

Does the Community Contribute to Reducing Student Dropout? Current Practices, Challenges, and A Way Forward in RuRal Bangladesh

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Abstract

The constitution of Bangladesh aims to ensure quality education for all children. Attending school regularly and completing the cycle is a pre-condition of quality education. This qualitative research was conducted to obtain insights into current practice on community involvement for regular student attendance and reducing dropout in rural Government Primary Schools (GPS) in Bangladesh as well as challenges and possible initiatives. Data were analyzed thematically after conducting five semi-structured interviews with Upazila Education Officers, Assistant Upazila Education Officers, head teachers, and School Managing Committee chairmen; two focus group discussions with assistant teachers and community members of two rural GPS; and school observation. We find that various local and school committees and associations were not performing their assigned and defined roles. Physical home visits were effective but not performed on a regular basis. Mother gatherings were to some extent helpful with the possibility of broadening their scope, but *uthan boithok* (local gatherings in common spaces) were totally absent. Poverty and lack of awareness about formal education, the tendency of educated families to live in cities and town, negative perceptions of communities about government organizations, the unexpected attitudes of teachers towards rural guardians, and a lack of about the importance of community involvement were the main challenges hindering community contribution to regular student attendance and reducing dropout. To mitigate these challenges, we recommend robust educational leadership, where head teachers as leaders take the required initiatives by raising awareness through collaborations with the local community. This research contributes to ensuring quality education by discussing possible initiatives involving the community to promote regular student attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS.

Keywords: Community, Rural Government Primary Schools, Attendance, Drop-out

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1. Background

Bangladesh has achieved enormous success in achieving universal primary education according to Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets. The country's present net enrollment rate is 97.9% and the gross enrollment rate is 112%, with a primary education completion rate of 80.8%. Therefore, considerable numbers of students drop out without completing their primary education cycle (APSC, 2016, and ASPR, 2017). According to the latest data, the dropout rate is 19.2% with 6.1% repetition, and the absenteeism rate is 12.5%, which is alarming considering the large population (APSC, 2016). However, Ahmed (2007, p.6) stated,

“a little over half of those enrolled in primary school complete the five years cycle and half of those who stay on till the end remain practically illiterate, which means that no more than a quarter of our children are assured of their right to education.”

These data reflect the loaded responsibilities given to teachers and schools. Children spend most of their time outside school and learn many things outside the classroom, even on a school day. However, most parents are unaware of this and tend to pass on all responsibility to teachers (International Survey Associates [ISA], 2016). To improve this situation, it is necessary to explore how communities can contribute to formulate improved and appropriate policy.

According to a recent policy brief from the National Education Association (NEA, 2016, p.1), “when schools, parents, families, and communities work together to support learning, students tend to earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, stay in school longer, and enroll in higher level programs”. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau showed that parental involvement in school positively impacts dropout rates, increases attendance, and promotes completion of the educational cycle (Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2012. p. 29).

Education policymakers in Bangladesh would benefit from realizing the importance of community, primary school, and national education policy collaboration:

“The existing primary education system will be decentralized thoroughly. School Managing Committees

will be further empowered if necessary and made more effective. Increasing the engagement of female guardians the teacher-parent committees will be formed and the Committees will be more actively functional. The parents will be closely involved in the various activities of the school. Besides, local community will also be involved in efficient management and school development activities (National Education Policy [NEP], 2010, p 67).”

Several studies have emphasized the importance of community involvement and how community involvement influences regular student attendance and reduces dropout. However, there are little data on current community involvement practices with respect to regular student attendance and reducing dropout, which are major challenges faced by both schools and the community when establishing how to involve the community and mitigate existing challenges.

2. Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following three research questions:

1. What is current practice with respect to involving the community to promote regular student attendance and reduce dropout in rural GPS?
2. What are the challenges to involving the community in ensuring regular student attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS?
3. What kind of initiatives would be helpful for mitigating the challenges to involving the community for regular student attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS?

3. Conceptualizing Community and Community Involvement

The conceptualization of community dates to the beginning of the 19th century, when concerns about the effects of social cohesion related to social displacement following industrialization were at their highest. “The earlier and most commonly held meaning of ‘community’ refers to people living in a place who have face-to-face contact with each other” (Goel, 2014, p.1). Most researchers define community as its people, relationships, and shared interests and values. This is much more personal than calling community an institution or system. Drake and Roe (2003) defined community as “a group of people conscious of a collective identity through common physical, cognitive and affective educational relationships” (p. 48).

Bray (1996), in his study “Decentralization of Education: Community Financing”, defined three different types of communities. The first was geographic community, which is defined according to its members’ place of residence, such as a village or district. The second was ethnic, racial, and religious community, in which membership is based on ethnic, racial, or religious identification and commonly cuts across membership based on geographic location. The third was community based on shared family or educational concerns, which includes parents’ associations and similar bodies based on families’ shared concerns for student welfare.

