools are functioning poorly.

### Looking for Answers

In this section we describe an ongoing study that seeks to address these questions using a randomised experimental design approach. Through an extensive field experimentation during the early months of 2005, Pratham has identified three kinds of campaigns, in ascending order of intensity: each campaign has different components of information dissemination and advocacy embedded in it. Three sets of villages were randomly selected to be "treatment villages" for implementation of these interventions. In a fourth set of villages, nothing was done; these villages served as the "control" group. The three interventions were randomly assigned to 280 villages spread across the four rural blocks are presented in Figure 10.

Relatively speaking, the first campaign or intervention is the most basic one. It seeks to create a platform in the village for information sharing, dissemination and discussions around school education. The actual sources of information are key people of the village community (such as the school teacher, headmaster or the pradhan). Between these key people, they should have all the information that is needed to inform the village community about primary education or, at least, have an access to people in the district who have that information. The platform (or the information dissemination mechanism) is created via a number of small group meetings held in the different neighbourhoods, followed by one village level meeting organised and facilitated by Pratham members, where all key people and members of the village community are present. In these meetings, villagers ask

and receive basic information about provisions, resources, decision-making mechanisms and the role of the VECs in facilitating decisions.

We can describe this first intervention as addressing the actual knowledge gap in the village about primary education. The gap is not only knowledge about provisions, resources and decision-making at the local level, but also about how to share the existing information that is already available.

Through experimentation in the field, Pratham found that the communication of even this simple information requires careful thought and design, if there is to be any reasonable hope of such information actually being retained and used by people when deciding what actions to be taken. Accumulated experiences from the villages during the pilot phase demonstrated that it was quite difficult to get people to agree to participate in the village meetings around education without an adequate preparation. To ensure reasonable attendance in a village level meeting, smaller meetings and discussions in small groups had to be carried out hamlet-by-hamlet prior to the big village level meeting. Although we considered a simpler approach to information dissemination – simply putting-up posters in the village – we rejected this idea because we found during field tests that few paid attention to these posters. Often, the posters had disappeared within a couple of days. High illiteracy also meant that many people were unable to read what was written. We also discarded any model of "outsiders" coming and giving speeches to "inform" the villagers, because it appeared that few would likely retain this information for any reasonable period of time, or actually use it to change their actions. In fact, if agents from outside the village too took an active role in the village meetings, the tone of the meetings invariably moved to urging outside engagement in the village and expressions of reliance on outside agents to "improve the village".

Faced with this situation, Pratham teams worked only to be facilitators of internal village discussion. In this spirit, the intervention teams approached individuals in the village by raising questions, rather than providing facts – do you know about the status of education in your village? Do you think children are learning? What issues about education concern you the most? Will you come to a village-wide meeting to get more information about the status of education in your village from other people in your village? Every effort was made to have the gram pradhan and school headteacher attend the village meeting. At the meeting, the intervention teams tried to facilitate discussion in such a way that it was the local key actors of the village (the gram pradhan and school teachers) that provided both general information about the provisions and resources available at the village level as well as village-specific information on the existence of VECs, its membership, what resources it receives, and the different roles it can play.

This field experience underscores the conclusions of new research on the psychological underpinnings of social communication, which indicates that getting information to have the desired impact on actual outcomes is a particularly difficult mechanism design problem.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 5: Are VEC Members Aware of the Institutions of Education?**

	Per Cent of VEC Members Who					
	Know They Are Members of VEC		Are Aware of the Existence of the SSA*		Are Aware of SSA Funds Provided to the Schools*	
	Know	Don't Know	Aware	Not Aware	Aware	Not Aware
Headmasters	95.8	4.2	99.5	0.5	95.8	4.2
Other VEC members	77.3	22.7	32.4	67.6	26.4	73.6

\* Of those who are aware of their position on the VEC.

The second intervention had an additional component focused on children's learning outcomes. The baseline survey clearly indicated that a large percentage of children currently enrolled in school were unable to read simple text or do basic arithmetic operations. The poor levels of learning implied that children could "graduate" from the primary school virtually illiterate. The awareness of the depth and scale of this "learning crisis" varied across different constituents of the village community and local collective action to improve the situation was lacking.

The second intervention was developed in response to two of the important findings of the baseline survey and in reaction to observations of people's discussions in village meetings in the pilot phase:

(1) The baseline survey indicated that parents of children who were poor academic performers were less aware of their own children's level of learning.

