

Community-based accountability for school improvement

A case study from rural India

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In 2011, he won the Pearson Education Prize for his doctoral research in leadership and organisational behaviour at Surrey Business School (part of the Faculty of Management and Law at the University of Surrey). His book *Learning and the Brain* (Teachers' Pocketbooks) was published in 2011.



Executive summary

Overview

This report looks at community-based accountability and parental participation as a lever for school improvement in rural India. It reviews a case study project in Andhra Pradesh, originally funded by the Department for International Development, which was set up in the context of failures in primary education access and quality across the state. The project used a novel approach to improve primary school standards: the training of illiterate mothers to inspect and report on local school quality using a simple traffic-light scorecard process.

This is an important case study for education policymakers as they turn their attention to the potential of community-based accountability to drive school improvements. The judicious use of this 'short route' of accountability is seen as a way of increasing 'return' without greatly increasing expenditure: a cost-effective way of driving basic school improvements in resource-poor settings (World Bank, 2004; Bruns et al., 2011).

This case study research gathers some valuable insights for policymakers by capturing these improvement forces in action:

- ***How and why did schools become more accountable to parents and School Management Committees (SMCs)? How did the SMCs change and get better at holding schools to account?***
- ***What is the evidence for improved school quality?***
- ***Which kind of social shifts underpinned successful community-based accountability reforms e.g. how did the parent-school relationship change and what did 'parental empowerment' look like?***
- ***What are the contextual factors which made this intervention powerful?***
- ***What were the critical success factors for this project from which other policymakers can learn?***

Context and theoretical underpinning (Chapter 1)

The project is an innovative example of the 'short route of accountability' (World Bank, 2004) where service user voice, performance transparency and localised accountability are central to the intervention. This section reviews the growing literature in this field and the case for increasing policy attention. There is emerging international evidence that community-based accountability interventions can lead to improved service provision and improved intermediary outcomes such as increased community voice, participation levels and service provider responsiveness. However, significant evidence gaps in the literature remain: what are the local contextual factors which affect success? What are the exact mechanisms and social processes through which community-based accountability drives change? Our research questions are designed to address some of these gaps.

The intervention (Chapter 2)

The project, Vidya Chaitanyam, empowered women in rural Andhra Pradesh to apply pressure to their local primary schools for quality improvement. It supported collective action by engaging a large network of existing women's Self Help Groups to monitor school quality in a simple scorecard and to publish it in their own group meetings and at School Management Committees. A highly innovative



feature of the project was to empower the most marginalised women in the community, the illiterate and semi-literate, to undertake these scorecard assessments.

This intervention was designed in the context of very poor primary school provision in isolated areas of Anantapur, coupled with weak existing mechanisms for accountability and improvement.

Research methodology (Chapter 3)

A retrospective evaluation was undertaken to build on findings from internal project evaluation reports. New primary research was conducted, funded by CfBT Education Trust and designed and carried out by an external evaluation team at the Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) in Hyderabad, India. Secondary data from previous evaluation studies and project monitoring data was also collected together and analysed.

Findings (Chapter 4)

How and why did schools become more accountable to parents and School Management Committees? How did the SMCs change and get better at holding schools to account?

What is the evidence for improved school quality?

Which kind of social shifts underpinned successful community-based accountability reforms e.g. how did the parent-school relationship change and what did 'parental empowerment' look like?

Key finding 1: There were significant improvements in school accountability as School Management Committees (SMCs) began to function more effectively and with greater parental participation compared to a control group and the project baseline.

There was clear evidence of improved school accountability to parents and the SMC:

- Evidence that SMC meetings increased in regularity, alongside statistically significant increases in parental awareness of SMC meetings and parental interaction with SMC members, compared to a control group.
- Evidence of increasingly purposeful SMC agendas being set over the project lifetime, which identified more relevant school issues for discussion.
- Evidence of increased parental challenge and pressure for improvement at the SMC. Parents in project schools were significantly more likely to make suggestions for school improvement than in a control group.
- Evidence for improved school responsiveness and resolution of issues. Headteachers in project schools were significantly more likely to act on SMC feedback than in the control schools.

The qualitative evidence from parents and students suggests that these newly effective SMCs drove up the quality of education through increased teacher effort in the classroom and through better management of school resources. There is also anecdotal evidence that the new community-generated scorecard data improved traditional school oversight by education officials as they engaged in the women's Self Help Group meetings, reviewed school scorecard data trends and listened to women's escalated concerns.



Key finding 2: There were statistically significant improvements in school quality compared to the project baseline, as measured by the self reported school scorecard results.

Most strikingly there were strong improvements over time in: teacher attendance, student attendance, student performance and the quality of the midday meal. These findings are supported by rich qualitative evidence from parents, headteachers and students, which provide insight into improved teacher effort in terms of attendance, effort in the classroom and more varied instruction methods. These themes were absent in qualitative data from control groups. The scorecard findings provide only partial evidence and have not been triangulated with other secondary data sources e.g. pupil attendance and learning outcomes data not compared against a control group.

Key finding 3: The success of the community-led accountability reforms was dependent on profound changes in the parent-school relationship. The study sheds light on the nature of these changes and parental ‘empowerment’.

Shifts were seen in parental skills, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in relation to education and schools. This supported two key changes critical for improved school accountability:

- A **more equal power balance** between the community and the school, which enabled effective community pressure and school improvement dialogue.
- A sense of **joint responsibility** for school and student performance, between the parents and the school. This encouraged parental ownership of education issues and collaborative problem solving in a new ‘community of practice’ in understanding, debating and resolving school issues.

‘Parental empowerment’ was therefore not just an oppositional force against schools; it was characterised by increased parental engagement in their children’s education as they increasingly understood their role and responsibilities in supporting school improvement.

Analysis and conclusions (Chapter 5)

The review generates a number of valuable conclusions for policymakers and practitioners.

What are the contextual factors which made this intervention powerful?

What were the critical success factors for this project from which other policymakers can learn?

Community-led accountability was a powerful and appropriate lever for school improvement in the context of rural Anantapur for the following reasons:

- By focusing on foundational school quality measures, the widely illiterate community was able to engage with the issues relatively easily.
- The baseline school performance was poor so a focus on resolving basic issues (such as teacher attendance) was also highly appropriate and could yield large improvements in school quality (Gillies and Quijada, 2008).
- Pressure for change was focused on areas where headteachers and SMCs had the authority and capability to respond through better management and resource allocation.



- The community-based nature of the intervention was highly appropriate because it filled a service void left by weak government oversight.

Two local pre-conditions were also critical:

- The pre-existing social capital from the microfinance sector, in the form of highly functioning women's Self Help Groups, which supported parental empowerment.
- An existing national and state policy context of decentralisation, which included a strong role for parents in School Management Committees.

A number of critical design factors supported the project's success:

(1) Empowering and engaging parents through:

- Knowledge and skills e.g. about educational rights and how to engage with education professionals.
- The right tools to increase transparency and provide 'content' for parental voice i.e. the simple scorecard with quality indicators.
- The right fora for education debate and to apply pressure i.e. the School Management Committee and the Self Help Group meeting infrastructure.
- Providing parents with a clear 'role' and confidence to engage with educational issues i.e. the decision to engage the existing Self Help Groups in school oversight and to make education a formal part of their remit so that community members became comfortable and familiar with school quality discussions.

(2) Engaging local District officials through:

- The alignment and convergence of scorecard indicators with their own school inspection criteria
- The submission of regular data and reports to Mandal and District level officials to support their own existing school oversight responsibilities.

(3) Ensuring full buy-in from the school through a carefully managed school sensitisation stage to introduce the scorecard process and benefits.

(4) Promoting dialogue and links across all of these actors, creating a shared understanding of school quality expectations and a shared culture of accountability.

Next steps

This report demonstrates the potential of a community-based accountability model to transform primary education in a rural setting in a development context. It recommends a series of known 'success factors' for future project design in a similar context, as well as further research to investigate the model's potential across different geographical and socio-cultural settings.



It also recommends four further avenues of research:

- Investigation of the female role model effect in a scorecard monitoring role.
- Qualitative investigation of the effect of community pressure on improved teacher effort.
- Validation of self-reported scorecard results via other impact data.
- Further research into the impact of community pressure on Mandal and District level decision making.



1 Context and theoretical underpinning

This project was an innovative example of the ‘short route of accountability’ (World Bank, 2004), where service user voice, performance transparency and localised accountability were central to the intervention. It drew on recent policy and academic debates which link failures in service provision to poor governance caused by a lack of transparency and access to public information, weak accountability relationships and low levels of citizen participation. Using these understandings of service failure, academics and international development agencies (particularly the World Bank and DFID) are turning their attention to the power of community-based accountability mechanisms to drive service improvements.

This section provides a short review of the literature in this growing policy field, including some of the emerging gaps and criticisms which informed the focus of this study.

The short and long routes of accountability

The World Bank’s Development Report (2004) identified two forms of accountability through which citizens can influence public service delivery in areas such as education and health. The first, the long route, occurs when the elected government acts on behalf of citizens to hold service providers to account. The government needs to listen carefully to citizen voice (i.e. the service user perspective) and service data when regulating services, to maintain their political mandate and credibility. The second form of accountability, the short route, occurs at community level when citizens engage directly with service providers and their management to apply pressure for improvement.

Advocates suggest the short route is underpinned by three main principles:

Firstly, the increased **availability and transparency of information** on service performance and entitlements will act as a lever for change, addressing issues of information asymmetry and stimulating citizen involvement and demand for better performance. Therefore:

“An important defining feature of information-for-accountability interventions is that they focus on the use of information, in and of itself, as the instrument of change [rather than] as an input into a system of official rewards and sanctions.” (Bruns et al., 2011).

Secondly, this information supplies content for enhancing citizen’s ‘voice’ to apply **challenge and pressure** through the exposing of shortcomings and inequalities (Keefer and Khemani, 2005; Majumdar, Mani and Mukand, 2004) or through exercising their **choice** for better service providers and ‘voting with their feet’.

Thirdly, the model is based on the principle that increased citizen pressure will be answered by sharpened **provider responsiveness** in meeting their needs. Thus demand-side ‘client power’ will drive up the quality of supply-side provision.

