

Appraising the Effectiveness of School Management Committee towards Enhancing Educational Outcome in Primary Schools of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

School Management Committees (SMCs) are an important institutional mechanism for decentralized school governance in the primary education sector of Bangladesh. Although they have been charged with improving accountability and involving the community at the school level, there is little evidence about their effectiveness in practice. This study explores the contribution of SMCs in improving key primary education outcomes (student enrolment, attendance, drop out reduction and academic performance) and systematically identifies bottlenecks in the structures and operations of SMCs that limit their effectiveness in achieving these outcomes. Using a quantitative-dominant concurrent mixed-methods approach, empirical data was collected from a range of educational stakeholders in primary schools in the Cumilla District, Bangladesh. Quantitative results show that SMCs have a moderate positive impact on school deliverables which include optimizing academic performance, creating school friendly environment etc. but less positive impact on distal school behavior outcome such as student dropping out of school and chronic absenteeism. Qualitative thematic analysis interprets these patterns and reveals entrenched systemic obstacles such as entrenched political interference, grossly underfunded schools, lack of trust in institutions and the socioeconomic shut-out of marginalized parents. The study demonstrates macro-level structures that limit local action using two theories: Systems Theory and Participatory Governance Theory. The study is a valuable addition to the global debate on school-based management in developing countries and is directly relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Quality Education) and 16 (Strong Institutions). Policy implications are based on moving beyond tokenism in administrative compliance to structural decentralization through the use of independent electoral oversight, school block grants and competency based pre-appointment induction.

Key words: Communication, Community Participation, Decentralization, Educational Governance, Primary Education, School Management Committees

INTRODUCTION

There is a consensus that primary education is one of the key pillars in human capital development, social equity and long term economic growth. Bangladesh has experienced a massive expansion in primary education over the last few decades with a number of large-scale policy interventions, such as compulsory primary education, stipend programs, free distribution of textbooks and school feeding programs. Consequently, the country now has over 65,000 government and non-government managed primary schools (BANBEIS, 2024; Government of Bangladesh, 2020). These changes have helped achieve significant progress in enrolments and gender parity, making Bangladesh a success story in terms of access to education in the region. Nevertheless, there are issues with the quality of education and learning outcomes, despite the gains in access. A significant portion of students do not achieve minimum competency in basic subjects, which means that a "quality-access gap" is prevalent in the education system (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2008; Islam et al., 2019). This gap reflects a structural imbalance, since higher school availability has not resulted in proportionate increases in learning achievement, thereby posing key questions on the effectiveness of school-level governance.

In this context, governance has become an important factor in the performance of education. The education system in Bangladesh is very centralized, with power held at national and sub-national administration levels. This centralization has sparked debate as it has been argued that it undermines school autonomy, accountability systems and responsiveness to the needs of the local community (Hossain et al., 2010; Rahman et al., 2022). Decentralization has been initiated to overcome these problems and School Management Committees (SMCs) are the major institutional structure for school-level governance. SMCs are conceived as effective participatory governance forums with the headmasters, teachers, parents and community representatives. They have formal duties to check the attendance of teachers, enhance school facilities, control the use of resources, and improve the relationship between schools and the local community (Mamun, 2014; Nath, 2020). Decentralized governance systems are in theory supposed to increase the transparency, accountability and performance of institutions when decision-making is placed in the local community. In reality, however, SMCs frequently face severe structural challenges, such as limited financial independence, poor training, institutional restrictions and political interference, which all contribute to the lack of effectiveness and often result in the SMC becoming a symbolic institution of governance rather than a working one (Akhter, 2017; Puri & Chhetri, 2024).

The main issue dealt in this study is the disconnection between the performance of the SMCs and their intended purpose. SMCs are expected to facilitate better governance of education and better education outcomes, but there is empirical evidence that they have limited influence, and mostly in very superficial or very visible aspects of education improvement, such as infrastructure development and increasing enrolments (Rahman et al., 2022). However, their influence on deeper educational outcomes (Student attendance, drop-out, academic achievement, etc.) is also very limited because of structural constraints other than their operation (Islam et al., 2019; Mamun, 2014). This is a symptom of a larger governance problem in the education system of Bangladesh where achieving access has not been matched by commensurate improvement in the quality of the schooling. Thus, it is important to critically assess and reflect on the role of SMCs as effective decentralized governance structures, or as formal administrative structures with little substantive power.