“A school’s community is comprised of all stakeholders. This includes businesses and agencies within the attendance boundaries of the school” (Kladifko, 2013, p.56). In this study, we define community as all the committees, associations, stakeholders (e.g., SMC, PTA, SLIP team, parents), and people in the school’s catchment area.

Community can be involved with schools in different ways. Shaeffer (1994) clarified some ways in which communities are involved with schools:

- involvement through the mere use of a service (such as enrolling children in school or using a primary health care facility);
- involvement through the contribution (or extraction) of money, materials, and labor;
- involvement through ‘attendance’ (e.g., at parents’ meetings at school), implying passive acceptance of decisions made by others;
- involvement through consultation on a particular issue.

4. Research Methodology

We used a qualitative approach, which is essential for exploring a social or human problem or issue in a nuanced way (Creswell, 2007). Kothri (2005) defined qualitative research as a process of in-depth understanding of human behavior. In order to gather teacher and community thoughts, reactions, and behaviors, qualitative research was more appropriate for a study in which multiple perspectives are valued instead of a single perspective (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

4.1. Research Site

The research site was far away from the upazila Sadar. We collected data from two rural GPS in Nalchity upazila in the Jhalakathi district. Both schools were situated in rural areas; the reason for selecting such schools in rural areas was that the students, teachers, and community members were deprived of many basic and modern facilities, i.e., infrastructural, health and hygienic, and adequate help and suggestions from the local education authority

(LEA). Exploring the current practices and challenges in these schools and finding way to mitigates challenges would be helpful for working with other rural schools as well as schools in urban areas.

4.2. Research participants and data collection procedure

The research participants were one Upazila Education Officer (UEO) and one Assistant Upazila Education Officer (AUEO) from the same upazila; two head teachers, two School Managing Committee (SMC) chairmen, ten assistant teachers, and twelve community members. All participants except the UEO were related to two rural GPS. The UEO had a vast experience and the AUEO had around ten years of work experience with the GPS. Both the head teachers were highly experienced as teachers but were new head teachers, although they had been acting head teachers for some years. The assistant teachers were a combination of senior and junior teachers.

All research participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Creswell (2007) stated that purposive sampling means that the researcher selects the site and individuals for study because they can inform the objectives and understand the research problem and unusual findings in the study. Qualitative research methods such interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observation methods were used to collect, analyze, and interpret data.

We conducted five semi-structured interviews, which took ~40 to 50 minutes each. These were based on open-ended questions, and the interviewee had the chance to explain and elaborate their views and ideas regarding community involvement for regular student attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS and what type of challenges they faced.

Then we conducted FGDs, which were especially useful for gaining access to targeted people (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Two FGDs were held, one with the ten assistant teachers of two rural GPS and another with twelve members of the community from the school catchment area. Before conducting the FGDs, we prepared an FGD guide using open-ended questions, one question at a time. We followed the FGD guide to conduct the discussion smoothly and keep the topic on the track. The FGDs allowed for interactions between all group members and permitted participants to give detailed opinions on a topic.

We observed and analyzed every activity related to community involvement. We observed SMC registers and meeting minutes, PTA registers, mothers' gathering registers, home visit registers, and checked all the home visits of every teacher. We also analyzed pictures and documents from various school functions such as sports day, victory day, and tree plantation ceremonies to better understand the context.

Table 1: Research methodology at a glance

Data Collection Method	Number of Activities/Time Needed	Participants
Interviews	Five (5)/ 40-50 minutes each	1 UEO, 1 AUEO, 2 head teachers, 1 SMC chairman
FGD	Two (2)/ 2 hours each	Asst teachers (09) Community people (12)
Observations	Two (2)	Register of SMC, PTA, mothers' gatherings, home visits, pictures from different functions like gold cup football tournament, inter-school sports, annual school sports, book distribution ceremony, etc.

5. RESULTS

The findings of this study are presented below under several themes.

5.1 Community Involvement in Regular Student Attendance and Reducing Dropout: Current Practices

This major theme is divided into four sub-themes, which are presented below.

5.1.1. Role of Committees and Associations

In the GPS, there was a School Managing Committee (SMC), a parent-teacher association (PTA), and a School Level Improvement Plan (SLIP) team. The formation of each was different, but their work was with the community. The data revealed that committees and associations related to primary school played both positive and negative roles in the school. Some tried to improve the school with the help of community people and government allocation, while most were found to dominate others and obtain financial benefits from it. There were contradictory messages in the interviews and FGDs with the teachers, officers, and SMC members. The data on the role of every unit is presented individually below.

Role of the School Managing Committee: An SMC president stated that his aim was to improve the school. He always used to think about the school. He stated, "I come to school to know about the problems and difficulties of the teacher and what type of help they need. I try my best to help them" (Interview1, 11/10/2018). He regarded it as his responsibility to the community people as a citizen of the country. He added "I am a citizen of this area, a

child of a nearby brother may not go to school, I try to make them understand about the importance of education and going regular to school. I think it's my responsibility as a member of the society" (Interview 1, 11/10/2018). The SMC chairman tried to communicate with the guardians by telephone as well as when he met with them. He obtained help from school in collecting the phone numbers of the guardians. As he mentioned, "The school has the mobile number of most of the guardians and I talked with more than 90% of the guardians over telephone and I also talked with them when I meet them" (Interview 1, 11/10/2018).