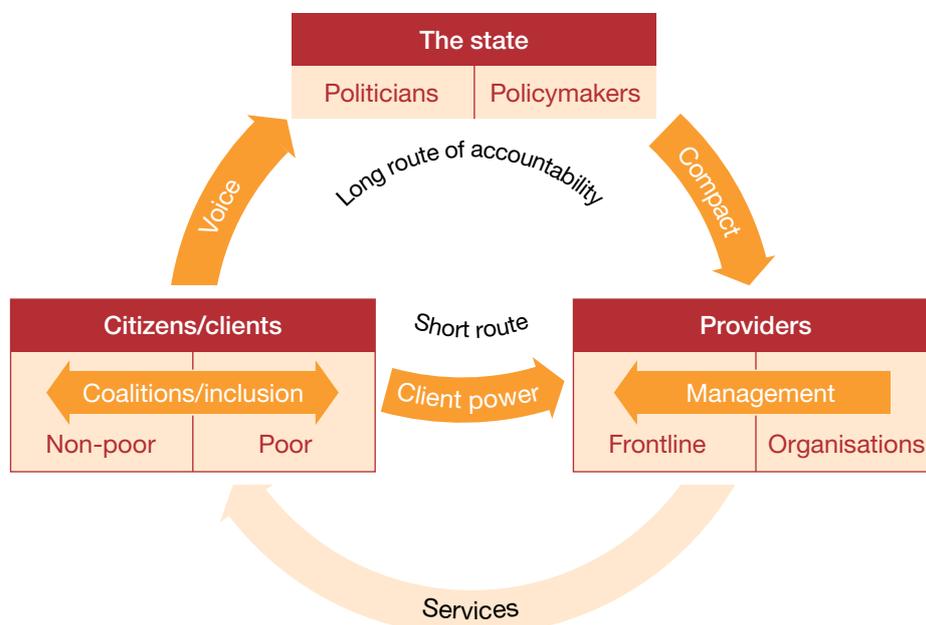


Figure 1: The short route of accountability (World Bank, 2004)

The short route theory sits within two main academic and policy contexts. Firstly, it is a model underpinned by basic economic principles such as supply, demand, market forces and 'client power'. Secondly, it is part of a wider philosophy of decentralisation of decision making and responsibility, including 'information for accountability' policies which argue for local access to information about school quality as a lever for change (e.g. Bruns et al., 2011). Advocates argue that decentralisation has the power to bring the ability to influence services within the reach of ordinary people (Bruns et al., 2011; Gertler et al., 2011) and facilitate the relationship between government policy and people preference (Besley and Coate, 2003; Besley and Ghatak, 2003; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2007; Lockwood, 2002).

Further insights into how and why community-based accountability drives change

In an evaluation of over 60 community-based accountability initiatives, Rocha Menocal and Sharma (2008) conclude that the causal chain of results in these initiatives is rooted in the idea of citizen 'empowerment' and is generally assumed as follows:



Figure 2: Causal chain of results generally assumed in short route of accountability approaches (Rocha Menocal and Sharma, 2008)



In the education sector specifically, Bruns et al. (2011) have developed more detailed explanations of the links between community empowerment and provider responsiveness. For example, scorecard approaches typically combine increasing the collection and availability of information about local school quality with the opportunity for direct community involvement in school governance. Bruns et al. describe how and why this combination of local participation and performance oversight is a powerful lever of change:

“Parent participation and oversight potentially enable closer monitoring of resource allocation – ensuring alignment between what parents want (which may include higher test scores) and the way resources are deployed. Participation also enables close monitoring of effort on the part of teachers and other educators. Both of these results – better deployed resources and greater effort – are, in turn, inputs into higher learning outcomes.”
(Bruns et al., 2011).

They also argue that better information will help managers to direct resources more effectively, although this is a general function of management information rather than improved local accountability per se. Finally they describe how the promotion of dialogue and consultation amongst all actors can alleviate information asymmetries and so promote more conducive learning environments.

In summary, the short route is deemed to function through better citizen choice, participation, oversight (and so pressure and challenge) of resource allocation and teacher effort, immediate service feedback and improved dialogue.

Chapter 4 of this research report examines the Anantapur project in context of the short route model, looking at how far local accountability relationships have been transformed by increased empowerment, transparency and pressure on schools, and how far this has actually led to service improvement.

Challenges to the ‘short route’ model

Several key challenges to the ‘short route’ theory emerge in recent literature.

Firstly, there is mixed evidence about the impact of community oversight on public service outcomes. A number of interventions have shown positive impact, but others have failed to drive any service improvements at all, even where there is strong evidence for successful intermediary outcomes, such as increased community participation and increased service provider effort.

Education sector approaches to community-based accountability

Typical education initiatives exemplified by the short route model include:

- School based management (Barrera et al., 2009)
- Parental participation in governance
- School performance scorecards
- Localised teacher contracting (Pandey et al., 2009)

Community scorecards are used in the case study explored in this research report. This is where community members collect and publish information about local service quality. Such an approach is seen as effective because it provides parents and clients with the information that they need in order to leverage improvements in services. Such scorecards link service providers directly with the community and enable citizens to provide immediate feedback.



Positive findings include Bjorkman and Svensson's study (2009) showing impact on health services and health outcomes from information-sharing and community-led action planning in Uganda. Pandey et al. (2009) found impact on learning outcomes, across three states in India, from information and rights campaigns targeted at local communities. Another successful example comes from Pakistan, where student and village level scorecards improved school performance transparency across whole village markets, and led to improvements in test scores.

However, some studies report no impact, including an important study by Banerjee et al. (2008) in Uttar Pradesh, India. The project encouraged the use of existing School Management Committees, raised educational rights awareness and improved monitoring of school performance. The intervention did not increase community participation in School Management Committees and therefore had no impact on education outcomes or teacher effort. Banerjee and colleagues concluded that:

"Whatever the explanation it seems clear that the current faith in participation as a panacea for the problems of service delivery is unwarranted. It is possible that it can work on a more systematic basis, but it would take a lot of patience to get there." (Banerjee et al., 2008: 25).

Secondly, there has been little in-depth examination from a qualitative research perspective of the exact mechanisms through which transparency and oversight lead to improved accountability and improved outcomes:

*"Enthusiasm for TAIs [Transparency and Accountability Initiatives] has overtaken an assessment of impact. Does increasing transparency or supporting social accountability initiatives lead to the desired outcomes? **What are the assumed links through which these impacts are expected to occur?** While there is a wide range of anecdotal evidence suggesting that such initiatives are successful, which seems to be the basis for them being replicated and capturing scholarly and popular imagination, there is little careful examination of these questions."* (Joshi, 2010: 1; our emphasis).

For example, exactly how does the increased oversight and close monitoring which Bruns et al. (2011) describe lead to increased school responsiveness in terms of greater teacher effort and better resource allocation? How does school improvement occur when generated by community pressure? The link from parental pressure to service improvement has been shown to be rather tenuous where School Management Committees lack the capacity and skills to govern; there is some evidence that SMCs may be less able than government in the administration of schools (Smith, 1985).

Thirdly, concerns have been raised about the assumptions behind the model and its supposed universality. The mixed evidence base raises the question as to what specific conditions need to be put into place in order for 'short route' methods to be successful in any given area. There have been few examinations of such pre-conditions and the underlying factors that are critical for the 'short route' to work:



“A growing body of evidence demonstrates that achievements in increasing citizens’ voice and accountability will not necessarily lead to better service delivery outcomes... the relationship between these dynamics can be far more complex than is often imagined and greater attention needs to be paid to some of the underlying factors that can shape whether or not accountability is a driver of service delivery.” (Wild and Harris, 2011)

and

“In summary, these evaluation studies answer one big question – finding that, yes, information appears to have the potential to leverage change for improving learning outcomes – but they also raise many additional questions. Further research is likely needed to establish, more consistently and clearly, when and how information can be used most effectively.” (Bruns et al., 2011: 65).

For example, in a schools context, some studies suggest that impact of such interventions on educational outcomes is strongly mediated by parental ‘capital’. In Gambia, Blimpo and Evans (2011) found no impact on learning outcomes from SMC training and a grant to initiate school improvement plans, except in communities where SMC members were more educated. This was in spite of clear increases in parental participation across all communities. Beasley and Huillery (2012) report similar findings in Niger, where increased supervision of teacher attendance was only found in the more educated communities.

In other words, it cannot be assumed that parental ‘voice’ will be effective and a driver of accountability in all contexts: parents do not always have the ability to make their voices heard and decentralisation can allow local elites to capture the benefits of public resources (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2005). Recent political economy analyses have explored some of these dynamics, examining how existing unequal power relations within communities can stymie efforts to increase parental voice (Wild and Harris, 2011).

Finally, the concept of ‘choice’ is problematic, especially in poor rural areas where citizens cannot ‘vote with their feet’ to choose alternative providers:

*“School choice is an important variable as it affects the types of students who attend the school and may induce specialization of competition. When choice is feasible, competition among schools can give rise to client power, a useful ‘short route of accountability’. **Of course, school choice is often non-existent, especially in rural areas, and accountability must be obtained by other means.**” (Reinikka and Smith, 2004: 60; our emphasis).*

Chapters 4 and 5 of this research report are written in response to some of these critiques and research gaps, deepening our understanding of the accountability changes which took place in Anantapur. They reflect on exactly how and why accountability was transformed and how a strong understanding of local context and power dynamics was central to the project’s success.



2 The Vidya Chaitanyam intervention

Context and need

The project objective was to support **citizens' ability to demand, monitor and advocate for quality service delivery from government and non-government basic educational providers** in Andhra Pradesh, India. It aimed to empower citizen groups in 60 selected Village Organisations (VOs) located in seven Mandals (regions) of Anantapur district in rural Andhra Pradesh¹ to monitor, report on, and claim their rights of access to quality basic educational provision.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is a Government of India initiative launched in 2001 with a remit to universalise quality elementary (6–14) education across India. It also has a strong decentralisation remit, with aims to increase accountability of schools to communities. This was mandated and enhanced under the Right to Education Act (2009) through the formation of the School Management Committee (SMC) for primary schools.

Primary school enrolment rates have risen impressively across India: the Government of India's flagship elementary education programme *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) has brought an additional 60 million children into school over the last decade, achieving near universal enrolment (CREATE, 2009; Little, 2010; UNICEF, 2011). However, the **quality of education** still remains a pressing concern. Teacher absenteeism in Andhra Pradesh is thought to be as high as 23% and student absenteeism 25% (ASER, 2011). Nearly 50% of government school children in Andhra Pradesh reach standard 3 unable to read a paragraph and 15% cannot read a word (ASER, 2011).

The project was therefore developed in the context of poor rural school quality, which was coupled with weak state capacity to hold the schools to account i.e. a failure of the 'long route' of accountability. Endemic school quality issues in rural Anantapur mirrored those at a national level including poor teacher and student attendance levels. Half of Mandal Education Officer posts, charged with carrying out school inspections, were staffed by headteachers with little capacity to undertake additional workload, so school oversight under these arrangements was seldom fulfilled. At the community level the baseline context was one of mass community illiteracy, with few parents of the new generation of elementary school children having been to school themselves and poor parental knowledge of the right to education for their own children. Finally, existing community accountability mechanisms were very weak due to the overall ineffectiveness of newly formed School Management Committees (a national agenda, driven by SSA, see box above for details).

The project design

The most innovative feature of the Vidya Chaitanyam (VC) project was the capacity building of illiterate and semi-literate women to assess the quality of basic education provision in state schools through the use of school scorecards, on a par with education professionals. The idea was to empower the most marginalised community members to hold their local schools to account through regular face-to-face 'inspection' visits to collect the scorecard data and through the publication of results at the local School Management Committee and at local women's Self Help Groups. This built a cadre of local parents who became fully engaged in community-based discussions about education quality for the first time.

