SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Policy Brief:

Community Engagement for Improving Quality of Education in the Developing World

By Jeremy Monk
Social Connectedness Fellow 2017
Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness
www.socialconnectedness.org
July 2017

The international education development agenda has shifted its primary focus since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in 2015. While important steps have been taken in the past two decades to increase primary and secondary enrollment, namely through the Millennium Development Goal 2, there is still significant room for improvement in regards to both access and quality of education, especially in the developing world. SDG 4, "to ensure inclusive and quality education for all", has targeted improving school infrastructure, promoting free and equitable primary and secondary schooling, increasing the supply of qualified teachers and encouraging inclusivity (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute Statistics [UNESCO UIS], 2015). This goal focuses on learning outcomes and equity all while continuing to increase accessibility to education. While these targets are vital for the enhancement of education worldwide, the SDG does not specifically touch on one important factor: improving and increasing community engagement within schools. Increasing community engagement and utilizing social capital has the opportunity to lead to truly sustainable, local and empowering education development.

Current Problems

Even after the tremendous efforts of the past 15 years, there continues to be 57 million children out of school in the developing world. (United Nations, n.d.). Although the SDG does not specifically target enrollment, it "clearly recognizes that this gap must be closed" (United Nations Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC], 2016, p. 7). The current SDG targets more than simply enrollment, it targets improving learning outcomes and the overall quality of education. The first SDG progress report states that "measuring learning achievement, starting in the early grades, will help to identify where schools are failing to meet their commitments to children and to formulate appropriate remedial action" (ECOSOC, 2016, p.7). Currently, too many schools are failing to meet proper educational outcomes. For example, between 40 percent and 90 percent of primary school children failed to meet minimum reading proficiency in 10 African countries. The same percentage of children failed to achieve minimum proficiency in mathematics in nine of those countries. These statistics are just a few that represent the large task at hand for the SDG and its quality of education goals.

Although there is no single indicator to measure quality of education, the Education for All Global Monitoring Report introduced a framework to better understand factors that contribute to improving education quality (see Figure 1). Increasing enrollment, decreasing truancy and improving quality of education are closely correlated. Whether parents send their children to school is dependent on the quality of teaching and learning, and the better quality of education the more likely students will want to stay in school and regularly attend class (UNESCO, 2004). Thus, to achieve the targets of the SDG, progress must be made in both areas.

Investing in school infrastructure, better teachers and inclusivity will have a positive impact on the accessibility and quality of education worldwide. However, in the current international education development agenda, community engagement and local knowledge has been pushed aside for grander and more centralized options. Using the extensive knowledge of social capital and its roots in education, as well as the more contemporary history of community engagement and schooling in the developing world, this brief recommends that the international community, national and local governments, and non-governmental organizations promote community engagement in the administration, goals and day-to-day life of primary and secondary schools.
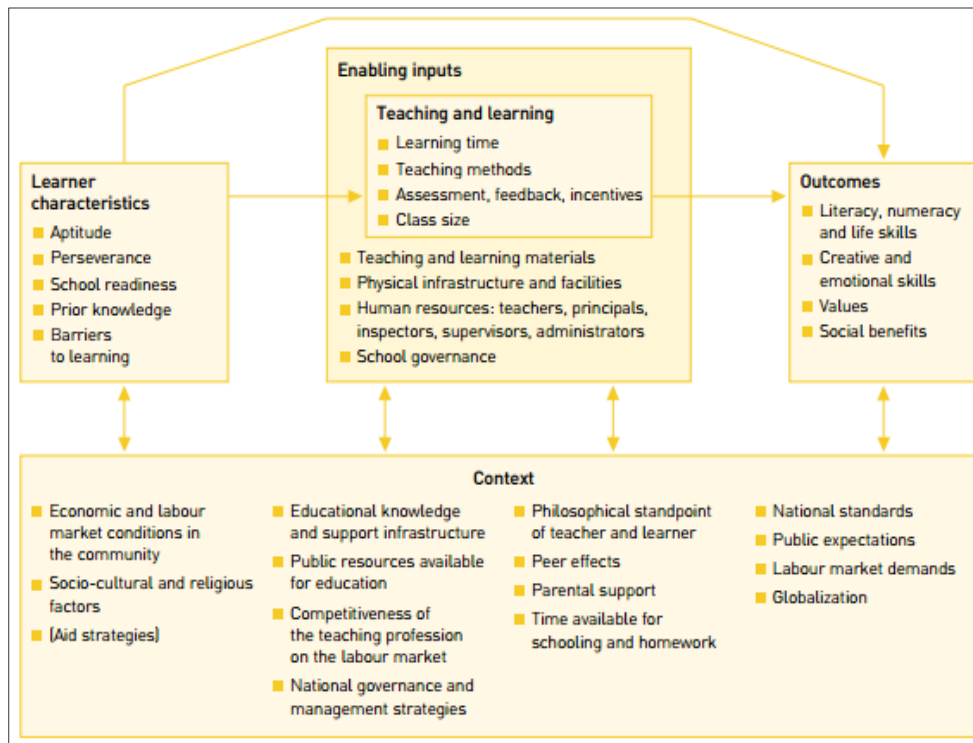
Figure 1: Framework for understanding education quality (UNESCO, 2004, p. 36)