However, in the FGD with the assistant teacher and interview with the head teacher and by analyzing documents from the offices, the opposite scenario was observed. They pointed that instead of benefitting a school, the SMC significantly harmed the school. They came to school only for personal benefit. An assistant teacher related a case study that, two years earlier, their school received tk30000 as SLIP seed money. The SMC president took all the money and spend only about tk10000 in related work. In the SMC meeting, he mentioned that he had spent tk35000 and the school had to give him tk5000 (FGD 1, 10/10/2018).

Another assistant teacher added that most ethical and affluent people lived in the town. Some people who had no permanent income and were related to politics had come to the SMC since they thought it was an income source (FGD 1, 10/10/2018).

A head teacher reported some disappointing and aggressive statements about current SMC practices. He opined that,

"The school began to destroy because of some SMC. There are some *patineta* (local leader who tries to show some power) who has no work and no quality to do any good to school is in the SMC. To call them in the school means hampering their regular work, they only come to school to take tea and make some disturbances."

Not every SMC was the same. A few SMC did good work in helping the head teacher improve the school, while most committee members tried to obtain benefit from the school. As there was political influence to be obtained by coming to the committee, they tried to dominate the teacher rather than assist or help them communicate properly with the community to ensure regular attendance of students. All the members were eager to come to committee meetings not for giving but to receive benefits. An AUEO stated:

"In my cluster among sixteen SMC, only two or three are thinking about the welfare of the school. They used the SLIP seed money properly for decorating school and making teaching aids which influences in regular attendance of the students, they also gave financial help from them with the seed money. Except them all the committee members tried to get financial benefit from the school, they took the SLIP seed money and tk5000 for decorating pre primary class. As the committee members are political persons, head teacher could do nothing." (Interview 4, 20/10/2018)

The data from the UEO was consistent with the AUEO. Although they tried to involve the community to improve the school, in most cases they failed. In some cases, the SMC members did very good work in promoting the regular attendance of students. The UEO stated:

"We tried our best to involve the SMC in school improvement. But they are politically influenced and always try to get financial benefit from school. Some SMC are doing beyond our expectation, a school has made a full multimedia classroom with laptop and projector, SMC president bears all the cost. This initiative plays an important role for student's regular attendance. Another school has the shorten of classroom and the with the help of community people SMC built a tin shade two rooms building for solving the problem. It is also mentionable that SMC of a school started mid day meal for the students with the help of the community about one year ago and it is still running. It makes the students regular in school and this will reduce dropout. We expect such help from the SMC." (Interview 5, 21/10/2018)

Analyzing the data from the SMC minutes of two schools, it was found that the teachers and officers were telling the truth. SMC meetings were irregular in both schools. Female guardians were totally absent. An SMC chairman opined "Ladies members from guardians' category are not so aware till now and they do not attend the meeting" (Interview 1, 10/10/2018). There was also no evidence of LGR attendance. One SMC president worked in Dhaka and had never attended meetings. After analyzing the meeting regulations, it was found in the minutes that only one meeting discussed the importance of community involvement for regular student attendance, and the chairman requested that the teachers communicated with community people instead of engaging them.

Role of the PTA: The parent-teacher association (PTA) did not play any role in rural GPS. In most schools, the association was formed by the SLIP. By talking to community members, we established that most did not know about the formation and function of a PTA. A head teacher mentioned that they had heard about PTAs but had not thought about forming one. A head teacher said, "when we take the training on SLIP, we come to know that it is compulsory to have a PTA for getting SLIP grant, and then we make it" (Interview 2, 11/10/2018). The DPE orders that there should be a PTA in every school. The local education authority delivered this message to the school, but due to a lack of proper monitoring from central to local offices, it was not applied. As forming a PTA was a difficult task, similar to the SMC, the PTA could dominate them so teachers were not interested in forming them. Furthermore, officers from the local office did not properly emphasize their formation or function. The data

revealed that while every school had a PTA, this was only on paper and not in practice; meetings were not held regularly and there was no involvement of PTAs in school improvement. On AUEO said, “I have heard about it but no senior colleague could give me clear knowledge about the formation of PTA, when SLIP grant has come, every school has made it but it is not working properly” (Interview 4,20/10/2018).