¹ Bukkaraya samudram, Peddavadhur, Bathalapalli, Gandlapenta, Hindupuram, Madakasira (all DFID funded) and Gudibanda (SSA funded)



This concept was underpinned by a carefully sequenced set of interventions:

- Information campaigns to build local awareness and knowledge of the Right to Education Act. Before this came into force, awareness-raising focused on basic education rights under the Indian Constitution (access, quality and parental participation).
- Design of a simple scorecard which set out some basic quality criteria for schools. This was a tool to guide community expectations of the dimensions of school quality and to support discussions with SMCs.
- Capacity building and training of local Self Help Group women (see box on page 17) in the use of the scorecard monitoring tool, including how to approach headteachers, observe activity, record data and report back at the School Management Committees. Importantly, education was set as a formal agenda item for the first time at all Self Help Group meetings, meaning that women became familiar with discussing school quality issues in their own meetings before airing their concerns at the formal School Management Committees.
- Campaigning by project staff (Education Activists called Vidya Karyakarthis) in each village, including door-to-door campaigns, to encourage parental attendance at SMC meetings.
- Strengthening of the existing government-sponsored School Management Committees (SMCs), including training on effective management procedures and participation expectations. This gave parents a forum in which to voice their concerns and discuss school scorecard performance. The expectation was set for monthly SMC meetings in line with the specifications of the education department, including discussion of scorecard results and the spot-checking of student performance.

The theory of change was that improved rights awareness and service expectations, combined with improved transparency and service information, provided an empowered community with the knowledge and tools to demand improvements. The strengthened SMC forum then provided the community with a better process of accountability to negotiate these improvements.

The Vidya Chaitanyam project

- Translates as: 'Self Help Group Partnership in Education Programme'
- Delivered in rural Anantapur district, Andhra Pradesh state
- Beneficiaries: 500 schools; 50,000 children
- Funded by DFID and Government of India, 2008-2012
- 7 regional Mandals, covering over 330 villages and over 5,500 Self Help Groups

School Management Committees in India

Decentralisation is an underpinning principle of the Government of India's national SSA programme to universalise primary education. At the school level this includes mandatory formation of School Management Committees for every school nationwide, with meetings typically held on a monthly basis.

Clear guidelines exist for the election, structure, membership and communication of SMC meetings e.g. specifications for parental, female and student representation. SMC practice across Andhra Pradesh was not consistent with these specifications before the VC project, with poor parental attendance and schools commonly submitting falsified attendance registers to the education department, where parents' signatures were collected for registers (so achieving compliance with SSA) for a meeting which did not then take place.



Key design features of the project were:

- The use of **existing social capital** to build community and women's empowerment, through Self Help Groups which led the school monitoring. This also had the benefit of the existing Self Help Group meeting infrastructure (see page 17), where education issues could be escalated and discussed.
- The **strong state buy-in** to the project through:
 - **Convergence** of quality indicators: the Andhra Pradesh *Learning Enhancement Program* uses a framework of 29 indicators to grade school quality. The VC project aligned the scorecard design with key indicators from this framework to build on this dialogue and to create a shared understanding of quality at the school community level and the state level.
 - Submission of data and reports to Mandal and District level officials, to support their own role in school oversight.
- A carefully managed **school sensitisation and capacity building** stage before introducing the monitoring activity. The process and benefits were explained to headteachers and teachers were given training in effective pedagogy and access to new resources such as high quality teaching and learning materials. These materials were directly managed by the women's groups at Mandal Education Resource Centres.
- The use of **existing mechanisms** to strengthen the accountability process i.e. the use of the School Management Committees to discuss and report on the scorecard results, which would be displayed at the meeting using wall charts and graphs. The SMCs had already been introduced through the nationwide flagship SSA programme.



Building the capacity of mothers through the school scorecard



Self Help Groups (SHGs)

The use of well-established Self Help Groups as the platform for this project was central to its design and success. Originally established 15 years ago through a United National Development Programme, the Self Help Groups have become famous in Andhra Pradesh for their success in community-based micro credit initiatives.

For the first time, the VC project made *education* part of the groups' community agenda by:



- Securing Andhra Pradesh state level buy-in to this new SHG education watchdog role.
- Working in partnership with **SERP (Society for the Elimination for Rural Poverty)**, which sits within the Andhra Pradesh Department for Rural Development and whose remit is to train and fund SHGs as part of their wider rural poverty elimination role. SERP supported CfBT in the selection and training of the SHGs in the seven UNDP Mandals.

The Self Help Groups comprise a group of 10–12 local women who meet regularly to discuss microfinance initiatives and other community issues. Although typically 70% of the women are illiterate, as a group they have developed core skills in basic accounting, agenda setting, minute-keeping and the tracking and follow-up of issues raised in meeting agendas.

The groups have a well established reporting hierarchy for issue escalation and resolution, connecting into District and State level officials who regularly attend the higher level meetings:

- Each group discusses community-level issues.
- These are escalated and reported at Village Organisation (VO) meetings, where the Education Sub-Committees have been formed.
- VO representatives attend Mandal-level group meetings called Mandal Mahila Samakhala (MMS). These are regularly attended by government Mandal Education Officers.
- The umbrella name for all seven MMS is Ananta Maha Samakhya (AMS), which is an autonomous legal entity. It holds a monthly General Body meeting and, since the project interventions, this includes an education agenda item. This is sometimes attended by state officials.
- The AMS lead (District Co-ordinator) works closely with SERP's Project Director at the Andhra Pradesh state level.

The project drew on the social capital of these groups, built over many years in relation to the microfinance sector, using it to support an education initiative for the first time. Critical to the project therefore was the incorporation of education onto the agenda of the groups' hierarchy of meetings.



The school scorecard design

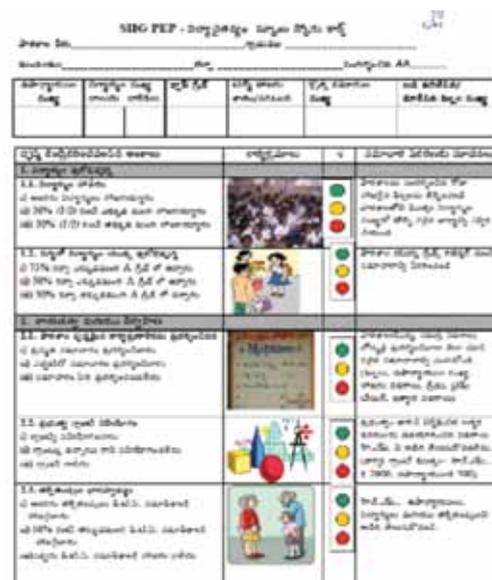
The scorecard was designed as a monitoring instrument for key dimensions of school quality:

Key Focus Areas	Sub Areas
Students' progress	Students' attendance Students' academic performance
Leadership and management	Display of school statistics Utilisation of government grants Parental support
Teaching and learning	Attendance of teachers Utilisation of teaching and learning materials Co-curricular activities
Infrastructure	Maintenance Provision of midday meal Toilets
Image of the school	Parental involvement in SMC meetings

Figure 3: The scorecard framework

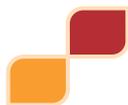
The indicators were carefully designed in consultation with District level officials and in line with state level indicators already in use by officials through the Learning Enhancement Program. Given the 70% illiteracy rate amongst the SHG women, the scorecard was designed with clear visual symbols to identify each indicator and simple traffic-light indicators were developed as a ratings system. The cut-off points for each colour rating were agreed collaboratively with input from District level officials to align with existing indicators and standards.

The scorecard itself served as a tool for raising awareness and expectations amongst the women about school quality and, for the first time, generating an understanding of 'what good looks like' in an education context.



The scorecard in Telugu, the local language

Results from the scorecard were shared in SMCs and at Self Help Group meetings, where typically a public display of graphs was published to track changes in colour ratings for each indicator over time. Graphs were also shared at higher-level SHG meetings: at Village Organisation meetings, at monthly Mandal level (MMS) meetings, often with the official Mandal Education Officer, and at monthly AMS meetings (see box on page 17 for definition). As well as scorecard data, the parents were also trained to undertake simple 'live' tests of a sample of students on selected academic topics at SMC meetings, to identify major teaching and learning issues.



3 Research methodology

This retrospective evaluation was conducted using a mixture of new primary research funded by CfBT Education Trust and secondary data taken from existing project monitoring and evaluation records, including reports funded by DFID. The primary research was designed and carried out by CESS (Centre for Economic and Social Studies) from Hyderabad, India.

Research Area	Research Approach
The impact of the project on school quality	<p>Primary data: Parental, headteacher and student reflections on school quality changes</p> <p>Secondary data: Self-reported school scorecard data on quality indicators</p>
The impact of the project on school accountability to parents (i.e. the 'short route of accountability'), including school-parent interaction and the functioning of the School Management Committee	<p>Primary data: Parental, headteacher and student opinions on relationships and SMC functioning</p> <p>Secondary data: Previous project evaluation data collected on SMC agenda topics; parental SMC attendance rates; scorecard indicators</p>
The contextual and critical success factors which contributed to the project's effectiveness	<p>Primary data: Interviews with project staff to identify key success factors</p> <p>Secondary data: Previous evaluation analysis and reports</p>

Figure 4: Overview of research areas and approaches

Note: the triangulation of self-reported school quality data with other secondary sources, such as students' examination results over time or student attendance data, was not possible, due to the timing and scope of this project.

Primary research

The study reviewed the impact of the Vidya Chaitanyam project on 16 randomly selected schools in each of two intervention areas (the Mandals of Madaksira and Bukkaraya), compared with 16 randomly selected schools in one control area (Rolla Mandal) which had not received any project support. Schools were selected from both DFID- and SSA-funded work. Fieldwork took place in February 2012, at the end of the DFID funding period.



A number of research methods and tools were used:

- 48 focus groups (one in each school) with approximately 10 parents from each school who were a mixture of SMC and non-SMC members.
- 48 focus groups with groups of 10 school students from each school.
- A structured survey answered by all 48 headteachers, plus some open-ended questions.
- A structured questionnaire for parents across the 48 schools, which resulted in 237 responses.
- A series of semi-structured interviews with a small number of key project staff, District education officials and local education officials.

All fieldwork was carried out by trained local research staff managed by CESS, including trained focus group and interview facilitators. For the focus groups and staff interviews, discussions were collected by scribes and a simple thematic content analysis was then carried out to identify themes and common perceptions.

Secondary data

The study also drew on a range of secondary data to strengthen the evidence base:

- Project-level, self-reported school scorecard data collected across all DFID-funded schools (87 schools across six Mandals).
Note: scorecard data from SSA-funded schools was not available.
- Baseline and endline survey data and reports for the DFID-funded project.