Social Capital and Schooling: A Brief History

The term social capital has garnered attention in economics and development studies since the 1990s. Robert Putnam's work on social capital, defined briefly as social networks that positively impact productivity and community wellbeing through civic engagement, has been at the root of its recent use (see Putnam, 2000). Social capital as a tool for development does not have one singular use or application. In terms of education and formal schooling, social capital as community engagement has had a distinguished history. The term social capital first derived from a 1916 paper urging the importance of community engagement to increase the effectiveness of Virginia's rural schools (see Hannifan, 1916). Social capital and its relation to schooling remerged in the late 1980s when sociologist James Coleman published "Social capital in the creation of human capital", an examination of the successes of Catholic schools compared to public schools. Coleman hypothesized that the success of Catholic schools was not due to the characteristics of individuals, but due to social connections of the community and its manifestation within the school (Coleman, 1988).

As social capital emerged in the study of economic development, its application to education development grew as well (see Grootaert, 1998; Woolcock, 2000). Mark Bray (2003) states that "financial and other limitations of government gained wider recognition, while advocacy of community participation again became stronger." by the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) (p. 32). As the international education development agenda took on greater commitments following WCFEA, community engagement has been included, but often as a secondary goal and with a lack of proper examination.

Experimenting with Community Engagement and Schooling in the Developing World

Examining the effects of community engagement in schools in the developing world has been a difficult task. Experiments have explored numerous types of engagement, and have demonstrated both positive and negative outcomes. For instance, in an experiment on school attendance and parent-teacher associations (PTA) in Burkina Faso, one extra PTA attendance per household increased the probability of school attendance by 3.5 percent (Grootaert, Oh & Swamy, 2002). In Pakistan, a case-study of three schools for girls demonstrated that when communities and parents were made true stakeholders, through school infrastructure, teacher hiring, security and by building partnerships, enrollment and achievement improved (Razzaq, 2015). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded Educational Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP) has been a leader in promoting and aiding non-governmental and community organizations in implementing community engagement programs. According to the USAID report "First principles: Community engagement in education Programs", "community involvement in school management has shown to increase accountability for both learning outcomes and school resources; involvement in curriculum development, which ensures the cultural relevance of subject content and teaching styles, leads to a wider embrace of the educational process" (Kintz & American Institutes for Research, 2011, p. 1). While these programs demonstrate the successes of community engagement, there is no conclusive way to properly implement a community-based program.