In the light of this, the purpose of the present study is to examine the effectiveness of SMCs in enhancing educational outcomes at primary schools in Cumilla District, Bangladesh. The study employs a concurrent mixed-methods research design, which includes both quantitative survey data and qualitative thematic analysis of the data to give a holistic profile of the governance performance and experiences of the stakeholders (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Biesta, 2010). A total of 20 primary schools in four Upazilas were sampled and 116 respondents from four groups of SMC members, teachers, parents of students, community members and headmasters were interviewed while 334 coded qualitative response units were collected from open-ended questions, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. To understand the interconnections of the elements of institutional inputs, governance processes and participatory mechanisms to achieve educational outcomes, the study draws on the theories of Systems Theory and Participatory Governance Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Akter & Giridharan, 2016). Moreover, it is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Strong Institutions), where inclusive governance is acknowledged as a key component to ensuring equitable quality education systems (Government of Bangladesh, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

The School Management Committee (SMC) has come to be widely acknowledged as a key mechanism of decentralized governance to primary educational systems, especially in developing countries. The conceptual basis of SMCs is rooted in the participatory governance theory that the incorporation of the community in the decision-making process of the school increases the accountability, transparency and responsiveness of the public service delivery (Bruns et al., 2011; De Grauwe, 2005). The idea of SMCs was introduced to decentralize the governance of schools and enhance their educational performances in the context of Bangladesh, which include increasing school enrolment, school attendance, reducing dropouts, and enhancing academic achievement. But with a wide range of implementation, there is empirical evidence that the effectiveness of SMCs fluctuates in an inconsistent manner due to several structural, institutional, and socio-political constraints (Rahman et al., 2022; World Bank, 2018).

The literature reviewed shows that governance quality, institutional capacity, and participation of stakeholders plays a significant role on the performance of SMCs. Systems Theory is a useful perspective for understanding how school governance can be viewed as an interrelated system where inputs like financial resources, training, and community involvement are translated into outputs like student performance and school performance (von Bertalanffy, 1968). In this context, SMCs are seen as a sub-system within the larger system of educational governance. Empirical documentations indicate that in the absence of strong inputs like training, financial support etc., governance processes get ineffective and educational outcomes do not remain optimum (Hossain et al., 2010; Mamun, 2014). Likewise, Participatory Governance Theory highlights that including parents, teachers, and community members in meaningful ways is crucial to enhance accountability and improve the performance of schools, but this is often limited by structural inequalities and institutional barriers (Fung, 2015; Puri & Chhetri, 2024).

A large number of empirical studies in South Asia have indicated mixed results of school-based governance reforms. Despite the positive results that can be achieved through community participation in WASH initiatives, in many countries, including India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, community participation in the form of school committees has been limited by elite capture, institutional authority, and technical capacity (Sehrawat & Roy, 2021; Nath, 2020). Although SMCs are formally constituted in almost all primary schools in Bangladesh, their effectiveness is often hampered by a lack of autonomy in decision-making processes, political interference and bureaucratic centralization (Akhter, 2017; Transparency International Bangladesh, 2008). Such restrictions have a tendency to turn SMCs into a symbolic governance structure which fails to become a decision making body and this undermines the role of SMCs in the decentralization of education management.

Additional literature also indicates that socioeconomic and contextual factors have a large impact on SMC effectiveness. Poor representation in school committees is often due to rural poverty, low literacy of parents and lack of awareness regarding the role of governance (Islam et al., 2019; Mamun, 2014). Additionally, gender norms and social hierarchies undermine formal policy provisions for inclusive representation, further limiting the role of marginalized groups, especially women, in governance processes (Rahman et al., 2022). Another issue being faced is political intervention in committees' composition and decision making is significantly affected by local power dynamics, which hinder transparency and accountability (Akhter, 2017, Zafarullah & Ferdous, 2024).

There are, however, important constraints on SMCs that have been identified in the literature which continues to grow. First, a lot of research to date has used macro-level educational indicators, like national trends in enrolment and policy-level governance reforms, and paid little attention to the micro-level institutional dynamics of specific school committees. Secondly, most of the studies use either quantitative or qualitative method alone, thereby limiting the capacity to observe patterns statistically and provide explanations contextually regarding governance effectiveness. Mixed-methods research designs, as identified, can offer a more complete picture of a complex social system like school governance by combining quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Third, it is evident that there is a geographical gap in literature, especially in the context of Upazila level governance dynamics in Bangladesh. Although some of the studies concentrate on the urban centres or on the extreme rural areas, the focus on the variation of governance effectiveness at district level is still limited, particularly in a district like Cumilla District which has diverse socio-economic and administrative profile. Fourthly, the literature offers limited information on the perspectives of stakeholders on the challenges of governance and reform priorities. While most studies focus on the analysis of institutions, they fail to adequately reflect the experiences and voices of those who directly participate in governance processes, such as SMC members, teachers, and parents, as well as community members.

From these restrictions, a research gap is revealed. An integrated mixed methods study is needed to consider SMC effectiveness as a dynamic governance system and not a series of separate variables. Little is known about how elements of governance, processes of governance, and constraints of governance relate to educational outcomes in a coherent analytical context. In addition, the feedback mechanisms that can account for how school performance results affect governance practices and institutional learning have received little

attention. This is especially relevant in Bangladesh where the effectiveness of SMC varies greatly from region to region, depending on institutional capacity, political influence and community engagement.

The present study aims to fill these gaps using a concurrent mixed-methods design and a systems-based analytical framework to explore the effectiveness of SMC in select Upazilas in Cumilla District. The study combines quantitative information from the survey with qualitative information from FGDs and KII, which makes it more contextually grounded and a more comprehensive understanding of governance effectiveness in primary education. This approach will help to add value to the theoretical studies on governance in the education sector and also to provide policy inputs to strengthen the decentralized educational systems in Bangladesh.