Role of the School-level Improvement Plan: The data revealed that the SLIP team did not perform well in rural GPS in involving community members to promote regular student attendance and reduce dropout. They did not communicate with other committees and organizations and did not inform them about the working procedure of the team. Assistant teachers, PTA chairmen, and some community members expressed similar disappointment. An assistant teacher said that he only knew that his colleague had got SLIP training with the head teacher and was doing the work; however, he had not been included. Digging deeper, the data revealed that there were some gaps in training and the people getting the training were not clear about communicating with the SMC, PTA, and the community to involve them with the SLIP team. A teacher in a SLIP team stated, “I hear it for the first time that we had to do it. The training was in month of Ramadan and we missed many things” (FGD 1, 10/10/2018). An AUEO and SLIP trainer agreed and added that most of the SLIP team in his cluster did not follow the procedure for communicating with the SMC, PTA, and community. He agreed that there may be some gaps in training (Interview 4, 20/10/2018).

The data revealed that though facing some difficulties, the SLIP did contribute to improving regular student attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS. Both schools gave tiffin boxes to the students so that the students could bring food and not leave the school in break-time. In one school, pens and pencils were distributed to students who were unable to buy them. This was regarded as positive work that inspired the students to attend regularly and not be absent. An assistant teacher said, “some students were absent as they did not have pen and *khata* (writing materials). After providing these, they were grateful to us and came to school regularly” (FGD 1, 10/10/2018).

5.1.2. Teachers Assigned Responsibilities and Duties

According to the policy and order of the DPE, there were some assigned duties in GPS to involve the community such as home visits, mothers gatherings, and *Uthan Boithok* (sitting at the enclosure of a house). We found that home visits and mothers’ gatherings were performed by the teachers, but not in the proper way. Teachers were obliged to make at least one home visit and keep written documentation. To avoid official problems, the teachers tried to do table visits; they did not physically go to the homes, instead talking with guardians over the telephone and sometimes writing reports without any communication with guardians. An AUEO stated, “it is compulsory for every teacher to make at least one home visit in every month” (Interview 4, 20/10/2018). When analyzing written reports on home visits, it was found that reports from the same teacher were similar for every student. Their suggestions for the guardians and results of the visits were also similar for every student. Digging deeper, it was found that teachers did not make physical visits to every student, instead making table or telephonic visits, which was not as effective as physical visits. An assistant teacher added, “out of three I visited two physically and talked over the phone with others” (FGD 1, 10/10/2018).

The data showed that both schools arranged mothers’ gatherings according to the official order, but their aims were not fulfilled. They arranged the mothers’ gatherings only to publish the result of different terminal examinations and final examinations but did not discuss any important issues like attendance, raising awareness about the importance of education, or involving them in various activities of the school. The parents, in most cases, came to school and collected the students’ results cards. A mother said, “we come to school to collect the result card” (FGD 2, 11/10/2018). An AUEO said that he had not organized any mothers’ gatherings recently (Interview 4, 20/10/2018). Data collected from the minutes of mothers’ gatherings from both schools revealed nothing of importance and that the minutes were only for show.

The data about the *Uthan Boithok* were also disappointing. Neither school had arranged any *Uthan Boithok* to involve the community in regular student attendance or reducing dropout in the past few years. Some junior teachers did not even know what the *Uthan Boithok* was. “I have never seen an *Uthan Boithok* practically arranged by the teacher, of course I observed it in last union perished election” an assistant teacher opined (FGD 1, 10/10/2018). The LEA did not apply much pressure to arrange *Uthan Boithok*, just talking about it and suggesting that they should be arranged. “We did not create pressure teachers to arrange *Uthan Boithok* but we suggested them to arrange and though it was effective to involve the community for students’ regular attendance”, an AUEO stated (Interview 4, 20/10/2018).

5.1.3. Extra-curricular Activities

The data revealed that some extra-curricular activities happened in school with the involvement of the community, especially the elite and community leaders, which played an important role in regular attendance and that led to reduce dropout in rural GPS. Every year, some activities like annual sports days and cultural competitions and prize-giving ceremonies, inter-primary school sports and cultural competitions, and Bangabondu and Bangomata Fajilatunnesa Mujib gold cup primary school football tournaments were arranged in every school. Some students who were good at sports but not regular attendees came to school. After getting the prizes and inspiration from the teachers and others, they attended school more regularly. A head teacher added:

“This year we have arranged a very gorgeous annual sports day; we have few students who are not regular at school and weak in academic performance but good at sports. After the sports day they are regular and two of them are doing very well in the classes now” (interview 2, 14/10/2018).

Similar result were found with regard to football tournaments and other competitions. The community played an important role in arranging those competitions. Arranging those competitions was expensive and the government allocation was not sufficient to fund them. For annual sports events, there was no government support. The data revealed that all the financial support and volunteering came from community people, and all did this spontaneously despite the target of the help being different. This was often because it demonstrated their social or political power in the locality.

Nevertheless, by giving financial and other help to arrange extracurricular activities, the community played an important role in regular student attendance and also reduced dropout in rural GPS.

5.1.4. School Decoration and Others

The data showed that classrooms, including the preprimary classrooms, in both schools were well decorated and that there was financial and other help from community people. One school in particular had done a very good job. They managed to install a monitor in every classroom and lessons were observed to be enjoyable. All the money and any other support were provided by the mothers. This initiative ensured that the students attended regularly and that dropout reduced. An assistant teacher stated, “except on a very bad day, our attendance is more than 95% and classroom decoration has a great impact on it” (FGD 1, 10/10/2018).