H. Dean Nielsen (2007), in a comprehensive study of a World Bank (WB) Evaluation Group report on WB funded primary education projects, finds that in the area of school construction and maintenance and teacher attendance, that community engagement projects have been successful (p. 89). However, other micro and country case studies do not demonstrate the same optimism for community engagement (see Bray, 2003; Pryor, 2005). These arguments stem from the make-up of communities, assumptions of social capital, community members' ability and desire to get involved and hegemonic outside actors. Promoting and implementing community engagement schemes in schools is not an absolute solution for issues concerning school enrollment and quality. Yet, even those who deem specific community projects to be unsuccessful do acknowledge that community participation, implemented effectively, can have a long-term and sustainable positive impact.

Moving Forward: Properly Understanding and Utilizing Community Engagement

In order to better conceptualize when and how community engagement improves education, more evidence-based studies that compare and contrast communities and how engagement occurs must be undertaken. There is currently limited monitoring on how school-community-parent interactions affect educational outcomes, which has inhibited a change within development paradigms (Kendall, 2007, p. 703). In addition, both Nielsen (2007) and Pryor (2005), who examined cases where community engagement did not lead to improved educational outcomes, believe that examining specific programs and targets, in both micro and macro level studies, is imperative to understanding how community engagement can be implemented. In short, it is evident that engaging communities in schools can have a positive impact, but there needs to be more evidence on how these interactions develop and manifest.

Recommendations: International, National and Local

Engaging communities in schools will take many different forms and has the opportunity to impact numerous educational development objectives. The following recommendations explore improvements on international, national and local scales, as well as micro and macro level suggestions.

International

1. Further research on reasons for success and failure of community engagement programs:

While this brief has explored numerous examples of community engagement in schools, there are still more questions than answers regarding what types of programs succeed, why they succeed and in what setting they succeed. It is important to consider that communities differ, and therefore there will not be one type of engagement program that will work in all cases. Before implementing programs, international organizations, governments and local groups must have more information on the feasibility, cost-benefit and externalities that accompany new community engagement programs.

2. Using community engagement as a rights-based tool for long term sustainable development:

The Sustainable Development Goals have attempted to incorporate rights-based approaches into their targets for 2030. However, SDG 4's targets do not address a key component of rights-based approaches: the capacity of people to respond to their problems. Local actors and communities must be incorporated into these targets by monitoring and promoting ideas that engage them and allow them to utilize their own resources and knowledge. Without community and rights-based approaches, sustainable and long-term education development will not be possible.

National

3. Promoting community partnerships with governments, not decentralization:

The literature on community engagement in schools reflects the ideals of decentralization proposed by the World Bank beginning in the 1990s. Community engagement was understood to replace national and local governments which were ineffective, especially in rural regions of the developing world. However, the changing of guard has not led to outright success. Instead of focusing on decentralization, governments must look to grow partnerships with communities, community groups and non-governmental organizations. Both parties may find that the expertise of the other party to be a missing link towards success. For example, in the case of successful school construction and maintenance, financing and transportation of materials may be best handled by governments, while construction, location and design of schools may be best suited for communities. These partnerships, and the communication required for them to succeed, is not a simple task. But, the emphasis on partnering not decentralizing may create momentum for successful and efficient engagement programs.

4. Engaging communities for specific goals, not complete system management:

A common issue for community engagement initiatives that fail is that the community does not have the capacity to administer such a complex system like a school, or group of schools. Expecting communities to address all management aspects of schooling is not feasible. Large management roles undertaken by communities may lead to similar issues that plague school governance in the developing world, including mismanagement of funds, elites taking over power, ethnic or religious fighting, etc…. Therefore, in similar fashion to the above recommendation, partnerships between communities, governments, and organizations will aide in ensuring that all parties are responsible for, and included in, specific goals best suited to their needs and abilities.