4 Findings

Part I: Impact on school quality and accountability to parents

This section outlines the impact of the project on school accountability to parents, including school-parent interaction and the functioning of the School Management Committee, and on school quality.

How and why did schools become more accountable to parents and School Management Committees? How did the SMCs change and get better at holding schools to account?

Key finding 1

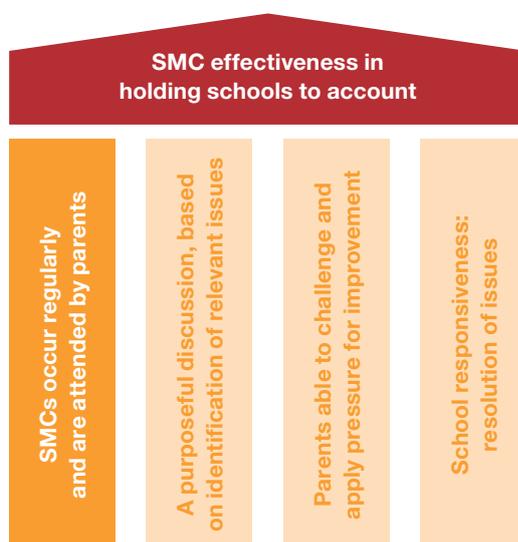
The project drove significant improvements in school accountability and governance through greatly improved functioning of the SMC compared with a control group and the project baseline. Strong evidence was found of an effective 'short route' of accountability through: improved parental attendance at SMCs; more purposeful SMC discussions about school quality; increased challenge and pressure from parents for school improvement; and improved school responsiveness to this pressure.

Despite national and state-level sponsorship, SMCs in the project Mandal areas were largely ineffective as forums for community-based accountability (see page 15) before the project interventions commenced. The evaluation showed strong evidence of improved school accountability to the community through much more effective SMCs:

- Increased SMC meeting frequency and parental attendance.
- A more purposeful SMC discussion where parents and schools alike could identify relevant school quality issues.
- Enhanced parental pressure at the meetings for explanations and improvements.
- Better resolution of school issues: an increased likelihood that headteachers would act on the feedback.

These four areas demonstrate a clear picture of the 'short route of accountability' at work, with parents and SMCs at the local level effectively holding schools to account. The 'short route' logic chain (see pages 9 and 10): increased information availability; voice and pressure; provider responsiveness) was clearly unlocked. We represent these areas of change as four 'pillars' in our analysis below.

With all these in place, the project schools in Anantapur were effective in: giving an account of their performance (transparency); explaining and justifying it (answerability); and taking account for it (responsiveness), which are recognised features of strong accountability across the literature (e.g. Zadek and Radovich, 2006; DFID, 2008).



Evidence for Pillar 1: Increased frequency of SMC meetings and increased parent-school interaction

There was clear qualitative and quantitative evidence of improved parental attendance at SMCs and awareness of meetings. The scorecards show that, at baseline (September 2009) only 8% of schools were rated 'green' for parental attendance ('green' signifying that the majority of parents attended); the final scorecard results show that at July 2011 32% schools were rated green.

The frequency of meetings also increased, with parents and project staff reporting that the old practice of falsified meeting registers

had ended (see the following quotations). Secondary data extracted from baseline and endline reports (CfBT, 2012) also indicate a shift in meeting frequency, with 62% of parents reporting monthly meetings at project endline, compared to only 26% at project baseline.²

"Earlier the parents used to just sign and go. Now, we interact with the teachers for at least an hour to know about our children and their education."

Parent, BK Samudram, MPP School

"Before, SMC parents used to just sign and go away, but now they are staying here for 1–2 hours." Parent, Sanjeevapuram

"Before, no one used to attend the meetings, no one used to care about the school's problems... now all the parents attend the meetings." Student, Neelampalli

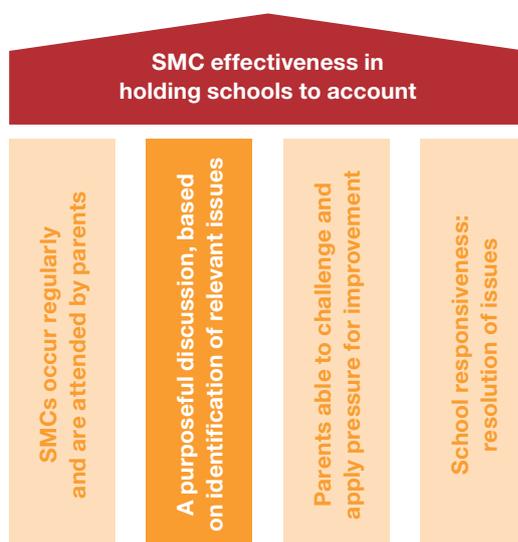
There was further positive evidence of improved parental interaction and contact with the SMC in the primary parental survey data collected:

	Intervention schools	Control schools
Parents had met SMC members	89%	53%
Parents aware of frequency of SMC meetings	91%	75%
Self Help Group discusses improving parental participation in SMC	74%	25%

Figure 5: Improved parental participation

Overall this points to a functioning accountability relationship between parents and schools. The differences between intervention and control schools were statistically significant using a chi-squared test of independence.

² Self-reported frequency of SMC meetings, based on 2,669 women from a sample of 252 SHGs



Evidence for Pillar 2: A more purposeful SMC discussion where parents and schools alike could identify relevant school quality issues

There was clear evidence of a more purposeful SMC agenda where relevant education quality issues were accurately identified and discussed. This is an essential feature of strong school accountability: only if the ‘right’ issues are identified for discussion can there be effective pressure for improvement in these areas.

The scorecard played a critical role here by developing a shared understanding of the dimensions of school quality and shared SMC goals in pursuit of ‘green’ ratings in these areas. The scorecard ratings themselves also provided performance data against these dimensions.

“Short-route accountability could be infertile if it is not accompanied with appropriate awareness of what good quality education incorporates.” CfBT Director

This new knowledge and information provided ‘content’ for parental voice, increasing the quality of the SMC dialogue. This demonstrates the powerful effect of transparency on good governance: in Anantapur it empowered parents to make valid, evidence-based demands of schools.

Secondary data from the endline evaluation report shows a higher frequency of relevant topic discussion at the end of the project compared with the mid-term (baseline data not collected):

Topics discussed at SMC meetings	% of SMCs discussing these topics	
	Mid-term	Final
Academic performance	33%	48%
Student attendance	25%	40%
Review of school facilities	19%	28%
Teachers concerns	23%	22%
Any other issues	1%	1%

Figure 6: Increase in relevant SMC topics discussed. Source: CfBT (2012)

These findings are supported by survey data in which headteachers stated that the ‘right’ issues were being identified in SMCs: 100% agreed in project Mandals whilst only 80% agreed in the control group. Although these differences are not statistically significant, they do indicate a shift in the right direction.



A range of qualitative evidence highlights the important role of the scorecard in knowledge generation and empowerment for parents, specifically in demystifying dimensions of school quality so that parents could hold focused and relevant SMC discussions. These parents previously had little or no sense of 'what good should look like' in their children's schools or which features to look for on visiting school premises.

"The scorecard has really helped to understand how to assess a school."

Parent, Korrapadu, MPP School

"We got to know that children should be sent to school regularly, food served to children must be hygienic." Parent, Bullasamudram

"We used to come and go without finding out anything... it got easier to understand the improvement after the introduction of progress cards... we were able to understand the teachers' and students' problems and take them to the notice of the teachers and were able to solve them."

Parents, Reddipalli

"They told us about the scorecard in the SMC. We hear a lot of things when compared to before the scorecard." Parent, Manuru

"After the introduction of the scorecard there has been a lot of change in the SMC."

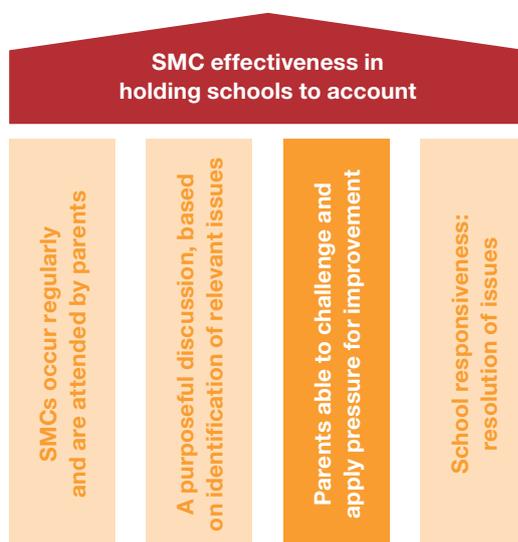
Parent, Rotarypuram



SMC with a written agenda – focus on student and teacher attendance



Display of scorecard results and school statistics



Evidence for Pillar 3: Enhanced parental pressure, challenge and 'voice' at SMC meetings

There was sound evidence of increased parental challenge and pressure for school improvement at the SMC meetings. This was founded on a significant shift in relationships: from a baseline of relative parental marginalisation from the school context towards a sense of parental empowerment and confidence in dealing with school staff during school monitoring visits and the SMC scorecard discussions.

For example, 94% of parents in the project Mandals stated that they had made improvement suggestions to their children's school, against

only 53% in the control group, clearly indicating a more powerful parental voice in the project intervention Mandals. This was statistically significant.

Strong qualitative evidence supports this picture of increasingly confident parents who understand how to question those in authority and to demand improvements over time:

"We started to ask education related questions after the scorecard was introduced."
Parent, Ammavaripata

"They are teaching us better now as the parents are coming into the school and checking. Our teachers know that they will be questioned." Student, Haresamudram

"Because of this we got a right of questioning the teachers." Parent, Siddarampuram

"We check the differences before and after SMC especially in education and the scorecard is very important." Parent, Reddipalli

"Because of the VC project our awareness increased and we are able to know what is happening in the schools and what our children are doing in school. Otherwise we were so scared to enter the schools because we are uneducated and we didn't know what to ask the teachers or how to approach the headmaster." Parent, Korrapadu, MPP School

"The community is questioning the school staff regarding children's performance, attendance of students and teachers, quality of midday meals and the usage of grants." AMO, Government Officer

"We often tell the teachers to give more homework to the children." Parent, BK Samudram

"They compare last month's activity and compare progress – they ask why quality has not improved." AMO, Government Officer