Thus, financial and other support for installing monitors in every class and to decorate the classroom allowed the community, especially the mothers, to play a positive role in attendance and dropout.

5.2. Community Involvement for Regular Student Attendance and Reducing Dropout: Challenges

The data revealed various challenges to involving the community in regular student attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS. Both the school authorities and the community faced challenges. Some challenges were created by the system, but most challenges were created unconsciously. The school authorities and the community played a blame game in this matter.

We discussed the challenges to involving the community in regular student attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS in the two sub-themes above.

5.2.1. Challenges Faced by School Authorities and Teachers in Involving the Community

According to the data, the school authorities faced some challenges to involving the community in attendance and dropout. Those challenges were unconsciously created by the community.

The first challenge faced by the school authorities was that most people were not aware of formal education. It was found that they did know about the need for education to help in the long run and ultimately change their lifestyle. In rural areas, some families were so poor that they needed help from their children. Although the government provided a stipend to them, they thought that it was insufficient. Children aged over eight could earn over one hundred taka per day, the same amount given in a month by the government. Therefore, the families used the children as a source of income generation. In these cases, the teachers tried to motivate guardians to send their children to school but they did not cooperate with the teachers, even avoiding meeting with the teachers or school authorities. An SMC chairman said, “still all guardians here are not so aware about the education in rural areas, sometimes I make them phone call and sometimes I talk to them when I meet, but they do not care” (interview 1,11/10/18). An assistant teacher reported a case study regarding this matter, saying that a student in class five only irregularly attended class since his father was fishing with him. When the teacher repeatedly tried to motivate the man to encourage his child to attend, he began to avoid the teacher. He even tried to hide when the assistant teacher went to his house. Therefore, poverty and a lack of awareness about the importance of education in rural people were big challenges to the school authority involving the community in regular attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS.

The data revealed that most educated government and non-government employees and businessmen who are thought to be more aware about education did not live in such rural areas. The men who lived in those villages remained busy with work, leaving the house early in the morning and returning at night. Therefore, it was difficult for the school authorities to properly communicate with them and involve them in regular attendance and reducing dropout (FGD 1 & FGD 2, interview 1, 2 &3). Mothers generally monitored the education of their children. Since they were also busy with housework, it was also challenging to involve them in monitoring attendance in school.

It was also found that teacher shortages in rural primary schools was another challenge. As communication was poor in rural areas and number of female teachers was high in GPS, they always tried to take posts in schools with good communication. Therefore, teacher shortages were common in rural GPS. Most teachers had to take extra classes and had high workloads. Furthermore, they needed to undertake a lot of official work and provide information to the LEA as required. This workload was challenging to them and prevented them from allocating time to communicating properly with the community.

The perception of the community was generally against involving them in the GPS. Individuals who could

provide financial or other help felt that government support was sufficient. They were interested in helping in *madrasha* or other non-government schools, since this was religious work. As a result, when the school authorities tried to communicate with them, they did not cooperate. An assistant teacher reported that when they met an affluent person who was already helping a nearby *madrasha* to buy a fan, he failed. According to the teacher, the rich man said “in government school government will give, why me? What my benefit is?” (FGD 1, 10/10/2018).

There were some political and conceptual contradictions among the local elites. Sometime these contradictions represented significant challenges to the school authorities to involve the community. One school was located in a very remote area, and the road to the school was beside a canal and damaged by flooding. The students found it difficult to get to school, with it sometimes being risky for them to try to attend on rainy days. The union parishad chairman was from far away from the village and stood against the candidate from this village in the last election. When the head teacher met the chairman and asked him to repair the road, he got angry and said “that village may go to hell, I will do nothing” (Interview 2, 14/10/2018). Both candidates were from the same political party, and the situation could easily become worse if the people were from different political or conceptual frameworks.

5.2.2. *Challenges Faced by Community to Get Involved with School Authorities and Teachers*

The community in rural areas faced some challenges with respect to involving them in regular student attendance and reducing dropout. These challenges were created on both sides and seemed to be created by the school authorities.

Sometimes, teachers were not interested in cooperating with poor and illiterate guardians. When some of the guardians visited the school to try to talk with the teachers about their child’s academic progress, they were neglected and not treated well by the teachers, thereby discouraging them. In some cases, teachers were engaged in private tuition. A mother opined “in a previous school when I went to school, the teacher never cooperated with me, even they were not interested to talk with me. The only reason was that I am poor and couldn’t afford private tuition” (FGD 2, 11/10/2018).

Data revealed that a large number of female teachers in GPS had a tendency to live in cities or towns, traveling long distances to come to work and making it difficult for them to manage their time. They were not interested in coming before the start of school or staying later after classes. Some even used to come in late and left school early, creating a communication gap between teachers and the community. An SMC chairman highlighted that “all our madams are living in town; they have to manage the family and have to travel long distance every day. They always try to leave early. They do not attend any program in the locality and even do not know the local persons” (Interview 2, 11/10/2018). One of the head teachers agreed with this statement.