Theoretical And Conceptual Framework

The present study is based on two theories namely Systems Theory and Participatory Governance Theory, which jointly offer an extensive and detailed perspective on why School Management Committees (SMCs) are effective in enhancing the achievement of quality education at primary schools of Bangladesh. These theories are then combined in a conceptual framework which outlines the ways that governance inputs are translated through institutional mechanisms into quantifiable educational outcomes, moderated by contextual factors, and generated feedback.

Schools are seen as open and dynamic systems from a Systems Theory point of view (von Bertalanffy, 1968) which consists of interrelated parts and changes constantly in interaction with its environment. In this system, SMCs are a key element of the governance of education, connecting resources, stakeholder involvement, institutional capacity and training. These inputs are significant in enabling good governance in the school. However, their effectiveness depends upon the organization and use of the system as well. This sub-system is not efficient as lack of finance, lack of training and weak institutions result in the poor performance of schools.

The Participatory Governance Theory builds on this systems-based approach in highlighting the need to engage stakeholders in public decision-making processes. It implies that the participation of the community in the management of institutions improves governance, transparency and accountability. In this study, SMCs are viewed as participatory platforms which enable parents, teachers, local elites and administrative actors to work together and manage school affairs. Good participation can enhance a sense of ownership, and accountability and responsiveness towards local educational needs. However, because of political interference, awareness and socioeconomic and institutional barriers, participation is limited in practice.

The conceptual model for the study is based on an input-process-output model. There are four key elements of input dimension, namely SMC training, financial resources, community participation and institutional capacity. These factors are determining elements of school governance. However, well-trained members of the SMC can understand their role and good financial resources can enable schools to undertake development activities. Similarly, strong community involvement brings about greater accountability and strong institutional capacity supports strong coordination and leadership.

Process dimension is linked to internal governance mechanisms; inputs turned into actions. This includes regularity of meetings, quality of communication, transparency of decision making and autonomy of decision making. Regular stakeholder meetings keep everyone engaged and effective communication enhances the school's and community's coordination. Transparency leads to accountability in terms of resource management, whilst autonomy allows SMCs to make decisions that are relevant to the context, but not governed by over-bureaucratic processes. These processes all impact how inputs to governance are used.

The output dimension represents the educational results from the operation of SMC. These are based on, for example, enrolment, attendance, dropout reduction, academic performance and the quality of the school environment. Better governance mechanisms are expected to have a positive impact on these as it is expected to increase the efficiency, accountability and trust of the community in the school.

The framework further takes into account contextual moderating factors including political interference, bureaucratic constraints, socioeconomic factors and gender norms. These external factors affect the SMC dynamics of inputs, processes and outputs; they allow or limit the ability of SMCs to function. Political factors, for example, may impact decision-making autonomy, and socioeconomic disadvantage may impact community involvement.

Finally, the model calls for a feedback loop process to the governance system. The results of the performances and feedback received from the community will impact future SMC decisions and enable ongoing adaptation and improvement. This is an ongoing effort to show how school governance systems are in inconstancy.

In sum, the conceptual framework is a blend of Systems Theory and Participatory Governance Theory that explains how SMCs work, how the effectiveness of SMCs is influenced by various factors, and how the governance practices of SMCs influence educational outcomes in primary schools in Bangladesh.

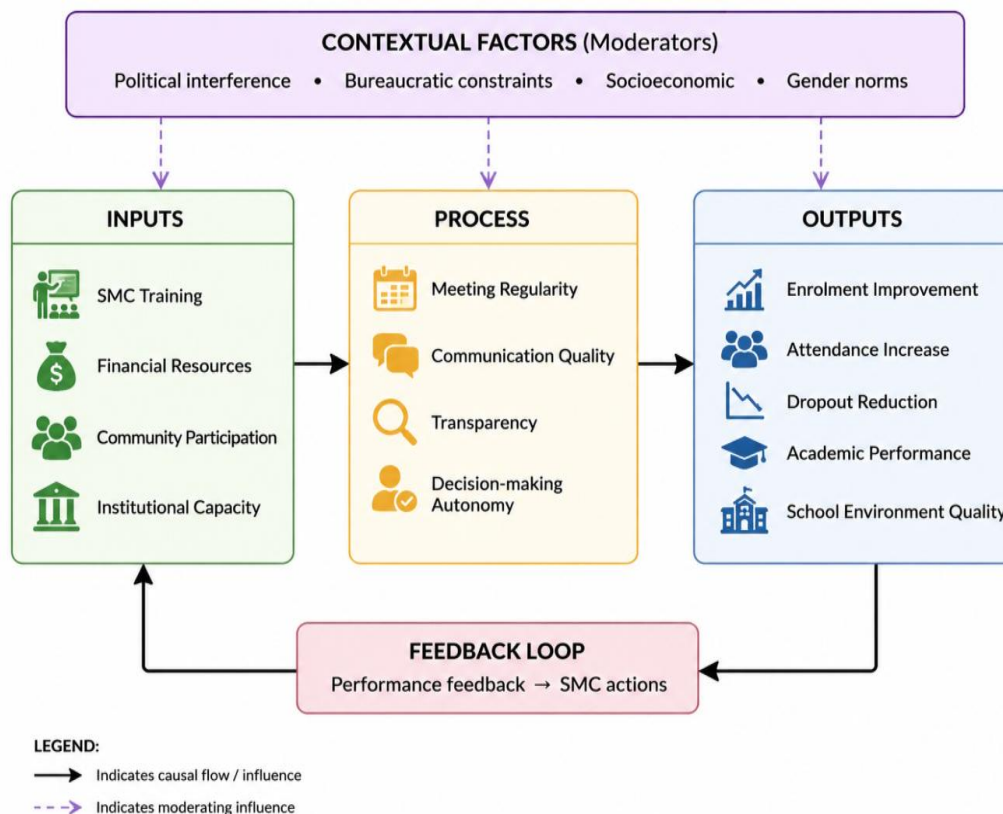


Figure 01: Conceptual Framework of the Study

METHODOLOGY

This study has employed a mixed method approach with preference to quantitative method for the investigation of effectiveness of School Management Committees (SMCs) in the improvement of education results in Primary Schools of Bangladesh. Triangulation and augmenting the contextual validity were achieved by using primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was collected from the involved stakeholders in the governance of SMC and secondary data was collected from published journal articles, books, government reports, policy documents and credible online sources. Mixed-method enables in-depth analysis of the practice of the institutions, governance process and perception of various stakeholders in the context of SMC effectiveness in the primary education system in Bangladesh.

The design of the study is based on case study method of four Upazilas under Cumilla District from which they are Cumilla Adarsha Sadar, Debidwar, Chandina and Daudkandi. By choosing the Cumilla District, the study is able to reflect a variety of governance dynamics in peri-urban, semi-rural and rural educational settings in the primary education system of Bangladesh. The focus of the study was on the interpretations made

by the stakeholders, and on their lived experiences of the SMC governance structures and their effectiveness, given the interpretive nature of the study. In addition, the analytical approach of the Systems Theory and Participatory Governance Theory was applied to grasp the collaboration of institutional inputs, governance processes and contextual conditions that impact on educational outcomes. Although the four Upazilas provide useful contextual variation, the single-district case-study design limits external validity; therefore, the findings should be interpreted as specific to Cumilla rather than nationally representative of Bangladesh.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling with stakeholder-group stratification, based on their direct involvement and experience in SMC governance and primary education. The final quantitative sample was composed of a total of $N = 116$ respondents from five stakeholder groups namely SMC members, teachers, parent representatives, community members and headmasters. This guaranteed that there was a variety of governance perspectives within the school system. Qualitative analysis was carried out through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to gain in-depth understanding of the governance processes and institutional constraints. 10 FGDs with a total of 80 participants and 20 KIIs with headmasters, education officers and SMC chairpersons were carried out. Furthermore, open-ended answers about the survey were obtained for all 116 respondents, totaling 334 qualitative response units for analysis. Informed consent was obtained before data collection and all participants were chosen because of their knowledge and experience of SMC operations.

Data was obtained using face-to-face structured questionnaires, KIIs and FGDs, adapting questions to suit the context and engage the respondents. The structured questionnaire contained both closed- and open-ended items. The closed-ended items used a five-point Likert scale to measure SMC governance effectiveness, institutional processes and educational outcomes, while the open-ended items captured perceptions of governance barriers, achievements and reform priorities. The KII and FGD instruments focused on community participation, governance challenges, school improvement processes and institutional decision-making.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns across stakeholder groups and educational outcomes. The reported analysis did not use inferential significance tests. Qualitative data from FGD transcripts, KII interviews and open-ended survey responses were analyzed through the six-phase inductive thematic analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2017).

Various techniques were used to enhance the validity and reliability. The instruments were expert-reviewed for content validity and tested for construct validity by relating them to the existing theories on governance. The quantitative instrument was checked for reliability using Cronbach's alpha with a result of $\alpha = 0.81$ which is acceptable. To enhance the robustness of findings, methodological triangulation was used by combining quantitative survey data with qualitative data gathered in the FGDs and KIIs.

Ethical guidelines have been adhered to during the research process. All participants signed an informed consent form before data collection. All participation was voluntary and they were told they could be removed from the study at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were carefully observed and no personal identifiers were shared in the analysis and reporting of results. All data were kept in a secure manner and used only for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Respondent Characteristics

116 respondents were included in quantitative analysis, each one of them from the different categories of SMC members (37.1%), teachers (29.3%), parent representatives (16.4%), community members (8.6%) and headmasters (8.6%). They had extensive governance experience: 63.8% indicated having over 4 years' governance experience as shown in Table 1. Educational qualifications were diverse with the majority having Diploma/Bachelor (38.8%) and postgraduate (30.2%) qualifications. However, training coverage was a concern as 53.4% had formal SMC training and 46.6% did not. The wide range of respondents adds to the findings, as it draws on institutional and community views of SMC effectiveness.

Variable	Category	n	%
Role	SMC Member	43	37.1%
	Teacher	34	29.3%
	Parent Representative	19	16.4%
	Community Member	10	8.6%
	Headmaster/Principal	10	8.6%
Years of Involvement	< 1 year	13	11.2%
	1–3 years	29	25.0%
	4–6 years	37	31.9%
	7+ years	37	31.9%
Education Level	Secondary (SSC)	11	9.5%
	Higher Secondary (HSC)	25	21.6%
	Diploma/Bachelor's	45	38.8%
	Post-Graduate and above	35	30.2%
Training Received	Yes	62	53.4%
	No	54	46.6%

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 116)

Source: Survey data collected from 116 respondents across 20 primary schools in Cumilla District, Bangladesh.

SMC Governance Capacity and Stakeholder Awareness

Empirical evidence shows that the operating capability of School Management Committee (SMC) is moderately positive, but is greatly limited due to the lack of the institutional training. Internal school communication is the highest (M = 3.67, 58.6%) with solid scores for financial transparency (M = 3.61) and meeting regularity (M = 3.54). But the training adequacy is a crucial factor with the lowest level of agreement (M = 3.24) and a high rate of disagreement (24.1%). This lack of training is reflected in a significant inequity in levels of duty awareness by role with institutional actors (such as headmasters) reporting the highest level of awareness (M = 3.70) and key parent representatives reporting the lowest (M = 3.11), highlighting a strong need for parent-specific capacity building.

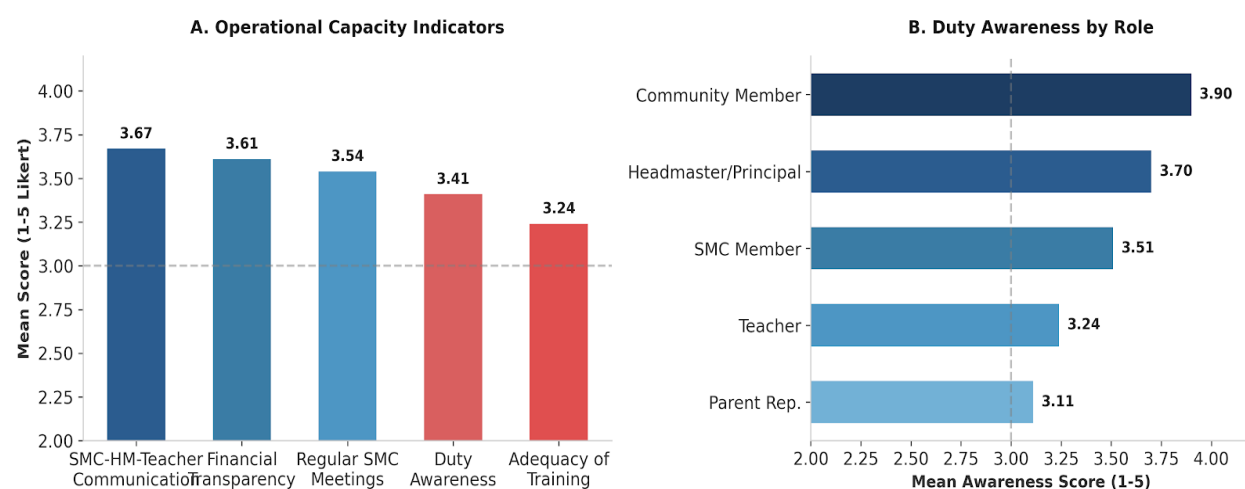


Figure 02: SMC Governance & Stakeholder Analysis

SMC Impact on Educational Outcomes

Evidence shows that School Management Committees (SMCs) have the most positive influence on the immediate school environments and academic results. School safety, ensuring an environment that allowed students to feel safe, had the highest rating ($M = 3.72$), followed by improvement in academic performance ($M = 3.68$) which had the highest overall consensus with 60.3% agreement. Student dropout reduction ($M = 3.28$) and attendance impact ($M = 3.34$) on the other hand had the lowest scores and also high disagreement rates (23.3% and 20.7%, respectively) which reflected the difficulties that SMCs had in influencing wider behaviour. This variation reflects the fact that SMC regulations do a good job of optimizing school internal environments but the fundamental socio-economic determinants of students' attendance and dropout rates are mostly out of SMC control.

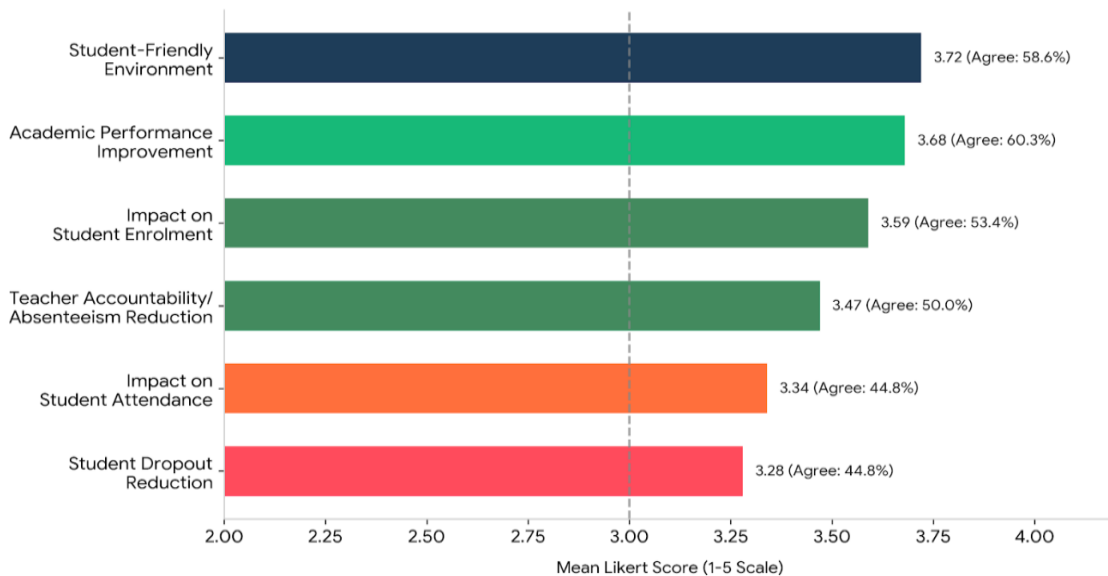


Figure 03: SMC Impact on Educational Outcomes

Structural Barriers to SMC Effectiveness

The School Management Committees (SMCs) are not working as effectively as they should. The empirical data show that lack of funds is the most thoroughgoing obstacle ($M = 3.84$), and that 67.2% of the respondents stated that local governance is underfunded to a critical level. Heavy bureaucratic red tape ($M = 3.57$) and extensive infrastructure problems ($M = 3.52$) limit operational environments. These outside pressures have a direct impact on community participation, with scores for local participation being low ($M = 3.47$). Corruption is an ongoing issue ($M = 3.28$), but it shows greater variation across schools. All these obstacles together give rise to a closed institutional framework that impedes local autonomy and self-governance.

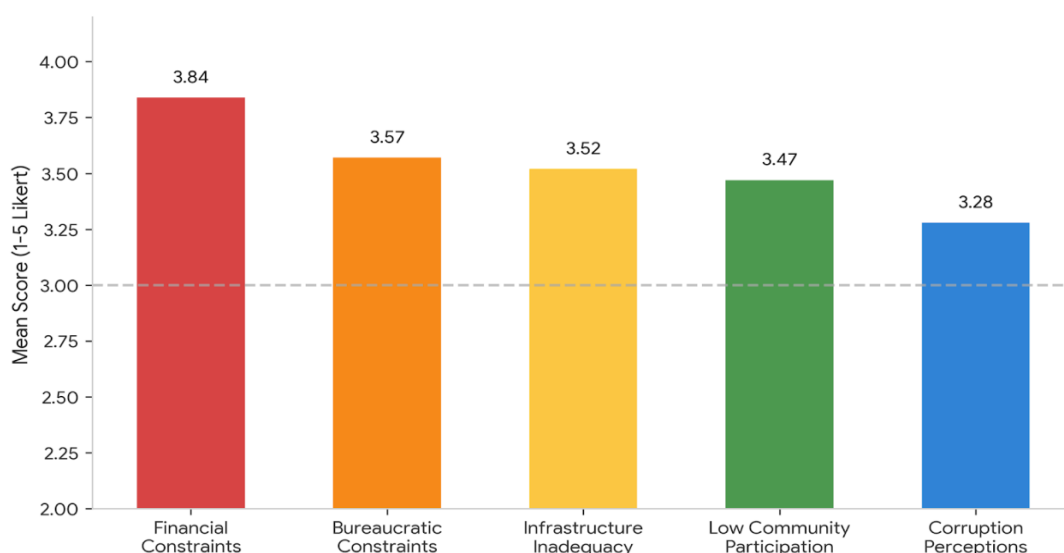


Figure 04: Structural Barriers to SMC Effectiveness

The qualitative data obtained from open-ended survey questions, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis process. 334 coded response units were analyzed, 113 coded units were identified relating to barriers to community participation and 112 coded units were identified relating to recommendations for strengthening School Management Committees (SMCs). Two main dimensions emerged from the analysis: (1) structural and operational constraints of effective SMC functioning and (2) stakeholder recommendations for strengthening institutions.

Major Categories of Barriers Affecting SMC Effectiveness

Theme 1: Local Power Dynamics and Political Interference

Political interference and unequal local power relations had the highest percentage of barrier-related responses ($n = 41$, 36.3%) and was the most dominant barrier identified. SMCs were often characterized as potentially being subject to informal political influence, with the ability for powerful local actors to influence the decisions committees make, the selection of leadership, and the allocation of resources. This gave the impression that SMC's involvement does not necessarily indicate democratic community involvement, but rather, existing local power structure. Three main sub-themes were identified:

Political influence on SMC decision making:

Respondents pointed out that committees are not always independent and that local political leaders can affect the way the committees are run.