(2) During field experimentation we found that people rarely focused on the issue of children's learning. The most frequently raised issue and the issue around which there was the most animated discussion was scholarships. The Uttar Pradesh government has a scholarship programme intended to provide cash assistance to students from "backward" castes. Parents complained that they were not getting these scholarships, whilst teachers responded that many were not getting it because they were not satisfying other eligibility criteria of having a child of school age regularly attending school. Teachers complained that parents inappropriately enrol under-age children, who cannot and do not attend school, just to lay claim to the scholarships. The second issue that attracted attention was the new government mid-day meal programme. Actual learning levels attracted the least attention, and the facilitators had a difficult time steering the conversation away from scholarships and school meals to the broader issue of learning.

In the second intervention, hamlet-by-hamlet, the intervention team invited local inhabitants to participate in collecting information on the enrolment and learning status of children in their hamlet. The simple assessment tasks were demonstrated by the intervention team to people in each hamlet and people were encouraged to try their hand at testing their own children as well

as other children in their neighbourhood. Local participants in each hamlet who helped create their portion of the "village report card" were encouraged to speak at the village meetings and present their findings and experiences. We actively explored the question of whether actual one-on-one interactions through tasks with children that you know, can help to mobilise communities to take action for improving these learning outcomes. Will the local participation in gathering information actually lead to action?

Our experiences in the villages during the pilot phase suggested that introducing assessment tools in the community generated a healthy level of curiosity among villagers. Typically this is what happened: the intervention team initiated a general discussion on education with people in a hamlet. As the discussion progressed, a few of the team members stepped aside and began asking children who had collected around the meeting to read. Quickly, the attention of the adults shifted to the children and to their attempts to read. Mothers would begin to push forward their children to see if they could read; when children couldn't read, a palpable sense of collective agitation and concern would grow, and questions would begin to surface. At this point, the intervention team would invite literate and interested adults to participate in interacting with children to see for themselves who could read or do arithmetic and where children were getting stuck. Immediately, debates about other general issues like scholarships or midday meals evaporated and a more focused discussion around learning outcomes ensued. It was almost as if specific and meaningful activity was needed at the time of the discussion to focus attention on issues that were important but had not come to fore earlier.

Our experiments in designing interventions 1 and 2 all faced the issue of people turning around and asking the "outsiders" what they should do to improve education outcomes. In its own programmes elsewhere, Pratham has been using an accelerated reading technique, which is simple to learn and implement. Using this technique, literate adults can be trained to facilitate children to read. In a period of two-three months, working an hour or two a day, children can begin to read simple text fluently.

The third, and the most intensive intervention, therefore includes the introduction of this technique to the village, and

**Table 6: Summary of Intervention Design**

	Intervention 1: Creating a platform for information dissemination	Intervention 2: [1] + creating village report cards on children's learning with local participation	Intervention 3: [2] + village volunteer based action on improving reading
Information related issues	Platform for discussion and information sharing of available general and village specific information on education provisions, resources and VECs	Same as [1] + generation of local information with local participation	Same as [2] + demonstration and training to village volunteers who want to take action to improve reading outcomes
Mode of information transmission	Facilitation of hamlet-level small group meetings and one village-level large group meeting to discuss education issues and where local agents can share information with the village	Same as [1] + interaction of local people with children to assess their reading, writing and arithmetic levels and discussion of these findings in small group and big group meetings	Same as [2] + demonstrations by intervention team of how accelerated learning can take place via "demo classes", training sessions and on-going monitoring of volunteer based classes. Encouragement of village community to see progress of children in these classes
Advocacy elements	Campaign urging people to come together as a village to discuss problems in education and explore what they can do about it	Use of the assessment exercise "village report cards" on learning to involve people, mobilise people; encouraging focus on learning outcomes	Invitation to volunteers to make their village a "reading village"
Immediate goal	Local participation in education services		Direct improvement in learning outcomes

training of local volunteers. It involves much more engagement by both the outside facilitators and the local people.

Table 6 interprets and summarises these interventions as “information campaigns”. Each intervention simultaneously addresses specific information gaps in the village, and, as an advocacy campaign, urges people to come together as a group to discuss education and ways to improve it through collective action.