The data showed that teachers did not expect help from the community. There were also some problems with ego, especially in junior teachers. They thought that, being university graduates, they were only teachers and had no role in visiting their homes.

In some cases, some teachers who were working in their own locality might have had some family problems with the neighbors or others. This resulted in them building relationships with the community and the community could not involve them with the schools. An SMC chairman opined “some teachers are from our locality, they have problem with others for land, this effect the community involvement” (Interview 2, 11/10/2018).

5.3. *Community Involvement in Regular Student Attendance and Reducing Dropout: How to Mitigate the Challenges*

The study revealed some major initiatives that might help to mitigate the challenges in involving the community in student attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS. Most of the initiatives would be related to building awareness both in the school authorities and the community. The school authorities and the local and central education authority must position themselves as the responsible people in society. Teachers and education officers must adopt positions of leadership. Both head teachers firmly stated that “undoubtedly teachers have to take the responsibility” (Interviews 2&3, 14/10/2018). An AUEO agreed and added “we can make the teachers aware about the importance of community involvement for students’ regular attendance and reduce dropout and it’s our duty I think” (Interview 4, 20/10/2018).

First, teachers and local and central education authorities need to understand that despite introducing initiatives, we have not reached our targets in terms of regular attendance and reducing dropout. Community involvement could help a lot in that matter.

The data revealed that in the SMC and PTA committees, all representatives had political influence. In the SMC, two members were directly nominated politically, while others members were indirectly politically selected. It was not possible to be a chairman or vice chairman in those committees without political involvement, with educational or any other qualifications not recognized. As a result, an illiterate person might be the chairman of the committee and could therefore dominate the teachers. They tended to always prioritize their personal interests. Therefore, there need to be specific rules and criteria for committee membership, and some educational qualification could be a pre-condition for committee membership.

Teachers need to be dedicated, maintain a timetable, and follow instructions from the authorities. In the rural GPS, the prescribed timetables were not followed. As a result, they hesitated to ask for any help from the community. However, if the teachers were dedicated, the community would provide help on their own. An assistant teacher described the situation of her school, pointing out that about one and half years ago when their school was not following the timetable, a man from the village who was illiterate and a fisherman always shouted and misbehaved with the teachers. However, when they started to follow a 0900-1630 timetable, the same man began to come to school, behaved very well with the teachers, and tried to help them (FGD 1, 10/10/2018).

Teachers' home visits and *uthan boithok* were two very important assigned activities that must be emphasized to involve the community in student attendance. Through these activities, the school authorities (especially the teachers) and community became closer. Community people, especially the parents, received them cordially and became very grateful for the teachers. They also tried to send their children to school regularly. An assistant teacher shared that, after a few days, he visited a student at 20:00, when his father was not at home. The next day, when he met the teachers, he felt very sorry for not being at home and for not feeding them anything. Another teacher added that when they went to a student's house, the parents always tried to feed them something. Home visits also had an impact on other students. The news of teacher visits spread quickly between students and their parents and all the students more regularly attended school. Both the teachers said that, after visiting, all the students attended more regularly and did better in class (FGD 1, 10/10/2018).

6. Discussion

The discussion is presented under the three themes based on the research questions.

6.1. Current Practices with Regards to Involving the Community in Regular Student Attendance and Reducing Dropout in Rural GPS

6.1.1 Role of the SMC

In the rural GPS, the SMCs were shaped by the influence of political power. Two members came from direct political influences selected by the local MP, while the other five or six members had indirect relationships with political power. No educational qualification or any other monitoring, supervisory, or coordinating experiences were required to be members or chairmen of the community (MOPME, 2012, Art 2). From analyzing the study data from long working experiences with the GPS, it was found that these people were keen to come to the committees but were not interested in working according to the guidelines. They were not even interested in attending regular monthly meetings prescribed by authority. As a result, meetings were irregular and all the members, especially female members (MOPME, 2012, Art 2), were absent from the meetings. A similar result was observed in a study in rural Andhra Pradesh, in that less than 70% of SMC members had participated in even one monthly meeting during their tenure (Rao 2009 as cited in Sharma). The SMC had an obligation to give a written report on student attendance to the UEO in every four months. It was their duty to ensure community involvement and try to increase student attendance and to reduce dropout (MOPME, 2012). In reality, as most of the committee members came from political influences, their aim was to obtain financial benefits rather than cooperate with head teachers. As a result, a blame game was established between the head teacher and the other members of the SMC. Islam & Helal (2017) reported similar findings, highlighting that a "lack of SMC meeting is another problem in the row which is making hindrances on the way of its active role play. Most of the HTs think that such meetings are of no use, while most of the SMC members reveal that HTs do not take step to hold SMC meeting" (p.98).

6.1.2 Practices of the PTA

The PTA should have had three years of validation and two meetings per year. The aim of the association was to create good relationships between teachers and parents and to find the causes of dropout and to help the SMC and school authorities reduce dropout (MOPME, 2000). Our data revealed that PTA meetings were not held regularly; even the committee was not formed properly. The school authorities only created the PTAs due to some obligation from the local or central education authorities, and they remained "on paper" only. No PTA activities actually built relationships between the SMC, parents, and teachers. Instead, we found that the two committees *divided* parents and communities for their personal benefit and for social position. The study "Participatory Evaluation: Causes of Primary School Dropout" by RTM International on behalf of Directorate of Primary Education reported that most parents did not know anything about PTAs and had not heard about PTAs and their meetings, nor did they have any knowledge about their activities.

6.1.3 School Level Improvement Plan Formulating Team

According to the operational guidelines, the SLIP team had the highest responsibility and obligation to ensure community involvement in every aspect of school improvement. The team was formed from the SMC, PTA, and teachers. It was their duty to ensure the presence of community people at all school functions like mothers' gathering days, sports days, parents' days, PTA meetings, etc. (MOPME, 2017).

Although the SLIP team did undertake some activities that involved the community, it did not perform its expected role. For example, the SLIP team did not arrange orientation meetings with the SMC, PTA, teachers, and

other stakeholders and community to involve them with the school and express their hope and desire to improve the school and to provide proper guidelines on how they could be involved. Instead of working as team, the SMC, PTA, and teachers made the situation more complex. In particular, the SMC chairman and the head teacher held opposite positions, as they had the power to withdraw from the SLIP account. Most SMC chairmen did not tell the other members about the expenditure, while head teacher hid it from assistant teachers. As the SMC chairman was politically and socially powerful, he sometimes took the seed money instead of helping. The head teacher had no way to protest. The PTA and other stakeholders and related persons within SLIP remained in the dark due to this corruption.

6.1.4 Home Visits: Individual Activities of Teachers

It is compulsory for every government primary teacher to make at least one home visit every month. Home visits should take place to ensure 100% enrollment of school-going children in a school's catchment area to ensure regular attendance, reduce dropout, build relationships between teachers and parents, and to discuss problems or progress of the students with their parents (DPE 2018). During these visits, the teacher should visit the student's house and write a report to the head teacher and then keep it. The LEA had to ensure that visits were taking place by checking the report (DPE, 2018). According to the data, all the teachers were not doing home visits in this way. Instead, to avoid problems with the LEA during their inspections, the teachers made a table visit (false report). The school had parents' mobile numbers in their register and sometimes teachers made phone calls to the parents instead of physically visiting their homes. However, this phone call was not as effective as home visits, even though it had some positive impact on student attendance and performance. An order from DD (inclusive education), DPE (Bangladesh) reflected these findings, showing that home visits were taking place but they were not actually happening. He ordered the DPEO to check the home visits of about 5-7 schools by a skilled UEO (DPE, 2018).

6.1.5 Child-friendly and Well-decorated Classrooms

There was a provision that the PTA would help the SMC and the school authorities make the school environment attractive and stimulating so that children could learn in safe and joyful environment. It was their foremost duty to find out the causes of dropout and try to reduce it (MOPME, 2000). The motto of SLIP was also to decorate the classroom. In the visit form of primary school, there were several columns about classroom decoration. The data revealed that the SMC and PTA played no role in classroom decoration; instead, mothers played role through financial and other help.

6.2. Challenges in Involving the Community in Regular Student Attendance and Reducing Dropout in Rural GPS

By analyzing the field data, we identified some challenges in involving the community in regular student attendance and reducing dropout.

6.2.1 Poverty of Rural People

Poverty was one of the main reasons for not involving the community with school. Some people in rural areas lived with marginal levels of poverty. The males in these families had to leave early and return home late at night. It was difficult for the teachers to meet with them. Mothers or females were busy housework and could not give time for their children's education. Sometimes children were engaged in work to earn money for the family. While the government provided a stipend of one hundred taka per month for every student, children aged over eight could earn more than one hundred taka per day. Therefore, families were utilizing the children as a source of income generation. In these cases, while teachers tried to motivate the guardians to send their children to school, they did not cooperate with the teachers, even sometimes avoiding meeting with the teachers or school authorities. Create (2011) reported similar findings. Current stipend schemes do not appear to be sufficient to reduce costs to zero, so these must be either increased and better targeted or abandoned in favor of school-based improvements in health and feeding programs, school materials, as well as more schools and teachers. There are also similar findings in secondary education in Bangladesh. Poverty and lower educational attainment are also common obstacles to performing these responsibilities, since poor parents need to concentrate more on providing support for the family. Moreover, parents (mostly mothers) with multiple responsibilities, i.e., job and household management, tend to invest less time in children at home or engaging with school initiatives (Kabir & Akter, 2014).

6.2.2 Lack of Awareness About the Benefits of Formal Education

A lack of awareness by rural people about the benefits of formal education and a lack of understanding by teachers and others about the importance of involving the community were other significant challenges. Epstein (2011) reported that many schools lacked an understanding of the resources available to support schools: "many educators, families, and students are unaware of the resources in their communities. Indeed, many are unclear where their community begins and ends" (p.462). In addition, financial solvency, educational level, and awareness of parents also matter when performing their obligations both towards schools and students' learning processes. For instance, although schools sometimes took the initiative to hear parents' concerns through SMCs, parents did not always respond, thinking that their responsibility was only in sending children to school; the remained was the teachers' responsibility, which discouraged schools to take such initiatives (Kabir & Akter, 2014).

6.2.3 Tendency to Live in Cities or Towns

Educated and more affluent people from rural areas had a tendency to live in cities and towns to access modern facilities such as communication, electricity supplies, and other facilities not available in rural areas. Therefore, it was difficult for the school authorities to communicate properly with them and involve them with the school. In addition, most teachers lived in the nearest towns. According to the APSC (2016), 66.9% of teachers are female in GPS (p.100), making the situation even more complex. They had to travel long distances every day and it was difficult for them to manage their time. They were not interested in coming to school early or staying late. As a result, they did not participate in programs or functions held in the community, and they were not even interested in being involved with celebrating various days in school. As a result, relations between the teachers and the community were not built.

6.2.4 Political and Conceptual Contradiction

Political and conceptual contradictions in the local elite and political leaders also hindered involving the community with rural GPS. Leaders from different political parties would not cooperate for the greater welfare of the community. Elite or other local leaders had some conceptual contradictions which kept them away from being involved with the schools.

6.3. *Initiatives to Mitigate the Challenges of Involving the Community in Regular Student Attendance and Reducing Dropout in Rural GPS*

The study paves the way for initiatives to mitigate the identified challenges of involving the community in regular attendance and reducing dropout in rural GPS. Initiatives should involve all stakeholders.

6.3.1 Initiatives from the School Authority (Head teacher)

The school authority and the local and central education authorities need to promote themselves as the responsible groups in society. The head teacher should be in a leadership position. Kladić (2013) stated that “the principal needs to be able to involve the faculty and staff in understanding the importance of school and community partnerships” (p.58). First, teachers and the local and central education authorities need to understand that existing initiatives have failed. Community involvement could help them attain their targets. As leaders, head teachers should try to build better communication with everyone in the school catchment area, not least the local elite, political leaders, local government representatives, and local education authority, because:

“School and community partnerships are built on relationships of trust and effective interpersonal communication. A review of the research revealed that successful school and community partnerships were created through leadership, trust, stability, readiness and sustained outreach.” (Auerbach, 2011; Epstein, Sanders, Sheldon & Simon 2005 as cited Kladić, 2013, p.55)

Head teachers could ask for help from local education authorities. Some schools have overcome challenges, and head teachers could discuss their successes with them to help to mitigate ongoing challenges. Epstein (2011) pointed out that “schools exist within communities and a principal needs to be proactive in developing relationships with stakeholders throughout the community” (p.462).

6.3.2 Initiatives from Teachers

Teachers must be dedicated, maintain timetables, and follow the instructions of the authorities. In rural areas, GPS did not follow the timetable prescribed by their authority. As a result, they hesitated to ask for help from the community but, if the teachers were dedicated, the community would come and help on their own.

Teachers’ home visits and *uthan boithok* need to be strengthened. The community, especially the parents, could forge better relationships with teachers through physical home visits to students’ houses, as parents receive them cordially and become very grateful to the teachers.

6.3.3 Initiatives from the Local Education Authority

The local education authority should take the lead in building sound relationships between all committees, associations, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in the community. They should monitor and inspire the teachers to work according to the law and try to make them aware of the benefits of community involvement. They could visit students’ houses with teachers to inspire and to check teachers’ work. They could coordinate meetings with the SMC, PTA, and other community stakeholders at the beginning of the year and share ideas on doing all the work collectively for the improvement of the school as suggested by Fullan (2010) in school settings. PTA meetings should be held on a regular basis to involve parents in the governance process. SMC members as well as education officers need to attend these meetings. Parents need to be informed about the progress of their children so that they understand their duties (Islam & Helal, 2017, p.100).

7. Conclusions

This study shows that community was not explicitly involved in matters relating to regular student attendance and reducing dropout in a desired manner. The SMC and SLIP team played a role in some cases, but the PTA had no role in this regard. Home visits and mothers’ gatherings were not performed in an effective way. The existing challenges highlight areas that need to be addressed to mitigate against these barriers.

To build a sound professional relationship in the school setting, this research emphasizes the need for effective communication between school authorities and community members, with head teachers taking leadership roles. Teachers must become more dedicated and conscientious in conducting physical home visits, mothers' gatherings, and *uthan boithok*. Through all stakeholders becoming conscious about community involvement, we hope that they will use their respective positions to promote regular attendance and reduce dropout by adopting a collaborative approach.

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