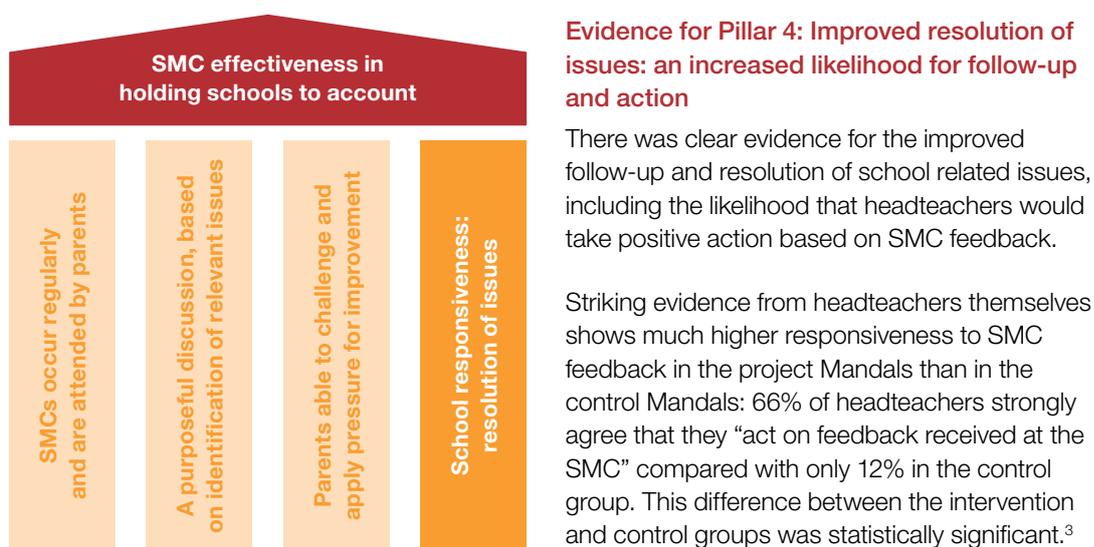
"Community monitoring has increased compared to the past and they are demanding the teachers for their children's progress." AP District Project Officer, Reddy

"It was consistently observed in the meetings at various levels that the Self Help Groups are mature and empowered. The women were articulate and confident, they could identify problems in the schools, cite instances, give reasons for the problems as well as suggest solutions. Uniformly the women engaged the duty bearers in a dialogue with facts, figures and counter arguments. It was evident that the dialogue was on an equal footing."

(Mid-term report, Betts and Menon, May 2010: 20-21)

"The community role in this is so important because they are there 24/7. It has an impact because they are posing questions and monitoring, and the teacher has self-respect to maintain." AP District Project Officer, Reddy

This evidence illustrates a key feature of the 'short route' of accountability model in action: enhanced parental and 'lay' voice exerting real pressure on service providers. Part II (p32) discusses how this parental empowerment came about.



Qualitative evidence from the focus groups and interviews also points to increased responsiveness by schools:

"SMCs are happening regularly once a month and the teachers are promising the community will see the change in a month or two regarding the progress in academic and in other issues."

Academic Monitoring Officer, Anantapur

"The scorecard helps the community to involve the teachers in school activities because the psychology of the teacher is that if someone questions, they work hard to prove themselves. That's what happening in project Mandals." AP District Project Officer

³ Using an Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U-Test (one tailed) which tested the null hypothesis that the control and intervention had the same median



Anecdotal evidence generated in the study suggests that school accountability to the local government also improved in some areas. This was because local education officers gained valuable oversight of school performance through the aggregated school scorecard data displayed by women at their Mandal level Self Help Group meetings (MMS). These meetings were attended by Mandal Education Officers as part of the overall project model agreed with the local District and they often gave the officers additional insights into school issues beyond their own datasets. The meetings also became another forum for women to escalate education concerns and to lobby officials for school improvement. A full review of this area of the project was out of scope for this study.

What is the evidence for improved school quality?

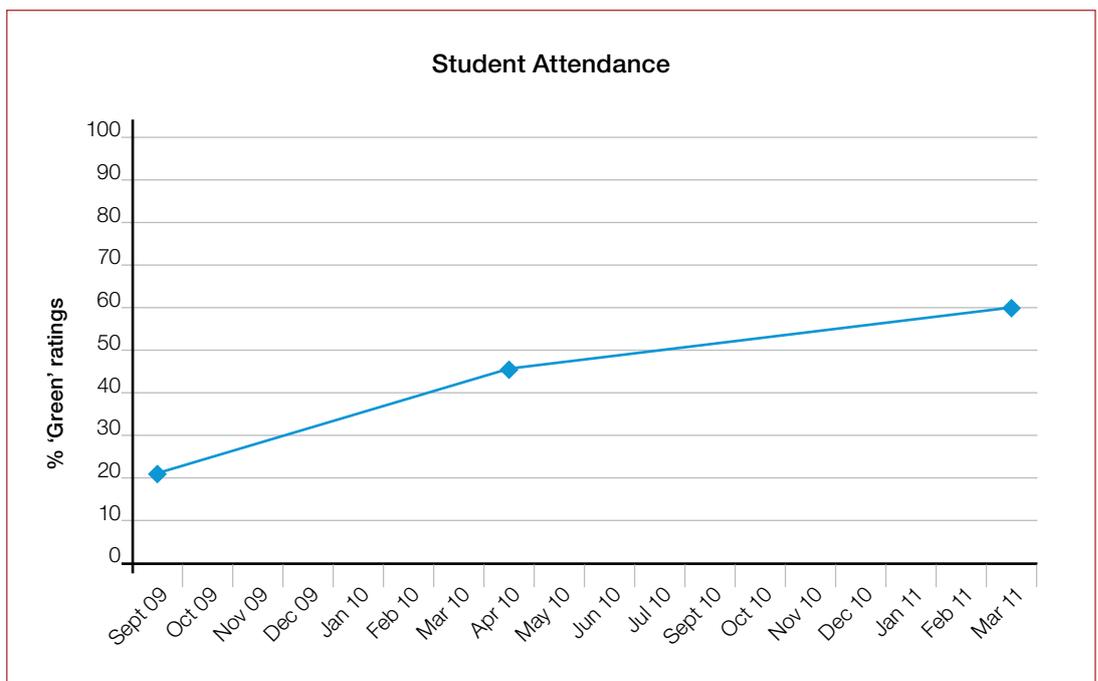
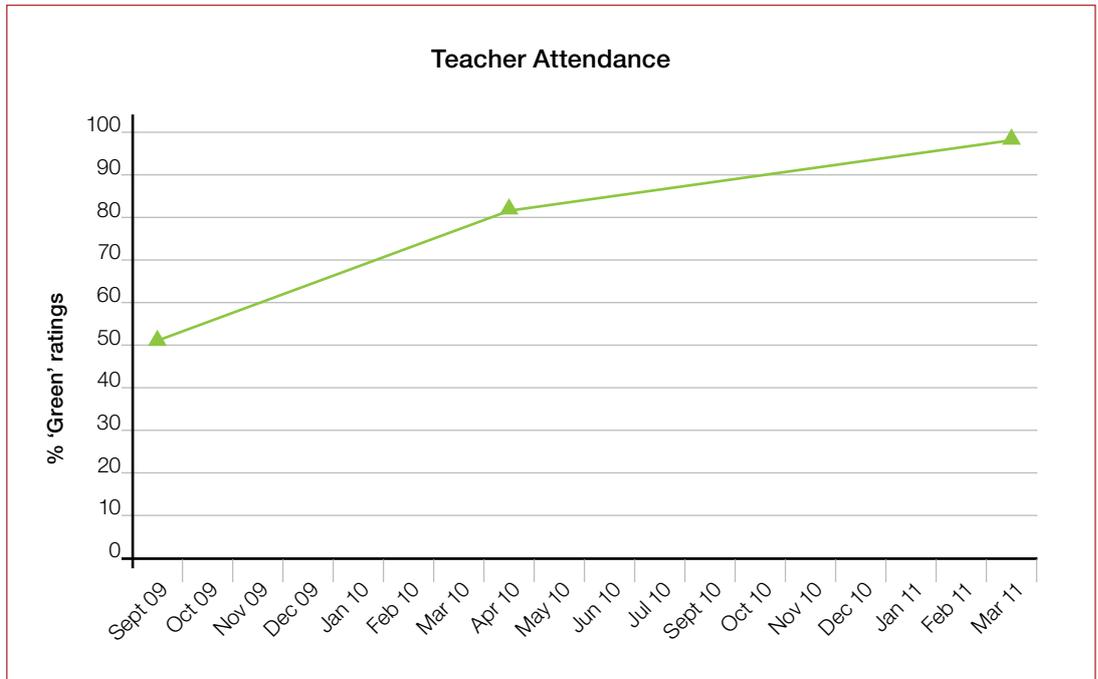
Key finding 2

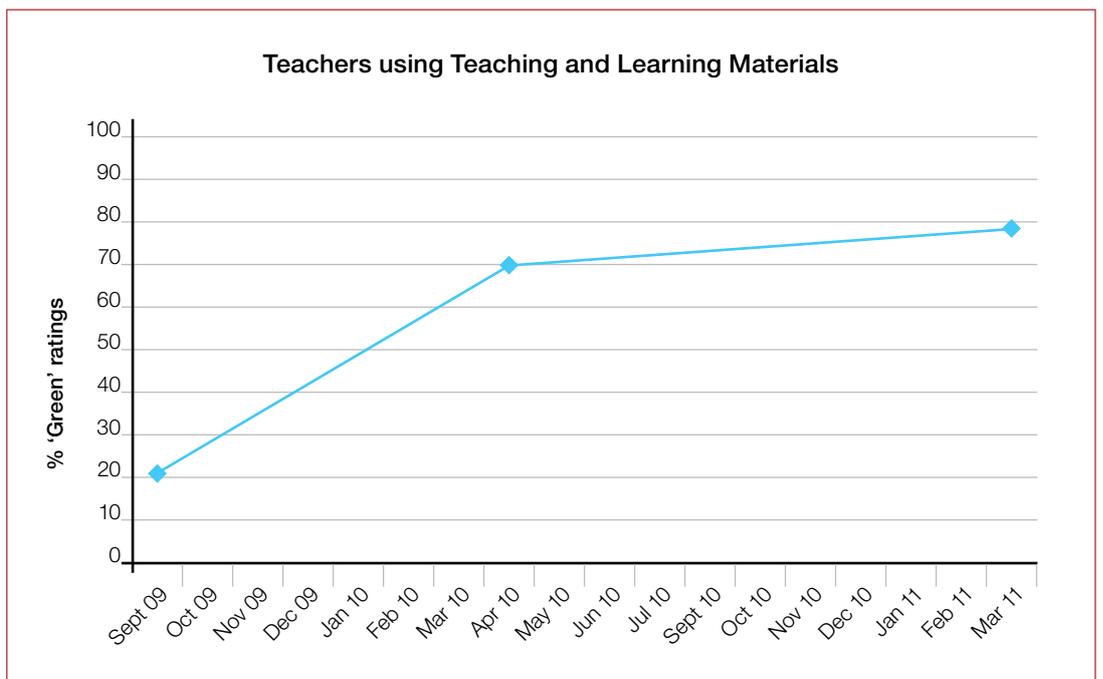
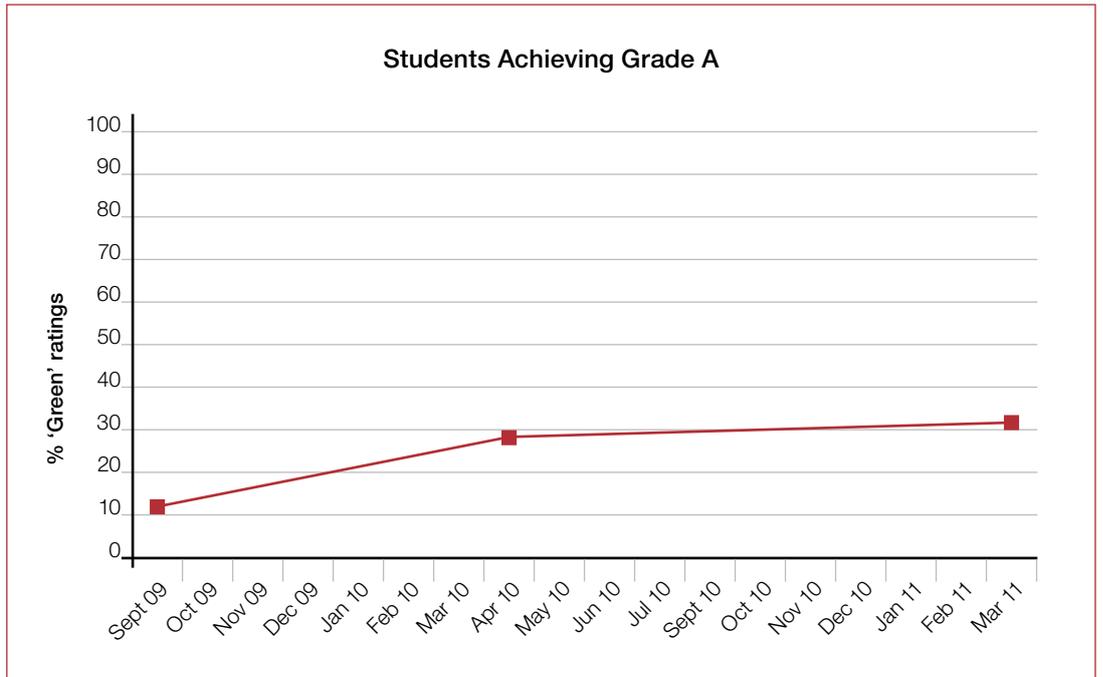
The project found evidence of statistically significant improvements in school quality compared with the project baseline, as measured by the self-reported school scorecard results. Most strikingly there were strong improvements over time in: teacher attendance, student attendance, student performance and the quality of the midday meal.