Local

5. Conduct local assessments of situations, attitudes and opportunities concerning education:

In order to best choose and implement engagement programs, communities and organizations must be aware of where the community stands on education and school issues. An assessment of the situation (condition of schools, teachers, inhibitors of school enrollment and success) and the attitudes of the community (what do they think must be improved, how important is schooling, how can they get involved) can help find what community engagement opportunities are possible. Without this assessment, engagement initiatives may be undertaken that do not reflect local capacity and realities. For example, if a community has a low rate of girls' enrollment and a high rate of truancy, there may be numerous community projects that, on the surface, could remedy the situation. However, depending on the situation and the attitudes of the community, there may be only one project that can make a large difference (enrollment campaign, transportation and safety, female teachers or new bathrooms).

6. Utilize local people and their skills within the school environment:

Communities and organizations must be open to utilizing people from the community within the school in different capacities. There are numerous ways to increase enrollment and improve the quality of schooling, and some may be as simple as engaging one local actor. Examples include school fundraising and campaigns, extra-curricular and athletic programs, learning activities related to local businesses and transportation and safety initiatives.

7. Creating school-centered communities and incorporating other areas for community engagement:

Schools are a deeply community-oriented and inter-generational space. While schools focus on children, parents and other community members are also rooted in the operations and welfare of the school. As a place that affects many people, schools are a perfect place for communities to meet, discuss and engage. As a focal contact point in communities, especially more rural communities, schools have the opportunity to include other services, for both children and adults. Schools can be a place of holistic development through social services, including education, health, and recreation. As more services are linked to the school, community engagement and ownership will increase, leading to more local and sustainable development.

References

Bray, M. (2003). Community initiatives in education: Goals, dimensions and linkages with governments. *Compare*, *33*(1), 31-45.

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *The American Journal of Sociology*, *94*, 95-120.

Grootaert, C. (1998, April). *World Bank Social Capital Initiative: Vol. 3. Social capital: The missing link?* Retrieved from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTSOCIALCAPITAL/Resources/Social-Capital-Initiative-Working-Paper-Series/SCI-WPS-03.pdf

Grootaert, C., Oh, G.-T., & Swamy, A. (2002). Social capital, education and credit markets: Empirical evidence from Burkina Faso. In J. Isham, T. Kelly, & S. Ramaswamy (Eds.), *Social capital and economic development: Well-being in developing countries* (pp. 85-103). Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

Hanifan, L. J. (1916). The rural school community center. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *67*, 130-138.

Kendall, N. (2007). Parental and community participation in improving educational quality in Africa: Current practices and future possibilities. *International Review of Education*, *53*(5/6), 701-708.

Kintz, G., & American Institutes for Research. (2011, July). *Educational Quality Improvement Program 1: First principles: Community engagement in education programs*. Retrieved from http://www.equip123.net/docs/E1-FP_CommEng_Comp_Web.pdf

Nielsen, H. D. (2007). Empowering communities for improved educational outcomes: Some evaluation findings from the World Bank. *Prospects*, *37*(1), 81-93.

Pryor, J. (2005). Can community participation mobilise social capital for improvement of rural schooling?: A case study from Ghana. *Compare*, *35*(2), 193-203.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simone & Shuster.

Razzaq, J. (2015, December). *The 2015 Echidna Global Scholars Policy Brief: Community-supported models for girls' education in diverse contexts in Pakistan: Key issues for policy and practice*. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/community_supported_models_for_girls_education_in_pakistan_razzaq.pdf

United Nations. (n.d.). *Quality education: Why it matters*. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ENGLISH_Why_it_Matters_Goal_4_QualityEducation.pdf

United Nations Economic and Social Council. (2016, June). *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General*. Retrieved from https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2016/secretary-general-sdg-report-2016--EN.pdf

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2004). *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Education for all: The quality imperative*. Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001373/137333e.pdf

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics. (2015, October). *Thematic indicators to monitor the education 2030 agenda: Thematic advisory group proposal*. Retrieved from http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/43-indicators-to-monitor-education2030.pdf

Woolcock, M. (2000). Managing risk and opportunity in developing countries: The role of social capital. In G. Ranis (Ed.), *The dimensions of development* (pp. 197-212). New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies.