Community Participation in Elementary Education and COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Public Schools in Bihar

Sonu Prasad and Anju Helen Bara
Development Studies, Central University of South Bihar, India

Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has affected elementary education adversely and exacerbated the pre-existing challenges. In such a situation, community support has become crucial and it can be ensured through School Education Committee (SEC). An empirical qualitative study was conducted to understand the notion of community in such a situation. Thematic analysis, triangulation, and purposive sampling were used. The study revealed that the community is willing to support but the education system has failed substantially to materialize it. We advocate for immediate interventions to reduce friction in the process of community participation in elementary education.

Keywords
Education, local governance, decentralization, community participation, school management committee, COVID-19

Introduction
An outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost every aspect of human life across the globe. The first case was detected in Wuhan city of China on December 31, 2019 and the first COVID-19 patient was detected on January 30, 2020 in Kerala, India (Jena, 2020). World Health Organization (WHO) declared it as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 and the first death was reported in India on March 12, 2020.

Initially, there was limited knowledge about this highly contagious disease which led to the devastating situation. A nationwide lockdown was imposed to prevent the spread of the virus by the Central Government of India. The Prime Minister of India announced Janta Curfew on March 22, 2020 and subsequently nationwide lockdown was imposed from midnight of March 24, 2020 (Das et al., 2020). It was a sudden shutdown of almost all the services except the essential ones such as medical facilities and grocery supply. After a few months when situations seemed to be under control, the Central Government of India initiated unlocking the day-to-day activities and services in different phases.
The pandemic forced almost all countries across the globe to shut down educational institutions. India was among those countries which had the longest days of school closures. According to UNESCO data, the global average of school closure was nearly 35 weeks and it was 73 weeks (full and partial) as of September 30, 2021 in India (Banerji and Wadhwa, 2021). It had impacted nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries and 94% of students worldwide (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). The impact is on almost all forms of education but it was more visible in elementary education. As per the UNESCO report, about 14 crores of primary and 13 crores of secondary students were affected in India due to the lockdown that led to the shutdown of schools (Jena, 2020). It is likely to have adverse impacts on various aspects of elementary education such as learning outcomes, dropout, and enrollment (ASER, 2021a).

The situation of Bihar¹ is more vulnerable as the pandemic restricted the teachers to teach using face-to-face and chalk-to-talk methods. They relied on digital devices and Internet facilities for online teaching. Unfortunately, the elementary level of students who had access to digital devices for learning was estimated to be insignificant. The students who belong to the disadvantaged group suffered the most as they had very limited resources that can be used for learning at home (Singh, 2022).

The way COVID-19 has emerged, it disrupted the education system and exacerbated the pre-existing challenges and further aggravated the education situation in India. In such a situation, active participation of the community becomes inevitable in recovering the losses to achieve universal quality primary education. This is a high time to deliberate on the policies envisaged to bring the community closer to elementary education. In this regard, the milestone was the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, which envisaged the formation of the School Management Committee (SMC) across the country to improve access, quality, and efficiency of public elementary schools. The majority of the members of this committee are elected democratically through a local assembly from the parents of admitted students. Elected members are seen as representatives of the parents’ community. It is an approach to decentralize the administration of elementary education which leads to improving the education system in terms of its efficiency, transparency, democratic participation, finance, and stability (Bjork, 2003).

This article has three parts. The first part covers literature about community participation and the context of the state where sample schools are located. It also covers the rationale, objectives, and implications of the study. The second part explains the methodology in detail and the third part includes the findings and discussions, key lessons, and explores the future pathways.

