Community schools and Education For All

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This article[1] stresses the continuing role for community schools within a multifaceted education delivery system. In suggesting a place for community schools within a diversified system of education provision to meet Education for All (EFA) goals, it highlights key dilemmas relating to the definition of communities; managerial and financial implications; decentralisation; sustainability; and transition into government systems.

Introduction

Many communities in Sub-Saharan Africa have traditionally provided education in a variety of ways, in particular by offering assistance and contributions for school construction and maintenance. Confronted with the deterioration, or absence, of public education, more communities are increasingly active in their children's schooling. Not surprisingly, a parallel system of community schools has developed that supplies approximately 10 per cent of school places in many countries.

The differences from the past decade lie in the number of schools established and run by local communities, and the involvement of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donor and funding agencies in promoting community schools. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) alone, working through NGOs such as Save the Children, Christian Action Research and Education (CARE) and World Education, supports more than 5,000 community-managed schools in Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Malawi, Mali, South Sudan, Uganda and Zambia (Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder, 2002). Community schools, with their flexibility in programming, have offered a means to meet EFA goals, improve student achievement, and reach out to remote and disadvantaged populations, while keeping costs low.

In contrast with the traditional, public school model, community schools are designed to meet the educational needs of students using curricula, language and materials that are familiar to them in their surroundings. They are often planned and run with ownership and direction from the communities in which the children live. Moreover, they are seen to be a low-cost means of ensuring access to education for children who would not otherwise have the opportunity.

While some of the benefits of these community schools are undeniable, there is also the criticism that benefits are often based on little concrete evidence, and are reported by those who have a vested interest in community schools. Critics point out that the sparse literature on community schools in Africa tends to be repetitive and highly descriptive, with endless accounts of how this school or that project was a great success, with little or no sustained critique of practice.

Whether they are spontaneous, community-established (such as the Harambee Schools in Kenya) or international agency-supported community schools (either intended to integrate ultimately into the state system or operate as an alternative to the state system), they offer an environment where teachers, students, parents and other community stakeholders see themselves as part of a community and deal with issues of learning, diversity, governance, and community building. In general, they have tended to serve children *in primary school* (often limited to grades 1–4) in remote rural areas. In most cases the community is responsible for school construction and maintenance and is involved in school management and governance; identifying and recruiting teachers locally; and promoting the adoption of limited, more focused curricula delivered through child-centered, activity-based approaches that are locally relevant in terms of language and content.

The value of community schools

Across Africa there is ample evidence that community schools increase access to education, in particular for girls and other marginalised groups; are more relevant to local development needs and conditions; are more cost-effective in providing comparable if not better instructional services for less money than public schools; and, have positive outcomes in terms of increased student achievement, greater teacher accountability and improved governance.

Despite enormous challenges and variability in implementation and impact, a review of the community school experience indicates the following.

1 The costs of primary education can be drastically reduced without significantly reducing quality.

2 Any community can provide financial and human resources to deliver relevant education for its children.

3 Community participation is fundamental to the success of schools.

4 Community-based schooling and other complementary approaches have been successfully organised because they rely on several actors not limited to the national system of education – communities, local and international NGOs, and other providers of external assistance. To take advantage of these

experiences, government policy needs to shift away from a single-supply model to a more pluralistic approach based on multiple models and strategies, drawing on resources, capacities and alternatives with proven efficacy (DeStefano et al., 2007).

Some key issues

Some key issues identified in the review of experiences in community-based schooling include: defining communities in the context of community schools; achieving access, quality and gender equity; establishing viable partnerships among key stakeholders; managing for sustainability; building indigenous networks for participatory research and advocacy; and transitioning to government systems.

Defining communities in the context of community schools

Community participation in education is highly complex, both conceptually and in practical terms, which behoves us to reflect more critically on the nature of participation, and how we define 'community'. The degree of participation can vary between communities – as well as between different members within a community – as they are complex and culturally diverse entities not always bound by common interests, concerns and goals.

While 'community' has a vast number of definitions, it commonly suggests that membership or exclusion is based on geography, ethnicity, gender and so on, as well as on overlapping networks of relationships, commitment and generalised reciprocity, shared values and practices, collective goods, and duration (Erickson, 1997). Yet, there are many sites where issues of membership, shared values, relationships, mutual commitment, duration, apply weakly, if at all. In such instances, token participation based on a consultative process where participants are informed of decisions, and are expected to accept decisions that have already been made, passes for authentic participation. Or school management committees may mirror existing social divisions, with women either not attending meetings or remaining silent when they do (Rose, 2003). This is not to say that community participation in education provision, management and decision-making should not be promoted, but rather, to note that it is a complex tool that can be manipulated in multiple ways to varying effect and it is necessary to develop strategies to identify and meaningfully involve different constituencies, especially those that are likely to be marginalised.

Achieving access, quality and gender equity

If community schools are to realise their potential they must improve access, quality and gender equity. A focus on 'quality outcomes' addresses all three goals. In this regard, successful programmes need to:

- Reduce distance between home and school
- Draw on and develop local capacities, including recruiting teachers familiar with the local environment at lower cost (with lower qualifications) and encouraging the recruitment of local female teachers
- Engage families in their children's education and connect schools and communities

A school teacher in India

- Improve academic performance by fostering students' health
- Teach a core curriculum that addresses local needs and is aligned with the national curriculum so students can matriculate to public schools
- Provide relevant capacity building for parents, community stakeholders, educators and administrators
- Pay special attention to the needs of girls, not only in terms of their gaining access to school but also in terms of raising awareness about girls' participation in education, adapting curricula and adjusting school organisation.