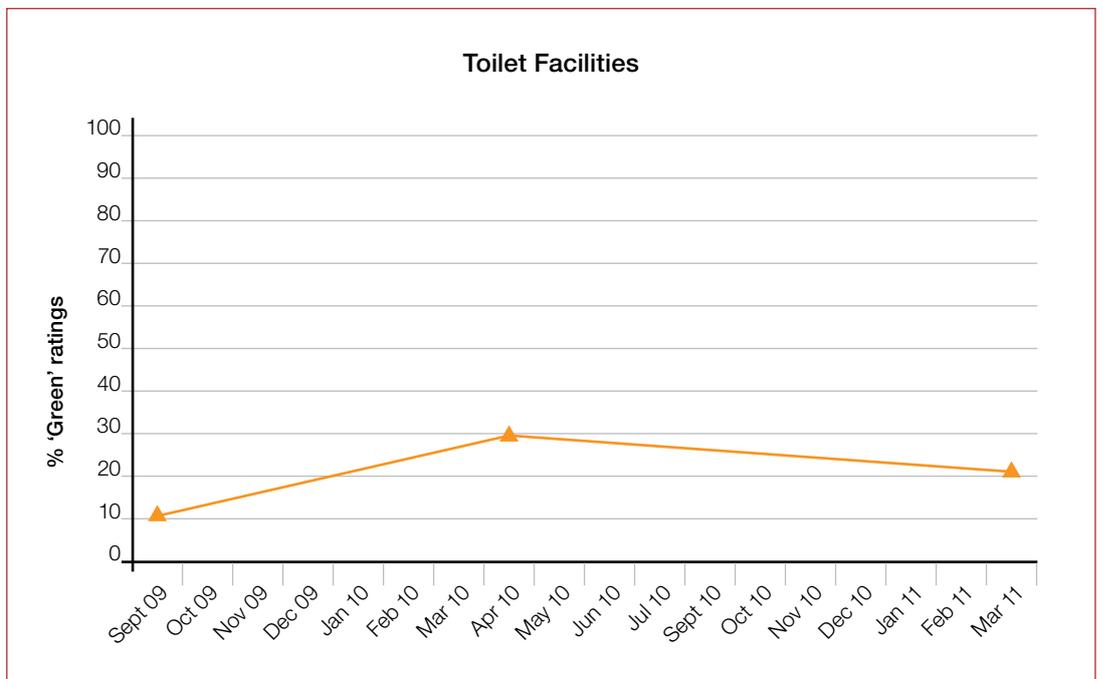
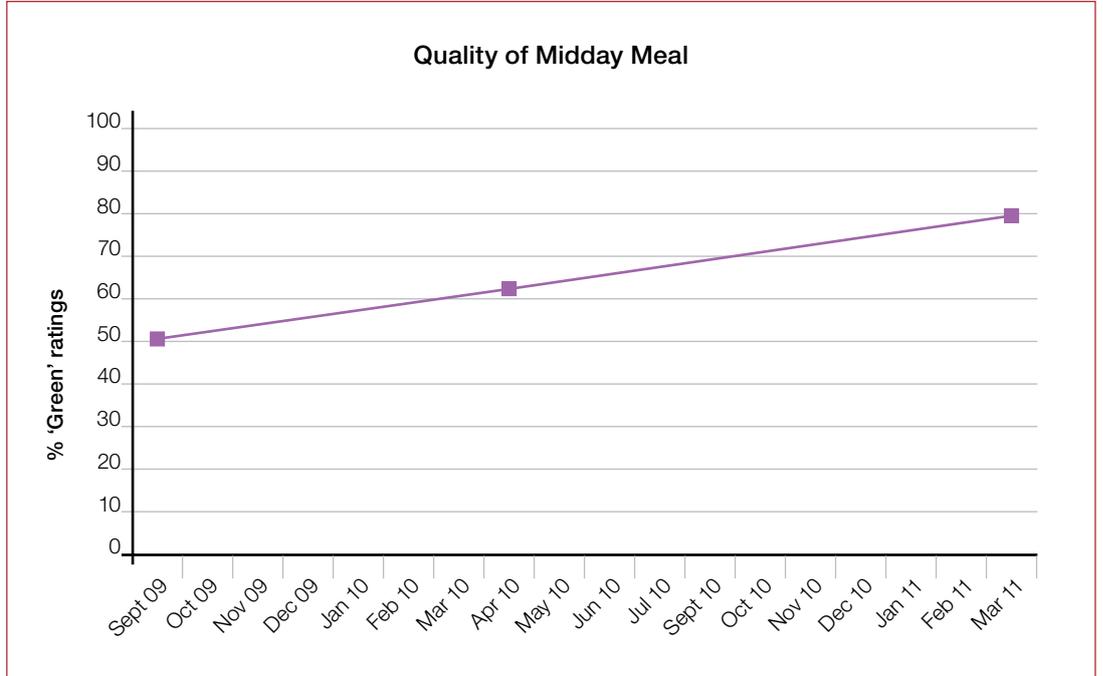
School scorecard ratings were collated for a sample of schools. These were taken from the 87 DFID-funded schools, across six Mandals, where scorecard data was collected between September 2009 (baseline once the project was in place) and March 2011. Note that valid subsequent data, until project close in early 2012, was not collected due to significant political disturbances in this area of Andhra Pradesh. The aggregated data shows improvements over time on the key school quality indicators (see Figure 7).



Figure 7: School Scorecard Quality Indicators: change over time









Between project baseline (September 2009) and the final ratings at March 2011, the increases were all statistically significant.

One of the most striking results is the increase in 'green' teacher attendance ratings, from just over 52% of schools getting a 'green' rating (i.e. 90–100% of teachers present) at project baseline to almost 100% of schools achieving this by project close. This is one of the school dimensions on which headteachers can most directly impact and demonstrates the power of community oversight in improving school management decisions and direction.

Improvements in use of teaching and learning materials (suggestive of efforts to improve teaching methods) are also dramatic: with just over 20% of schools getting a 'green' rating (i.e. 90–100% of teachers using varied teaching materials) at project baseline to almost 80% at project close. A resultant impact on learning outcomes is suggested by the tripling of the number of schools where >80% of students score Grade A (i.e. a 'green' scorecard rating) over the project lifetime. However, this evidence of improved learning outcomes must be treated with some caution because, although these school assessments are undertaken according to external criteria, the validity of school assessment methods is unknown and the data may not reflect shifts in actual learning outcomes.

The qualitative findings (see below) shed some light on how these changes impacted on the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

Validating school improvement findings

These findings are drawn from the self-reported scorecard data which have not been validated by other evidence such as school register data, externally-managed attendance spot-checks or school assessment data. Neither have they been compared with a control group. However, there is value in these self-reported results: the women undertaking the ratings have no incentive to inflate the ratings in their oversight role on behalf of their children and, in fact, the tendency might be quite the opposite. In addition, some school-recorded student attendance data is widely considered flawed, since teachers inflate student attendance numbers and under-report drop-out. In this case, the parent-driven data actually provides a valuable check on school-reported student attendance.

There is also a wealth of qualitative data from the focus groups with parents and students, and interview questionnaires to triangulate these findings.⁴ In particular, they provide insight into improved teacher effort, in terms of their attendance and effort in the classroom, and the impact of this on learning.

Improved teacher attendance

"Prior to the SMC meetings no one knew when the teacher would come to school but after these SMC meetings teachers are coming on time." Parent, Kothulagutta

"Teachers are coming regularly to school so all the lessons are taught well and we are studying well." Student, Venkatapuram

⁴ Note: similar comments were almost completely absent from the control group questionnaires and focus groups

Improved student attendance

"We got a yellow in cleanliness in the last meeting and this time we got a green. The attendance percentage of the teachers and monitoring by the parents has increased and everyone talks about the meetings. We come to know about the students' attendance and try to improve it."

Parent, Kondapuram

"As the issues are being discussed in the SMCs, teachers are taking good care because of which the children are also showing interest in being regular to school." Parent, Korrapadu

Improved teaching and learning

Improved teacher effort and better teaching methods were highlighted as a benefit of the project in every parental and student focus group, a finding not mirrored in the control focus groups. The students described in some detail the changes they had witnessed in teaching methods and were able to articulate the link between these methods and the impact on their learning outcomes. The changes they had experienced included:

- More varied teaching techniques, including better materials and methods of teaching.
- Better explanations and clarification of points where students struggled to understand the first time.

Students discussing the increased variety of teaching methods:

"Teachers are organising quiz competitions and giving away prizes. There is a change in the teaching. They make us do the class work with a lot of interest. The practices of writing on the board, reading and asking are helping us get good marks and we are studying well."