**Literature review**

Community participation in elementary education is considered a means to improve the overall performance of the school (Govinda and Diwan, 2003). As the community is a mere beneficiary, if they get involved in governance and share accountability for the functioning of the school, it may result in a transparent and efficient education system (Kimu and Steyn, 2013). In this way ensuring supportive supervision and other support on time would be possible (Tyagi, 2016). Furthermore, optimum utilization of allocated resources and collection of resources locally could be possible which will reduce the financial dependency on the state (Bray, 2003; Reddy and Bhavani, 2012). In a study of the World Bank, Uemura has listed several ways through which a community can contribute to the delivery of education such as ensuring enrollment, students daily attendance, collecting resources locally, developing infrastructure, recruiting teachers, monitoring teachers attendance and performance, helping children in the study, promoting girls education, and improving the school environment (Uemura, 1999).
The related empirical studies have found favorable outcomes. In a case study of seven villages of Gujarat, Chand and Kuril (2018) collected data in two phases. The first phase was conducted in 2001–2002 and the last in 2015. They found the SMC effective in increasing enrollment, retaining students, collecting resources for schools locally, and developing organizational capacity in the members of the community. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (MHRD, Government of India) and Save the Children (nongovernmental organization (NGO)) jointly studied the best practices of community participation through a case study method in eight states. The findings affirmed that community participation through decentralization have positively impacted several aspects of school education such as enrollment, retention and daily attendance, infrastructure, mid-day meals, and teaching resources (Ramachandran et al., 2013). A case study conducted by Oxfam India in Karnataka asserted similar kinds of findings. In addition, they noticed that it empowers parents to take significant decisions about the future of their children (Niranjan, 2014). A survey study conducted in Bihar reported that nearly 75% of the School Education Committee (SEC) members meet in monthly meetings and discuss the issues such as finance (57.1%), infrastructure (82.2%), enrollment (82.2%), dropout (75.0%), students absenteeism (82.1%), parental motivation (57.1%), problem of teachers (39.2%), quality of teaching (53.6%), and mid-day meals (85.7%). However, the study did not investigate whether such discussions translated into any corrective action or not (Ghosh and Rana, 2011).

Although community participation in elementary education is a complex phenomenon, hence accomplishing it to a desirable magnitude requires strategic and consistent intervention. Several studies have revealed various barriers to community participation such as lack of resources, social power dynamics, local politics, bureaucratic power, lack of skills and knowledge, corruption, disproportionally devolution of authority and responsibility, and lack of political commitment (Acharya, 2002; Mukundan and Bray, 2004; Ramachandran, 2001; Reddy and Bhavani, 2012; Wankhede and Sengupta, 2005).

**Emergence of SECs**

To enjoy the benefit of community participation in education both the central and state governments in India have taken various initiatives in terms of making laws and implementing dedicated programs. The National Policy on Education (Government of India, 1986) envisaged a mechanism for educational planning at all levels of administration from village to state and the formation of the Village Education Committee (VEC) at the local level to facilitate the involvement of the community in elementary education. In pursuance, the Government of Bihar issued an executive order in 1988 to constitute VEC in every public elementary school in the state (Kumar, 2015). Furthermore, Bihar Education Project (1991–1992) was launched to strengthen the VEC through capacity building and mobilization of the community to enhance their participation. To provide legitimate status to VECs the Bihar School Education Committee Act, 2000 was passed that made significant changes in the structure of the committee and also renamed it as SEC (Kumar and Singh, 2016). Later, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (Government of Bihar, 2009) came into existence, which made it necessary for the formation of a SMC in every elementary public school in the country. Hence, the Government of Bihar repealed the existing Act (School Education Committee Act; Government of Bihar, 2000) and replaced it with the Bihar Elementary School Education Committee Act, 2011 (Government of Bihar, 2011a). This new Act envisaged decentralizing school management to ensure community participation through the formation of SECs but it had not materialized on the ground. Hence, it was repealed in 2019 by the Bihar Elementary School Education Committee (Repeal) Act, 2019 (Government of Bihar, 2019).

In pursuance of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, the Department of Human Resource Development of Bihar passed The Bihar State Free and
The committee consists of seventeen members of which nine seats are reserved for females. Those nine female members are elected democratically through the local assembly from all social categories (BC-2, EBC-2, SC/ST-2, General-2 and Physically Challenged-1). The remaining eight members are as follows:

- Heads of village organization of JEEViKA and Mahila Samakhya.
- Two student representatives (a boy from Bal Sansad and a girl from Meena Manch).
- The highest donor to the school is from the local community.
- The ward member of the concerned ward of the Gram Panchayat (Ex-Officio Chairman).
- Headmaster (HM) of the school.
- Senior-most teacher of the school.

The role and responsibilities have been outlined along with other provisions for the functioning of the committee. It includes supervision of the conduct of school; utilization of funds properly; 100% enrollment; construction and maintenance of infrastructure and collection of donations; arrangement of mid-day meal; ensuring teachers attendance and non-engagement in other than non-teaching works; preventing torture, humiliation, or discrimination against children and preparing the yearly school development plan. Lots of efforts have been taken by the Government of Bihar since the 1990s to get the community involved in elementary education. Despite over three decades of endeavors, the goal is yet to be achieved.

**Elementary education and COVID-19 in Bihar**

Bihar is considered among the most backward states of India based on various socio-economic parameters. It has the lowest literacy rate in comparison with other states of the country. However, data show that the state has made steady growth in recent years. The highest literacy growth rate of 14.8 percentage points has been recorded from 2001 to 2011 in the history of the state. It increased from 47.0% in 2001 to 61.8% in 2011 which is also the highest among the states of the country. The number of elementary schools have increased from 41,170 in 2011–2012 to 74,006 in 2017–2018 and the enrollment increased from 214.87 lakhs in 2012–2013 to 235.84 lakhs in 2017–2018 by a 1.8% of annual growth rate. The dropout rate has observed a steady decline at the primary level (Class 1–5) at 15.5 percentage point and upper primary (Class 6–8) level at 6.9 percentage point during 2012–2013 to 2017–2018. The number of teachers in elementary schools have increased from 3.5 to 4.1 lakhs in 2017–2018. The expenditure on elementary education has increased from 7764 crores in 2013–2014 to 19,152 crores in 2018–2019 (Finance Department Bihar, 2020).

In India, when the cases of COVID-19 were surging first time in March 2020, the Government of Bihar issued an executive order on March 13, 2020 to close all schools and colleges in the state. After a year, upper primary and primary schools were reopened on February 8 and March 1, 2021, respectively. But schools were forced to close in the first week of April 2021 as cases surged due to the second wave of the pandemic. On August 16, 2021, schools were reopened and remained functional till the end of the year. The third wave that emerged in January 2022 forced schools to be closed for nearly a month again. The schools were closed for nearly one and a half years. In such a situation the possibility of deterioration of elementary education is very high in the state.

Amid the pandemic situation, the pedagogy of online teaching has become the most appropriate way to ensure the continuity of education (Dhawan, 2020). Lots of initiatives have been taken to
strengthen the infrastructure of information and communication technology (ICT) and digital educational programs have been launched to deliver educational instructions to learners. But it was quite limited to the secondary and senior secondary level and slightly better in higher education. In Bihar, the students of elementary level of public schools were marginally benefited from online education due to various constraints such as lack of digital devices, Internet connectivity, and low digital literacy among teachers (Singh, 2022).

Rationale, objective, and implication of the study

The pandemic has exacerbated several challenges in elementary education. In such a situation, the collaboration between the community and the education system becomes imperative to minimize the adverse impact on learners. It requires such studies to be undertaken that explore a new mechanism or measures to enhance efficiency of the existing one.

As the situation demands, this article is exploring whether SECs of government elementary schools are in a position to support the schools in the fight against the challenges induced by the COVID-19 pandemic or not in Bihar.

The study contributes to the knowledge about the consequences of sudden abruption of educational services and the notion of community in such a situation. Furthermore, it may help the educational planners and practitioners to understand the gaps and take corrective measures.

Methodology

It is an empirical qualitative study mainly based on primary data. The ethical approval has been obtained from the Departmental Research Committee (DRDC). The data have been collected from five government elementary schools7 in Tekari Block of Gaya District, Bihar in March 2022. Thematic analysis method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of six steps, has been followed, as it is suggested to be appropriate in such kind of study (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). The schools have been selected through the consultation with Block Education Officer8 through purposive sampling. We have attempted to select sample schools that represent poor, average, and good performing schools. The student’s attendance against enrollment is considered an indicator of school performance. The range of attendance is categorized as good (50–70), average (30–49), and poor (below 30) percentage. Triangulation has been used, which entails employing more than one method of data sources that result in greater confidence in findings (Bryman, 2012). It has produced sufficient and significant data to reach the saturation point of the study. The methods, their uses, and outcomes have been explained in Table 1.