Establishing viable partnerships among key stakeholders

Key to the success of both existing and new community schools is the establishment of viable, collaborative partnerships among government, donors, local and international NGOs, and/or religious organisations, and the local communities hosting a school. Such partnerships should not only address finance and governance issues but also legal and regulatory issues that will enable community schools, their teachers and their students to meet standards of accountability and performance and be formally recognised as educational institutions. NGOs can play key roles in facilitating partnerships between government and the local community and in helping to define the roles and responsibilities of each.

Managing for sustainability

Community schools need to be well managed to be sustainable both financially and institutionally. This is a complicated issue,

however, as many stakeholders are involved at the local, national and often international levels each with a different vision of how schools should be financed and managed. Many community stakeholders do not have a 'well-developed understanding of the educational process or what actions on their part might improve that process' (Chapman et al., 2002) and have given little thought to indicators of educational quality. Training for community members and school staff in how to participate effectively in supporting and managing community schools is critical.

Building indigenous networks for participatory research and advocacy

More research on community schools needs to be conducted to develop a better understanding of what these schools are doing and how well they are doing it. Documentation is needed not only on the 'quality and quantity' of community schools but also on legal and regulatory, cost and management issues. Such information is needed not only by donors or NGOs who are interested in establishing community schools but also, more importantly, by communities and governments (local and national) as they have the biggest stake in their success.

To date, most of the research on community schools has been conducted by 'outsiders' for outsiders. As Carneal states (2004) 'It is much more difficult to locate reliable records of actual parent, student, and teacher assessments of community schools, local NGOs' experiences in supporting them, or national government views on their effectiveness'. These stakeholders now have considerable experience with community schools. Indigenous networks, both within and between countries, could engage these local stakeholders in participatory research and advocacy efforts to strengthen the community school movement. The challenge however is to encourage the community to reflect on its own existing and emerging learning needs and practices and to translate this reflection into social change.

The transition to government systems

The strategy of moving community schools over to the larger government system has positive and negative implications. The value of the strategy in terms of sustainability, and of ensuring that governments fulfill their obligations as the primary provider of public education, is obvious.

However, one needs to consider the impact on the quality of the community schools themselves and on the larger system. In many countries, the entire system is seriously deficient, with school infrastructure being inadequate, the most basic teaching materials (pencils, paper, chalk, textbooks) in short supply, and teachers poorly trained, supervised and monitored. As the community schools are drawn into such an environment, the challenge is how to ensure that they retain the operational integrity that accounted for much of their success in the first place.

As community schools are moved to within government systems, continuing to base learning on 'community knowledge' does not have to be in conflict with the standardised syllabus requirements of government schools. It can supplement them. As part of the process it is important that ministries and departments of education and teacher education programmes develop appropriate pedagogies and curricula that enable students to access, record

and learn from and through community funds of knowledge (Power and Waters, 2004). A balance has to exist to ensure that students who go on to government school acquire the content knowledge and appropriate skills to participate in those settings, and are not disadvantaged in their attempt to acquire formal qualifications.

What's next for community schools?

Changes in organisational thinking, which challenge the 'one-best-system hierarchy', emphasise the value of hybrid models of organisation that capture the advantages of centralisation and coordination produced by hierarchy, while harnessing the advantages of more decentralised provision and management of education (Boyd and Crowson, 2002). From this perspective, only by adopting hybrid pluralistic delivery systems can we hope to meet EFA goals and provide access to quality education for the more than 72 million children out of school worldwide.[2] Indeed, a continuing role for community schools and other complementary models becomes even more vital, when one considers that the real challenge of EFA is not simply to provide access for those children not in school but also to create competencies and improve learning achievement.

The ultimate role of community schools is not completely clear. Is it to mainstream learners into the formal system, or to develop an alternative, parallel delivery system? Adopting an 'either/or' position with regard to these questions is not very useful. Clearly, we cannot simply apply a single, uniform school model throughout a country or even, for that matter, throughout a programme. There are times when the schools need to be moved to the 'formal' government system. In these cases we still face the challenge of figuring out how to ensure their 'operational integrity', and that they retain the key features that contributed to their efficacy in the first place.

On the other hand, there are instances where community schools will and should remain outside the formal government system. This may be necessary especially where particular groups (based on gender, ethnicity or age, for example) face multiple barriers to learning (due to time, space, circumstance, conflict and emergencies). In these cases, community schools will need to vary to meet the needs and circumstances of different environments (that is, religious and cultural environments, rural and urban environments, heterogeneous environments). It is clear that there needs to be some re-conceptualising of the notion of community schooling – to cover a new multi-faceted system of diverse and interconnected learning communities, institutions and spaces, which attempts to go beyond the artificial boundaries of formal and non-formal education.

A better understanding of community schools and other complementary programmes, for providing quality basic education for all including underserved populations, may contribute more to meeting EFA goals than another round of large-scale sector investment strategies. Appropriate policies that promote complementary and alternative approaches to providing basic education, together with different capacities – governmental and non-governmental, centralised and decentralised – can and should be mobilised, organised, and reinforced in pursuit of quality education for all.

Endnotes

1 This article is based on a collection of invited papers on community schools and country studies undertaken by Save the Children US as part of an institutional reflection on Save the Children's experience of implementing the community or village school model in Sub-Saharan Africa.
2 South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa account for 24 per cent (17 million) and 45 per cent (33 million), respectively, of all out-of-school children (2008 Global Monitoring Report).

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