The fear of higher status and influential members:

The majority of participants indicated that when influential people prevail in the discussion, ordinary community members avoid giving their opinions.

Domination of the elite and marginalization of weaker sections:

Poor households as well as women and those who were not affiliated with a political party were seen as having little voice in decision making processes.

This concern was summarized by a parent representative: 'Dominance by local politicians'.

-- Respondent, Parent Representative

A teacher added also: "The fear of influential members".

-- Respondent, Teacher

The results indicate that the political capture has a negative impact for participatory governance goals of SMCs as it renders SMCs as spaces for the reproduction of existing power dynamics instead of community accountability mechanisms.

Theme 2: Logistical and Structural Limitations

The second major barrier was practical issues for involvement of the community regularly ($n = 25$, 22.1%). While community members were willing to participate, there were a number of institutional structures that posed barriers to meaningful engagement. Main sub-themes were:

Meeting times are not convenient to the stakeholders:

The meetings were held during working hours, and many parents, especially those working in agriculture and as daily wage earners, were unable to attend.

Time limitation and livelihood pressures:

Attendance at meetings was seen as an expensive activity as it meant departed income generation.

Instability of membership and geographic accessibility issues:

Continuity and institutional capacity was impacted by distance from schools and changes in committee members.

One member of SMC said: "Inconvenient meeting times."

Respondent was the SMC Member.

All of these findings suggest that participation barriers often do not reflect a disinterest in participating, but rather are created by institutional arrangements which are not designed to meet the lived realities of community members.

Theme 3: Institutional Distrust and Transparency Deficits

Another important barrier was institutional distrust ($n = 17$, 15.0%). The respondents expressed that lack of transparency and accountability in the past lowered the confidence in the SMC processes. Three major sub-themes were identified:

Lacks transparency in financial management:

Some of the participants doubted the openness of financial decisions and the use of resources to the community.

Negative previous experiences with SMC functioning:

The lack of community participation was a result of past experiences with committees that were not effective.

General mistrust of governance institutions:

Some respondents felt that SMCs were incapable of impacting meaningful decisions.

A statement from a member of the community "Lack of trust in the system".

-- Respondent, Community Member

The results show that no matter how much awareness is created, participation can only be strengthened if there are tangible improvements in transparency, accountability and responsiveness.

Theme 4: Gaps in Communication between Stakeholders

Limited communication was also a major challenge ($n = 21$, 18.6%). Weaknesses in information sharing between schools, SMC members, parents and the wider community, were identified by respondents. The sub-themes included:

Poor communication regarding meeting and decisions: Community members were often not informed about SMC activities in time.

Limited knowledge of SMC roles and responsibilities: Some parents and community representatives did not know what their governance authority was.

Unawareness of under-educated persons about Formal communication: Technical language/bureaucratic styles decreased access.

The results show that there is information imbalance between institutional actors and community stakeholders, due to the communication gaps that exist, which affects the participatory governance of the community.

Theme 5: Socioeconomic Exclusion of Marginalized Community Members

The last barrier category referenced socioeconomic and gender based exclusion ($n = 15$, 13.3%). This was due to unequal opportunities for participation, where disadvantaged groups were more constrained. The major sub-themes were:

Economic opportunity costs of participation: Poor parents were unable to sacrifice time for income generating activities.

Lower educational backgrounds: Sometimes parental educational disadvantage and low confidence meant that they were unable to take an effective part.

Gender related barriers: The traditional social roles restricted women's participation in governance processes.

This theme illustrates how important it is to have inclusive mechanisms to ensure effective community participation and to tackle structural inequalities between community members and other actors, and that they are not all equal.

Proposed Recommendation Areas for Strengthening SMC Functionality

Based on stakeholder responses, six major recommendation areas emerged.

1. Strengthening SMC Autonomy and Reducing Political Interference

The biggest number of recommendations ($n = 31$, 27.7%) was for making the SMC more independent. Respondents put stress on transparent committees' selection, decreasing political influence and increasing legal authority.

A teacher suggested: "Autonomy + Transparency."

-- Respondent, Teacher

Another respondent recommended: "Not to be confused by politics."

-- Respondent, Teacher

This recommendation addresses the most important barrier identified in the study.

2. Improving the accountability and transparency procedures:

Improved accountability systems ($n = 24$, 21.4%) was a highlighted theme among the respondents. Suggested solutions involved transparency of financial data, periodical evaluations, and monitoring systems.

A headmaster recommended: "System of monthly performance review".

-- Respondent, Headmaster

There was a need for greater accountability as this was seen as critical to restoring trust to institutions and to promote more community involvement.

3. Capacity Building and Structured Training Programs

Reform in training was identified as a key recommendation area. Respondents felt that a few workshops were not enough and proposed formal induction programs for new SMC members.

Recommended actions included:

All SMC members must attend an orientation session prior to taking on roles.

Role-specific governance training.

Training on financial management and accountability.

This recommendation aligns with the identified gap of almost half of the respondents not having formal SMC training.

4. Financial Authority and Empowerment

Participants spoke to both financial resources and authority over expenditure decisions as necessary for the effectiveness of SMC. Recommended reforms included:

Dedicated operational budgets.