To maintain confidentiality A, B, C, D, and, E have been used instead of the name of the schools. School A was located in a semi-urban area Tekari that had good infrastructure. The case of school B was the same as A but located in a rural area adjacent to the main road. Both schools C and D were located in rural areas but differed in infrastructure; school D was running in a small campus with three classrooms to teach eight classes and school C had six classrooms for the same. The situation of school E was vulnerable due to the poor attendance of students. On the day of the visit, despite the availability of six classrooms, all students were adjusted in a classroom due to the low attendance. A teacher of school E explained,

School is suffering from low daily attendance due to scarcity of teachers and community support. The school feeder area has majorly low-income households. We are three (teachers) posted here; official works consume a large chunk of the time of the headmaster; a teacher is allotted some official work by Block Resource Centre; I am only left here to run the school. (Male, Age 30)
The sample schools in Table 2 have been arranged according to their performance. It means School A and E represent good and poor performing schools, respectively.

A total of 30 respondents were interviewed—a HM, a teacher, and four parents' representative members of the SECs from each school. We followed the concept of “saturation” to determine the sample size (Guest et al., 2006). To assess the status of paid tuition and textbook the researcher explained the situation and asked students to raise their hands to count them during interaction in the classroom. Ethical measures such as the purpose and objective of the study were communicated to participants. Anonymity, privacy, willingness to participate, and so on were followed properly.

### Findings and discussions

#### Breakdown of communication between teachers and students

In Bihar, for nearly one and a half years schools were closed for students but not for teachers. They were instructed to stay at home only during the peak time of the pandemic. For nearly 3 months, two (A and B) of the five schools were converted into quarantine centers and some teachers were allotted non-teaching work during the first and second waves of COVID-19. Social distancing was highly recommended as a precautionary measure to avoid infection; hence, schools were closed to avoid gathering. The virtual mode of communication was left as the only alternative to be in touch with the students and parents to keep them on track. Unfortunately, sample schools had failed...
substantially to establish communication with them. Furthermore, none of these schools provided any learning materials to the students. HM of school A explained,

We haven’t taught students during the school closure period. Neither we (Teachers) nor students are comfortable in virtual teaching-learning as well as students have no access to the electronic device. (Male, Age 50)

Teachers said that they got no support from the senior authority except the instruction to teach the students virtually. The unavailability of devices, Internet connection, and lack of support from the community of parents were mentioned by them as major challenges. Parents sound differently on the issue. The majority of them responded almost the same as “school se koi sahayta nahi mila” (There was no support from the school). They had arranged paid tuition even in the situation when household income was squeezed. It seems that if schools had initiated anything they would have certainly cooperated and contributed as much as they could. The case of voluntarism was also found in school A. A retired teacher and an undergraduate student from the community took a few classes monthly as a volunteer.

Loss of learning outcome

The closure of schools has impacted learning outcomes adversely. A study conducted by Azim Premji Foundation (2021) affirmed that students of elementary level have not only lost curricular learning of the current class but also lost a few learning abilities that they learned in the previous classes. The loss of foundational learning ability or not learning at the current grade results in struggling students to understand complex concepts further. ASER (2021a) has also reported the same.

In sample schools, we have attempted to assess the understanding level of SECs about learning outcomes and losses during school closure days. Both parents and teachers were convinced and concerned about the learning losses. Parents were trying to do their best but teachers sound helpless to do anything. The secretary of SEC from school C explained,

In the village, children are taking paid tuition during the lockdown, mine too. Parents are always ready to do whatever they can for the education of their child . . . schools were closed hence children were engaged in activities other than education that may impact their future adversely. (Female, Age 36)

As schools were closed for around one and a half years, it eroded a grade completely. Almost all students have suffered but particularly the students from the government schools who belong to lower socio-economic strata of the society are affected badly. A majority of them get minimal or no support in their study at home hence whatever academic activities they do, they do with the help of school only. In a situation, when the functioning of schools had come to a halt for a long time, the one who suffers the most are those disadvantaged students. It may reinforce the educational gap among the students of different strata of society.

Futility of catch-up course

In between the first and second waves, a catch-up course of 90 days was introduced to recover the learning losses. It intends to help students to learn concepts quickly that they had missed due to the closure of the schools. A training program of 2 days was conducted for the teachers to make them understand the implementation strategy. After a few days, the second wave came, which forced schools to close again. Consequently, it was not implemented at all in the sample schools.
Shifting of students from private to public school

ASER (2021a) report speculated that government schools are going to face the overburden of students. The household income of the middle class has squeezed leading to the shifting of students from private to public schools. The circumstances created by COVID-19 have wiped out a good number of small private schools and many are struggling to survive. To understand this phenomenon, we tracked the enrollment of sample schools from the academic year 2018–2019 to 2021–2022. All schools were showing an increasing trend in enrollment except school D. It had a total number of 332 enrollments in academic session 2018–2019 that had decreased to 308 in 2021–2022 (Grade 1–8).

During the field visit, we observed that parents were struggling to produce the transfer certificate to ensure admission of their child which was demanded strictly by the schools. Schools were asking for either a transfer certificate or an affidavit that cost around 200 rupees and a visit to the local magistrate office. A teacher of school A explained,

The cause of this phenomena may either be the students who are moving from a private school hasn’t paid the fees of a few months hence the school denies to provide it or school is wiped out due to the pandemic. (Male, Age 52)

One more possible reason might be that the students who migrated after the sudden lockdown do not have transfer certificates. However, as per the Right to Education Act 2009 guidelines, the self-declaration of parents can be considered a valid document for admission in the primary grade. The ambiguity in instructions may be responsible for this inconvenience.

Invisible dropout

In the case of Bihar, the rate of dropouts at the elementary level has reduced significantly since the up-gradation of schools happened, as it has ensured the availability of elementary schools within a reasonable range of villages. However, every school has some students who are absent for a long time, but their names are still listed in the enrollment register. The number of those students is likely to be increased, especially the younger girls (Banerji and Wadhwa, 2021). There should have a mechanism to monitor daily attendance. The number and causes of absenteeism for a long time should be collected to understand the phenomena in depth. SECs can play an important role in this regard.

Paid tuition

The trend of taking paid tuition has increased significantly (ASER, 2021b). It entails that the demand for education has risen to the level where even lower-income households have managed to pay a certain amount of money for the education of their children. We assessed how many students among present students (on the day of the visit) were taking paid tuition from classes 6, 7, and 8. The number we found was around 88%, which is quite high. The amount they paid as tuition fees was ranging from 100 to 250 rupees per month. Few teachers of sample schools were found to be taking paid tuition in the village although it is prohibited. HM of school B explained,

Salaries of teachers are not regular in Bihar so economic hardship may force some teachers to do it. In some cases, the passionate teachers use to teach and take a little token amount. (Male, Age 56)
**Students with no textbooks**

A few years ago, a change has taken place in the process of providing textbooks to students in elementary schools. Before that, the government provided textbooks to every student. Now, the direct cash transfer scheme is at work. The money to purchase the textbooks is transferred to the bank account of the beneficiaries. The former process required managing various stakeholders for printing, transportation, distribution, and so on, which sometimes resulted in delayed delivery of books to students. The latter has proliferated the number of students who do not have all the textbooks for their grades. In the sample schools, such students were nearly 69% in academic session 2021–2022 of Grades 6, 7, and 8. HM of the school D explained,

> It is a common phenomenon of not having all the textbooks by the students but the numbers have increased after the adoption of the direct cash transfer scheme. Parents failed substantially to understand the importance of having textbooks and hence spend that scholarship money on other expenses. (Male, Age 35)

This issue needs serious attention. Government can easily ensure textbooks for every child without any discrimination. During the pandemic situation, textbooks were the only means upon which the majority of the students relied. It has the potential to impact learning outcomes positively.

We attempted to understand why parents have managed to pay a tuition fee that cost an average of 150 rupees per month but have not purchased books even when students are getting a scholarship? The majority of the parents responded in the same tune as “I am not aware that he (child) doesn’t have all textbooks, I will purchase soon.” It seems that parents assign less importance to textbooks than tuition due to their limited understanding. ASER (2021b) asserted that the availability of learning material for students at home is influenced by the education level of parents. We found that the majority of parents have less education in sample schools. However, it is difficult to enhance the education level of parents but making them understand the value of textbooks is possible through a well-designed campaign in which SECs can play a major role. It may produce a desirable outcome within a short period.

**Where do SECs stand today?**

In Bihar, the 3 years’ tenure of SECs was over in the second half of last year (2021). Hence, it has again been constituted in every school. In sample schools, committees were formed in the month of August–September 2021. But no training was conducted for them. However, a training program for previous SECs was conducted last year amid the pandemic. Nearly, 6 months have passed and the members are still waiting to understand the actual meaning of being in the committee. However, they have a vague idea about it. We asked them about their roles and responsibilities, their responses were in the following tune:

> I came to local assembly and HM said that you are elected as a member, I don’t know anything else. (SEC member, School C, Female, Age 40)

> We are here to see the functioning of the school, teaching-learning, mid-day meals, and other things. (SEC chairman, School B, Male, Age 35)

Majority of the members were not fairly aware of their roles and responsibilities although those who were elected repeatedly had some ideas but were still lacking to have an understanding of the mechanism to solve a problem if any will occur. An SEC member asked the researcher:
In our school, the process of the recruitment of cook has not been followed. I want to raise the issue. Can you let me know how can I do it? (SEC member, School D, Female, Age 32)

The review of the SEC meeting register revealed that monthly meetings were regular before the pandemic emerged. After the pandemic, only two or three meetings happened. The issues related to low student attendance, sanitation, lack of infrastructure, and so on as well as announcements of book and scholarship distribution, cultural programs, and some expenditures was mentioned in the agenda and proceedings of the meeting. But, the corrective measures to solve the issues were not found. Also, there was no indication to check the register on regular basis by the senior monitoring officer.

We tried to apprehend their understanding and attitude toward the role they were supposed to perform. We found them concerned about the education of their children as well as the functioning of school. They showed willingness to contribute for the development of school according to their capacity. They responded in the following way:

   We all want to educate our children, but what we can do, nothing is in our hands. (SEC member, School E, Male, Age 28)

   Everyone knows what is going wrong with school and those who are capable to correct it do not care. (SEC member, School A, Female, Age 38)

The most common response was “Sir ji log jo kahte hai humlog wahi karte hai” (We always do those things which are told to us by teachers). They do not seem that empowered to intervene in the supervision and making a plan for the development of the school as it is prescribed in SECs regulations. They perceive teachers as superior in many aspects. Hence, they are looking toward them with the hope to bring some valuable changes that will benefit their children the most.

Key lessons

The SECs are solely responsible for the governance of schools. Their main responsibility is to supervise academic activities, ensure 100% enrollment and attendance as well as manage the finance of the school effectively. However, literature indicates that the SECs are not able to discharge their role effectively in Bihar and found many reasons for the same (Kumar, 2014, 2015; Kumar and Singh, 2016). However, we are not going to discuss it in detail as this article is aiming to explore the possibility of where and how they can support the school to recover the losses that occurred due to the pandemic.

The members of the SECs belong to the same village in which the school is located. A representative of Panchayati Raj Institution (ward commissioner) is also in the committee as chairman. They are well informed about the locality and possess rich information about the situations of every household. The committee is rich in many aspects and able to support the school in various ways.

The monthly meeting is crucial and requires due attention as well as the mechanism under which SECs are working needs to be strengthened. Educational planners seem to underestimate the capability of SECs. However, it is fair to assume that the people who are not well educated may not be good at making strategies related to curriculum, pedagogy, or other educational activities as well as poor economic situations prevent them to contribute financially. However, they are capable to mobilize students, ensuring punctuality, managing logistic things, and so on. Whenever a committee is formed, they are energetic, excited, and enthusiastic to take responsibility and do something
that makes them feel proud and satisfied. As new committees have been formed recently, it should be taken as an opportunity to engage them more than ever before. It requires the attention and dedicated efforts of educational planners of the state.

The pandemic has made the ground fertile to welcome the community in the process of educating children. It can be seen as a blessing in disguise. In the pandemic situation, the community has taken a step ahead to support the education of their children (Bhattacharjea, 2021). ASER (2021b) survey reported that nearly 75% of all children were getting help in the study during school closure days from family members. Educational planners should not miss out on the opportunity to bring them on board. Their realization of the significance and ability to contribute in children’s learning should be appreciated and encouraged.

Exploring the future pathways

The situations of elementary education are still fluid in many aspects. It requires additional input from the government and community. The waves of COVID-19 are anticipated to come in the future, which may disrupt the functioning of schools again. The policymakers need to deliberate on seeking support from the community through SECs. The parent community have shown the willingness and extended support to educate their children. The endeavors must be taken to develop a mechanism that facilitates to persistence and proliferation of the notion of community engagement in elementary education.

Having a mechanism for monitoring the conduct of the committee and providing corrective measures is necessary to keep them in the right direction. Also, the flow of information needs to be ensured, which keeps all stakeholders well informed. The role of SECs should be explicitly defined with consideration of ground reality in every campaign and program which are to be implemented at the school level. The community learning program, classes, library, and seeking volunteers to work for schools may increase the learning outcomes and empower the community as well.

The attitude of teachers toward the community is crucial in forming a reciprocal relationship between school and community. Teachers are considered respectful and superior in knowledge hence they are in a better position to introduce interventions that encourage community members. It may require a well-designed training program for teachers to impart the importance of community participation and the way to materialize it.

Strength and limitation

The study is exploring a contemporary issue through empirical investigation and the findings will be helpful in normal situations as well. It helps to understand the notion of the community related to educating their children in the sudden occurrence of a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the case study approach with a small sample size is a limitation of the study. However, such study which is accompanied by a reasonable sample size allows the researcher to have an in-depth investigation and captures essential elements through the exploration of participant’s experience. Its significance can be observed in studying the localized impact of a phenomenon like COVID-19. The findings of the study can thus form the basis for large-scale surveys, which can capture the magnitude of such a phenomenon.

Conclusion

The pandemic COVID-19 has impacted almost every aspect of human life on earth. Elementary education is among those aspects that are badly impacted particularly in developing countries.
Bihar is a state of India that is listed among the backward states of the country. Its performance is poor in many human development indicators. The closure of schools for such a long period made students more vulnerable. Low-income households are struggling to afford an alternate way to educate their children. The pre-existing issues such as low daily attendance, dropouts, malnourishment, the gap among different groups (gender, caste, class, etc.), and learning outcomes are likely to be exacerbated by the circumstances created by the pandemic in Bihar.

We found that sample schools have substantially failed to help the students in learning during school closure days. A large number of students did not have all the textbooks for their grades. The trend of taking private tuition has increased significantly that is indicating the rise in demand for education among low-income households. The students who migrated from other places or private schools were struggling to produce transfer certificates for securing admissions in public schools.

Further analysis revealed that the teachers and parents both have acceptance of learning losses. But they were unable to do anything significant about it. The ignorance of the education system to engage the community is evidently visible as only two to three times the SECs have met during the last 2 years when the need for community support was highly desirable. The new committee was formed recently in the second half of last year, but no training is conducted yet. The SECs members seem enthusiastic, and the parent community has taken a step ahead to support their children in education.

There has been growing evidence from the different parts of the country and the world which outlined the needs and benefits of community participation in elementary education. Furthermore, the literature has outlined several roles for the community to play in elementary education which counts on empirical experiences. Therefore, one cannot imagine a holistic, accountable, and efficient system of elementary education without involving the community. This study strongly argues that the educational planners of the state should not miss out on the opportunity to facilitate community participation and it should be done by removing the friction between community and school to form a reciprocal relationship. It is a necessity to develop a sustainable education system. It certainly leads to the recovery of losses that occurred due to the pandemic and moving the curve positively toward the most desirable goal to achieve universal quality primary education in the state.

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Notes
1. Bihar is the second largest state of India with close to 125 million population.
2. Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD).
3. In Bihar, School Education Committee was referred to as Village Education Committee initially.
4. BC—Backward Caste, EBC—Extremely Backward Caste, SC—Scheduled Caste, ST—Scheduled Tribes.
5. The Bal Sansad is envisaged to be formed democratically in every public schools. It is based on the concept of democracy; of the students, by the students, for the students. This committee represents the students and do activities to improve the functioning of the school.
6. Meena Much is a committee of girl students. It organizes discussion on the different issues related to school specially girls, once in a week.

7. All five sample schools are offering grades from 1 to 8.

8. Block Education Officer is the administrative officer at Block level of education system in Bihar.

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**Author biographies**

**Sonu Prasad** is a research scholar in the Department of Development Studies, Central University of South Bihar. His area of interest is decentralization, community participation and development.

**Dr. Anju Helen Bara** is currently working as Assistant Professor in the Department of Development Studies, Central University of South Bihar. Her interest area includes policy studies, governance, political ecology, and tribal studies.