Student, Dayyalakuntapalli

"Earlier, we only learnt through books and blackboard. Now we can learn through charts, flash cards, pictures." Student, Rotarypuram

"Teaching methods have changed. Now the lessons are taught by pictures, charts. We are taught about the environment. Through charts and pictures, lessons are well taught." Chandu, Pujitha, Manjula, students, Yedavula Parthy, Bukkaraya Samudram



Improved teaching methods



Students discussing the improved explanations and better clarification:

“Our teachers didn’t use to teach us properly before, but now they are teaching us correctly, in a way we can understand.” Student, Haresamudram

“Teaching has now improved. If we do not understand any topic, teachers explain that topic in a very easy way and understandable ways using diagrams wherever applicable.” Student, Kothulagutta

“We study in groups and rectify each other’s mistakes. Our marks in exams have improved.”
Student, Neelampalli

“Previously the teachers did not teach us well. But now they are taking an interest in us and we are reading and writing well.” Student, Dinamedhapalyam

Parents discussing improved teaching and learning outcomes:

“There is a change in the way the teachers are teaching because of SMC. Also, there is an improvement in the marks of our children because of the scorecard. Parents have started liking government schools because of SMC.” M. Nagarjuna, B. Lakshmi Devi, N. Sashikala, parents, MPP School, Sanjapuram, Bukkaraya Samudram

“Through the SMC there have been drastic changes. Before the SMCs became regular children would not attend the school regularly, but now they are regular and punctual to school. There is progress in the children’s marks.”
Parent, BK Samudram

“There is a change in our children’s behaviour. They became more interested in studies, they are concentrating well. They are getting good marks. The teachers are also teaching well.”
Parent, KVS Nagar



“My daughter could not read anything. But because of these meetings, she has learnt to read and write.” Padmavathi, mother, MPP School, Jakkepalli, Madaksira

Part II: Exploring parental empowerment and parent-school relationships

Which kind of social shifts underpinned successful community-based accountability reforms e.g. how did the parent-school relationship change and what did 'parental empowerment' look like?

This section unpacks the social changes associated with community-based accountability. It looks at shifts in the parent-school relationship and the nature of 'parental empowerment' in this context in rural India. It provides an analysis of 'why' and 'how' these social changes led to better school accountability.

This responds to recent calls (see the literature review in Chapter 1) for deeper qualitative analysis into the mechanisms through which community-led accountability approaches improve school governance and outcomes.

Key finding 3

The success of the community-led accountability reforms was dependent on profound changes in the parent-school relationship. The study sheds light on the nature of these changes and parental 'empowerment'. Shifts were seen in parental skills, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in relation to education and schools. This supported two key changes critical for improved school accountability:

- A **more equal power balance** between the community and the school, which was an enabler of effective community pressure and school improvement dialogue.
- A sense of **joint responsibility** for school and student performance, between the parents and the school. This encouraged parental ownership of education issues and collaborative problem solving in a new 'community of practice' in understanding, debating and resolving school issues.

A more equal power balance

Qualitative evidence from the parent focus groups shows that the interventions helped to rebalance the unequal power relations between schools and the parent community. This was a critical ingredient for improving school accountability, ensuring that parental voice was heard in SMCs and became a voice for change.

The baseline situation for the parental groups was one of marginalisation and great social and economic distance from school staff: the women were 70% illiterate, mainly of the lowest social castes and their per capita income would typically have been seven to ten times smaller than that of the average teacher (Kingdon and Teal, 2010). For parents in Anantapur this meant a lack of confidence and skills to engage with school staff before the project, let alone to challenge and question them. The role of the Self Help Group meetings was crucial here: the women became familiar and at ease with school





quality discussions at their local meetings, which built their confidence to continue discussions at School Management Committees.

The following quotations from parents' focus groups illustrate the changing balance of power and the sense of empowerment achieved for the first time by parents.

Parental empowerment and changing power dynamics

"We know a lot of things through scorecard. We got the feeling of giving good education to our children through scorecards." Parent, Adireddi Pallem

"Now we are attending the meetings as we are part of SMC and we try to know things which we didn't know before." Parent, Reddipalli

"Because of this scorecard we can ask anything in the SMC meetings. We can check the condition of the school and progress of the children." Parent, Dinamedapalyam

"[Before] when we entered the kitchen when midday meals were served, they scolded us and asked why we came to the kitchen. After the SMC meetings... even if we enter the kitchen, no one asks us why we entered the kitchen." Parent, Jakkepalli

"We are illiterate. As we are uneducated, we were not intelligent in the society. Through SMC meetings, we got to know about our children's education and try to solve their problems." Parent, D. Achampalli

"For the progress of schools this type of monitoring is necessary. Parents can now frankly interact with the teachers." Parent, Rotarypuram

"After attending the SMC meetings we realised a few things like the importance... of giving good education to our children so that they study well and are successful." Parent, Reddipalli

The project took careful account of the existing political economy and made specific efforts to support parental empowerment. For example there was strong investment at the beginning of the project in headteacher and SMC sensitisation regarding the women's new role and parental rights to challenge school management. Another successful strategy was securing state buy-in to legitimise the women's new school monitoring role:

"After the introduction of the scorecard, lots of changes have been observed in SMC... every matter is resolved properly, because the card reviews are sent directly to the officer." Parent, Jakkepalli

"Ever since the introduction of the scorecard, work is now done regularly because the scorecards are sent to the officer." Parent, Bullasamudram

A sense of joint responsibility and a community of practice in solving school issues

The research evidence also points to a second social change: an increasingly shared sense of ownership of school issues between parents, communities and schools. A genuine dialogue developed, enabling parental voice to be heard. In addition, a powerful 'community of practice' evolved in identifying and solving school issues (see examples below and in case study box). This



included new skills in debating the causes of problems and a pooling of ideas on how to collectively solve the issues as a community.

Joint ownership of school issues

"They feel that the property is theirs – they talk about 'our school. Coordination between community and teachers increased. Teachers are also feeling that the community is supporting the school instead of feeling pressure." AP District Project Officer, Reddy

"We didn't know so much about the school before the SMC meetings were held. We are feeling more responsible towards our children after the meetings started. We also started questioning the teachers." Parent, Kondapuram, MPP School

"The feeling of belongingness developed in staff and students." G. Thirupathiah, HM, DPEP School, Dayallakuntapalli, BK Samudram

"Parents started feeling more responsible." K. Venkatesulu, Incharge, MPP School, Ammavaripeta, BK Samudram

Collective problem solving

"We take problems to the teachers' notice if there are any. We thought of cleaning up the weeds in and around the school. We thought of cleaning the compound and we did all this work." Parent, Kondapuram

"When the strength [numbers] of our teachers was less, SMC and the VO [Self Help Group Village Organisation] association collectively hired a teacher for us." Student, Rotarypuram

"Whatever problems we have, we directly report it to the teachers. In the SMC meeting those problems are discussed and steps are taken to solve those problems." Parent, Madakasira

"Monitoring has brought some changes. We discuss students' and teachers' problems in the SMC and try to solve them." Parent, Kothapalli

"We talk about the things we are not doing properly, and we talk about the steps to be taken to set it right and also discuss about the subjects we are not so good at." Student, Sanjeevapuram

Case study: close working between schools and SHGs

Kaggallu is a hamlet 7 km from Indupur town, with 2,000 inhabitants. The village women primarily earn their livelihood through dairy farming. The VO Saraswathi Gramaikya Sangham had a problem: due to the lack of a proper venue it was difficult to hold their meetings. The women took the initiative and got the venue moved from their local Panchayat office, which was cramped and small, to the school premises where they could also ask the headteacher to attend the meetings.

They reasoned that with their meetings held monthly in the school, it would help them keep a close eye on the school development as part of their new monitoring role. SHG women have now volunteered to clean the school premises and put up a schedule of three women per week who are regularly cleaning the school. The school is now clean and welcoming.



These new attitudes and skills fostered more purposeful SMC discussions and more effective resolution of school problems. They also represented a significant shift in mindset for both the parents and the schools: prior to the project, schools operated quite separately from the community and parents felt strongly that educational issues were for schools to solve.

Three critical success factors helped to build this dialogue and collective problem solving:

- The incorporation of 'education' as an agenda item for Self Help Group meetings. This literally brought education onto the community agenda for the first time and created a community-wide dialogue about school improvement. The meetings were increasingly attended by headteachers as they reciprocated the women's attendance at SMCs.
- The Self Help Groups' history of taking full responsibility for micro credit projects, and of solving and debating problems.
- The training of Self Help Group women to develop their negotiating skills over time. In the early stages of the project the women's pressure actually failed in some cases to drive school responsiveness; school staff became defensive when the women attempted to collect data and demand improvements. This relationship improved over time.

These changes are exactly what Swift (2008) advocates as part of sustained community development:

"What is needed is to give communities the perceptions that the local school is theirs, not the government's. Besides increasing parental involvement in schools, this also enables the school to be a focus for community development." (Swift, 2008: 4)

An additional benefit was a positive impact on parents' interaction with students in the home as they took **responsibility and control for their children's learning**:

Parents' reflections:

"Because the parents are monitoring the children regularly there is an improvement in their marks... our children are doing their homework regularly." Parent, Korrapadu

"Student attendance has increased now – even the parents are encouraging their children. They do their homework after coming home. We ask them what they learnt that day."
Parent, Adireddi Pallem

Students' reflections:

"As parents are attending these SMC meetings they know whether children are coming to school or not. As a result if we want to go for playing we get scared and go to school."
Student, Kothulagutta

"Our parents check whether children are studying properly or not." Student, Jakkepalli
"My parents are making me do the homework at home. They tell me to study well and I am getting good marks." Student, Kothapalli



Unpacking change: parental empowerment and engagement

“Information for accountability... aims to change the relationships of accountability among the various actors in the education system to change behaviours and thus improve outcomes.”
(Bruns et al., 2011)

The evidence presented above sheds light on the nature of ‘parental empowerment’ in the context of community-led accountability reform. It shows that empowerment was not simply about setting up adversarial complaints through exposing underperformance. It was about new power relationships and a changing sense of role and identity as parents developed a sense of engagement and a stake in local education provision for the first time.

Drawing on approaches from organisational change and management theory (e.g. Dilts, 1990, 1996) it is suggested that parental empowerment was underpinned by changes at different ‘levels’:

Parental empowerment: levels of change	Qualitative evidence of change
Empowerment through new parental knowledge	Knowledge of: education entitlements; school performance; school quality criteria
Empowerment through new parental skills	Skills in: the ‘how to’ of collective action (how to question teachers, how to monitor schools and identify issues, how to negotiate improvements)
Empowerment through new parental beliefs	Beliefs in: parental ability to make a difference to education quality; the importance of education and SMC attendance; their rights to challenge; a new sense of responsibility for the local school
Empowerment through new parental attitudes	Attitudinal changes in: self-confidence; high expectations of schools
Empowerment through new parental behaviour	Behavioural changes: forming a dialogue with schools and the wider community about education, attending SMCs, engaging with headteachers

Figure 8: Levels and evidence of change

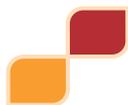


These developments in parental role and identity supported profound changes in parent-school and parent-student relationships. These in turn resulted in improved school, community and home-based efforts to support education.