### *Implementation of Interventions and Plans for Evaluation*

The three interventions were simultaneously launched on September 5, 2005. The interventions were separately implemented in 65 randomly selected villages each, with the remaining 85 villages being the “controls” where no campaigns took place. There were 10 intervention teams, consisting of three people each, and two additional teams for the training of local volunteers under the third intervention. The implementation was completed towards the end of March 2006.

Follow-up surveys were conducted from April to June 2006 to collect information on the same basic variables as the baseline survey – child learning, school functioning (funds available, facilities available, teacher performance), and local participation (VEC activity, parent engagement). New data will also be collected to examine more carefully the mechanisms of change that might be brought about by the interventions.

By comparing changes within “treated” villages against changes within “control” villages before and after the interventions were implemented, we plan to evaluate how the interventions impact local participation and outcomes. Specifically, we hope to investigate answers to questions like the following:

- Is there a greater awareness about provisions, resources and local decision-making mechanisms such as VECs in the “treatment” villages?
- Is there an increase in participation in VECs in the “treatment villages” as compared to the control villages?
- Are VECs becoming more active? If so, where? What kinds of decisions and actions are VECs beginning to take as they become active? Are there any significant differences across the three kinds of “treatment” villages?
- What are the indirect channels of change in incentives and institutions? Does the gram pradhan/VEC take more interest in schools (meeting with teachers, visiting schools, etc)? Does the VEC become more active (hiring ‘shiksha mitras’, organising volunteers)? Do other forms of community engagement in and contributions to education develop?
- Are learning outcomes changing? Are more children able to read, write, and do arithmetic in villages that received an intervention? What are the immediate channels through which learning outcomes might have changed (more regular child attendance, increase in child enrolment into schools, greater teacher attendance, hiring of additional teachers in schools, greater resource availability in schools, volunteers working with schools and children, parents paying greater attention to their children’s learning)?

### **Conclusion**

Increasing or widening faith in the effectiveness of local participation in improving development outcomes has led policy-makers to create new institutions and mechanisms to facilitate such participation. However, there is little evidence

on whether these new institutions indeed have an impact, or whether additional enabling measures might be required to “activate” them. The study described here aims to fill this gap. In translating policy into practice, the role of evidence and systematic preparatory ground work is critical. The broad reform agenda in education and in local self-government needs more evidence for better policy design and more effective implementation. [\[37\]](#)

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### **Notes**

[This paper reports first stage results from a collaborative study. The collaboration is between Pratham Mumbai Education Initiative (Pratham), Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at MIT (J-PAL), and the World Bank. We would especially like to thank Sanjib Kundu, Mukesh Prajapati and the implementation teams. We also thank numerous members from all three institutions for inputs and comments.

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- 1 For villages with multiple schools, the headmaster on the VEC is he or she with the most seniority. The VECs have existed in UP for some time before 2000, and there was an extensive training of their members under an earlier government initiative for local participation in education services – the district primary education programme (DPEP).
- 2 This study is being undertaken collaboratively by researchers from three institutions: Pratham India Education Initiative (Pratham), the Poverty Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the World Bank.
- 3 Jaunpur served as an appropriate location for the intervention and accompanying research because: (1) its reading level and other learning indicators were close to the state average, and (2) it was relatively untouched by other Pratham programmes. The first criterion is important for external validity: if the intervention is shown to be successful here, it will likely be successful in other average districts in UP. The second criterion is important for internal validity: launching the programme in a district with no Pratham presence allows us to randomly assign a pure control group of villages from which we can compare and obtain a true measure of the impact of our intervention. The survey was designed by the research collaborators from the three institutions mentioned here, is funded by the World Bank, was implemented by Modus Analysis and Information (Mode), and monitored on the ground by Pratham.
- 4 In obtaining averages for the survey as a whole, all responses and results are weighted by their relevant population.
- 5 In the case of basic reading, perceptions are also higher than reality but the gap is smaller.
- 6 This number increases to 25 per cent when asked specifically about whether education was discussed.
- 7 Lupia (2003) provides a framework to assess how particular modes of information transmission are likely to succeed or fail in getting people to retain and actually use information to achieve specific objectives. More details can be obtained from Lupia, Arthur, (2003). ‘Necessary Conditions for Improving Civic Competence’, mimeo, University of Michigan, <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~lupia/necessary.pdf>.

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