This analysis supports observations elsewhere in the literature about the power of unleashing these 'levels' of change. For example, there is evidence of new problem-solving skills and a community of practice in school improvement planning; this supports Banerjee et al.'s (2008) hypothesis that for local accountability projects to be successful in India they need to teach local participants the skills of effective facilitation and the 'how to' skills of collective action.

Wild and Harris (2011) have also observed the importance of a new sense of responsibility in their descriptions of empowerment. They reject a view of empowerment based on confrontation, noting that:

"While the current theory of change [for community scorecard-led accountability] emphasises citizens' empowerment vis-à-vis the state, what is interesting is the extent to which in practice the implementation of the scorecards has served as an important reminder of the roles and responsibilities of citizens themselves." (Wild and Harris, 2011)



5 Analysis and conclusions

This case study demonstrates that the simplest of accountability frameworks, even when administered by lay people, can generate considerable improvements in educational outcomes.

What was the educational impact and the evidence for improved school quality?

The evidence demonstrates the striking effect that community-led accountability in rural Anantapur had on foundational aspects of school quality such as teacher attendance, student attendance and school facilities. Self-reported scorecard data showed significant gains in the dimensions of these qualities as well as student learning outcomes. There are limitations to this evidence given the lack of a control group and other data sources for triangulation; however, the study also provides rich qualitative data presenting further evidence and insight into these outcomes e.g. evidence for increased teacher effort and more varied instruction methods.

How did improved accountability generate improved educational outcomes in rural Anantapur?

The project generated three levers of educational change in an 'ecosystem' of accountability amongst different actors: parents, schools, the community, students and District/Mandal officials:

- (1) **Increased school accountability and school responsiveness due to more effective School Management Committees.** The evidence suggests that this drove up the quality of education through increased teacher effort in the classroom, leading to better teaching instruction, and through better management of school resources, leading to changes such as improvements in midday meals and toilet facilities.
- (2) **Increased school accountability to higher political and administrative structures due to escalation of issues by Self Help Groups,** and increased engagement of officials at Mandal and District level in the review of school performance data. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this led to the resolution of some issues outside the management control of headteachers and SMCs.
- (3) **A sense of joint accountability for education between the community and school,** leading to changes within the home as more engaged parents supported high student attendance and followed up on homework. It also led to better problem-solving of some educational issues such as teacher shortages and facilities, as parents increasingly took ownership of solutions, particularly via the Self Help Groups.

What do our findings tell us about the relevance and limitations of community-based accountability as a lever for school improvement?

These gains in school quality were largely in **foundational** issues that were clearly within the management control of headteachers and SMCs. These issues included the supply and management of material resources, such as midday meals and toilet maintenance, but also the management of teacher and student attendance. Within these 'spheres of influence' community-led accountability was able to act as a clear driver of school improvement. This is in line with Bruns et al.'s' (2011) argument that pressure for better resource management and teacher effort is a key way in which parental participation can directly influence school quality.



A community-led accountability approach was therefore a very **powerful and appropriate** lever for school improvement in this poor rural context. It was appropriate because illiterate parents were able to engage in useful dialogue about relatively non-technical school quality issues. This pressure for change was focused on areas where headteachers and SMCs genuinely had the authority and capability to respond and make positive changes through better management and resource allocation decisions. In addition, using community-based pressure was highly appropriate because it filled a service void left by weak government oversight. The model's powerful impact came from its focus on foundational issues which, in the context of very poorly performing schools, has the potential to dramatically improve students' opportunity to learn from their low baseline. Resolving basic school management and teacher effort issues therefore had a large impact on overall school effectiveness in Anantapur. This is in line with wider educational development models, such as Gillies and Quijada's 'Opportunity to Learn' model (see Figure 9):

"The lowest level factors reflect the lowest levels of management and technical complexity, and yet have a huge impact on outcomes." (Gillies and Quijada, 2008)

Using the 'Opportunity to Learn' pyramid, we can see that the project secured at least four of the foundational factors at the bottom of the pyramid, as well as some of the more complex factors found higher up, such as 'Family Involvement':



Figure 9: Student opportunity to learn, based on Gillies and Quijada, 2008



Clearly there are limitations to community-led accountability approaches since many higher-level features of this pyramid fall outside the influence of school management decisions and rely on supply-side reforms and/or additional resource inputs. The project's engagement of District and Mandal-level officials shows the intervention's potential for initiating further pressure and change upwards through higher administrative structures, but this would not be a credible alternative to systemic change. Further limitations to community-based pressure emerge where schools lack the skills and capacity to respond; this is widely recognised as a limitation in education reform theory, where the need for both pressure and support is recognised in generating the most effective school improvement (Fullan, 2010).

What were the critical factors for this project's success?

The research evidence clearly demonstrates how the project interventions generated these accountability levers:

- **Through a carefully managed school sensitisation and capacity building stage** to ensure full school buy-in to the monitoring activity.
- **Through information campaigns and Education Activists in each village**, which built parents' awareness of educational rights and encouraged their attendance and participation in SMCs.
- **Through the school scorecard**, which played a central role in all of the key changes identified above. This tool gave all stakeholders transparent information and a shared language about school performance. It supported high expectations and purposeful school improvement dialogue between all actors.
- **Through the School Management Committee**, which provided a forum for the scorecard data to be formally shared and discussed, and for parental voice to be heard. As the literature on the 'short route' cautions, merely improving parental knowledge of performance is not enough: parents need the ability to make their voices heard (Galiani et al., 2008).
- **Through wider community engagement via Self Help Groups' new role in collecting scorecard data**. This was transformative because it ensured school quality discussions were occurring not just at school level, but in the wider community as Self Help Groups discussed scorecard data and school issues amongst themselves. It developed a cadre of community members who were deeply engaged in the education agenda for the first time and who developed new capacity for education-related self-help, including a sense of shared responsibility for their children's education. This supported positive changes in the home and joint problem solving with schools. The groups also escalated issues to District and Mandal officials through their existing meeting infrastructure at these levels.

Other success factors included:

- The 'joined-up' approach of the project which engaged all actors – community, parents, school, SMCs, District officials – in the creation of a new accountability regime and shared expectations about school quality.
- The strong political buy-in achieved through the convergence of scorecard indicators with District and Mandal officials' own school inspection criteria.



What were the local pre-conditions and contextual factors which made this intervention powerful?

These interventions built carefully on existing political and social infrastructure and initiatives, taking full account of local pre-conditions and using these to create a successful model. These included:

- The existing social capital of the Self Help Groups built through their microfinance sector role, including well developed organisational and administrative skills.
- An existing national and state policy context of decentralisation, which included a strong role for parents in School Management Committees.
- An existing Mandal and District level drive for school quality, including a set of inspection criteria under the Learning Enhancement Programme, but a weak system for collecting this data. This raised the appeal of the project to local officials.

Reflections on the social changes experienced and the nature of parental empowerment

The study sought to contribute fresh evidence about the exact mechanisms through which parental participation and accountability reforms can lead to improved outcomes. It highlighted some important findings in this respect.

Firstly, it demonstrated that transformed community-school relationships, based on dialogue and a more equal power balance, were at the heart of the changes observed in accountability and school improvement planning. Parental 'empowerment' and 'engagement' were both critical drivers of change, leading to increased school accountability and also better school improvement planning, as parents took joint responsibility for responding to education issues. The project is a clear example of highly effective 'collaborative governance' (Ansell and Gash, 2007) where "face-to-face dialogue, trust building, and the development of... shared understanding" play more of a part in school improvement than adversarial demand-side pressure on schools.

Secondly, the study unpacked the mechanisms for change, finding that the project had driven shifts in parental knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, including the 'how to' of collective action (Banerjee et al., 2008). It was these changes which unlocked the new social relationships and the 'culture' of accountability across the different actors and which will also support its longer-term sustainability. The changes in attitudes and beliefs also demonstrate that the project interventions were not just about creating effective new scorecard processes or accurate monitoring data: they were about creating the right motivation, mindset and quality expectations amongst different actors for an ongoing school improvement dialogue. Bruns et al. (2011) refer to this as the 'socialisation' of report cards, noting that:

"Where the current equilibrium is that parents and local stakeholders feel disengaged from the education system (and perhaps disempowered from it)... simply making information available may not be enough to change that status quo." (Bruns et al., 2011)

In a similar vein Pandey et al. (2009) consider that, where local accountability initiatives have been successful in India, it is the result of discussion and the social processes of interaction associated with such discussions. Our findings suggest that the Vidya Chaitanyam project is an excellent example of such social – and cultural – processes at work.

Sustainability

Several project features are key to the sustainability of the model. Firstly, its careful alignment with existing political, social and educational structures will facilitate ongoing support, momentum and resource for the project. Secondly, the project mirrors the state infrastructure in terms of its school, Mandal, District and state-level interfaces, supporting operations and continued issue escalation at different political and administrative levels. Thirdly, the project's ability to engage and transform several 'levels' of the community, such as attitudes, beliefs, skills and relationships, has built a powerful new culture for ongoing community-led accountability and school improvement dialogue.

Avenues for further research

Four potential avenues for further research are recommended:

Marginalised women, role modelling and educational impact on students

This project gave an enhanced civil society role to the most marginalised women in the community. There is an emerging literature on the power of the role model effect on education (Beaman et al., 2012; Mpokosa et al., 2008) and we recommend further research into the potential impact on students' attitudes and motivation when the role models are the least educated women and the least likely to be in traditional role model positions.

Teachers' experience of accountability reforms

The study generated little evidence about the changes which took place for teachers in a new culture of school accountability. What does their interface with parents and 'parental empowerment' look like? How and why does their 'level of effort' change in response to community pressure? Does their intrinsic motivation and mindset change or do they improve their efforts just enough to satisfy external pressure and SMC requirements? The impact of different types of monitoring and pressure on teachers remains relatively unexplored in a development context. Further avenues for research could include in depth exploration of the teacher experience of SMC pressure and how this changes their motivation, knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours over time.

Triangulation of school quality impact

The evidence for school improvement gains was based on the community-generated scorecard data. It would be useful to review how robust such self-reported data is, not only to validate the data for research purposes, but also to understand the links between community perceptions of improvement and 'objectively verified' improvements measured by other means. Longitudinal tracking of learning outcomes and student attendance data would be further valuable lines of enquiry in assessing the impact of community accountability projects of this nature in India.

Impact of parental voice on higher political and administrative decision making

A full investigation of the impact of the project on Mandal and District level policy and decision making was beyond the scope of this research. This would be a valuable avenue for further academic study since it would investigate wider and systemic impact beyond the local school and community.

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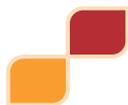
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