Easy financial approval process.

More local control of school improvement funding.

This is a direct answer to the finding that financial barriers were the most frequently cited quantitative barrier.

5. Inclusion and Community Engagement

Respondents emphasized the need to increase the involvement of the marginalized groups, including women and underprivileged parents. Suggested measures included:

Increasing women's representation.

Organizing awareness programs in the community.

Establishing easy to access meeting arrangements.

This recommendation is related to socioeconomic and gender-based exclusion that has been identified in the barrier analysis.

6. Digital Administration and Improved Stakeholder Coordination

The last recommendation area was that of administrative coordination, with the aim of enhancing administrative systems and communication. Suggested improvements included:

Digital record keeping.

Online financial reporting systems.

Improved communication between SMCs, schools & education offices.

Digital tools were seen as tools to enhance transparency, minimize information gaps and increase institutional accountability.

Overall, the thematic analysis in general reveals that effectiveness of SMC is limited by the interrelated political, institutional, financial, communication and socioeconomic factors. The recommendations highlighted in the proposal suggest that in addition to capacity enhancement, deeper structural reforms are necessary to ensure SMCs are autonomous, to enhance transparency, and to include and build accountable participatory governance.

Integrated Quantitative–Qualitative Interpretation

There is strong convergence between the two evidence streams as shown by triangulation. Financial constraints, lack of training and political obstacles were identified as quantitative evidence and the qualitative responses reflected the mechanisms behind these issues. The results suggest that three conditions are prerequisite for SMC effectiveness: Resources, Institutional autonomy, and Capacity of stakeholders.

The interpretation indicates that there is a need to implement systemic reform to enhance SMC performance, not isolated interventions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) should focus on depoliticizing School Management Committees (SMCs) structurally and standardizing them during elections, since this is the biggest challenge of political interference and local dynamics. The election process for SMC should be transparent, competitive and devoid of arbitrary political appointments. To increase institutional integrity, the number of term limits, independence of electoral oversight, eligibility for election, and prohibition on key positions held by active political party members should be established. These changes would enable SMCs to be a true community based governance body instead of merely a symbolic or politically influenced body.

Primary School governance is hindered by a serious lack of funding which urgently needs policy attention. MoPME should shift financial power to schools by implementing direct, dedicated school operational budgets via non-discretionary, block grants. These grants must be given with simplified guidelines for spending to ensure that SMCs are able to respond to the needs of the schools without undue bureaucracy. If committees had more financial autonomy, they could respond to the infrastructure, teaching-learning and student support needs in their local communities.

Training awareness gap should be filled by changing the present workshop based training to a compulsory competency based pre-appointment induction. All elected SMC members should undergo a basic governance training prior to assuming the roles. This training should include the roles of the committee, financial management, accountability, child protection, communication and school improvement planning. Particular consideration should be given to parent representatives who had relatively low awareness scores. Training material should be prepared using simple language and local dialects, to ensure participation of undereducated and socioeconomically disadvantaged members.

More transparency and accountability mechanisms should be put in place. It is recommended that schools have a monthly public accountability cycle where minutes of public meetings, financial accounts, expenditure decisions and member attendance are posted on school noticeboards and are communicated via digital platforms (where possible). This transparency can help to break down institutional trust barriers and enhance the dialogue between schools, parents, and communities.

Another priority is inclusive participation. For all SMCs, there should be a fixed percentage of participation for women (at least 33%) and practical considerations should be made regarding the actual functioning of the SMC, given the domestic responsibilities of women and the work schedules of working parents. Make meetings accessible to more full participation by marginalized groups by their time and place.

Finally, it is essential to enhance the linkage and coordination between SMCs and Upazila Education Office through quarterly review meeting, establish localized linkage and coordination and simple digital dashboards. An off-line mobile record-keeping, financial monitoring and resolution monitoring app will support administrative efficiency, gaps in reporting and improve evidence-based supervision in line with SDG 4 and SDG 16.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effectiveness of School Management Committees (SMCs) in decentralizing primary education in selected Upazilas of Comilla District in Bangladesh. Results indicate that SMCs have a moderate

positive effect on internal, immediate school deliverables – namely on improving local academic outcomes ($M = 3.68$) and creating safe and student friendly environments ($M = 3.72$). But results indicate that their effectiveness drops significantly when they deal with behaviors related to the socioeconomic context of the student such as reducing student dropouts ($M = 3.28$) and monitoring chronic absenteeism ($M = 3.34$). Moreover, there is a strong "capacity-awareness paradox": almost half of all committee stakeholders (46.6%) are not formally trained in governance, resulting in a high level of role-based duty awareness asymmetries between institutional head ($M = 3.70$) and parental representatives ($M = 3.11$). These findings offer valuable evidence that decentralized school boards in Bangladesh are effective in optimizing local physical and academic context, but they are an institution whose effectiveness and systemic efficacy is profoundly hampered by macro-level institutional constraints.

The study extends the existing literature in two ways: firstly, it clarifies and deepens the understanding of decentralized school-based management in the developing world and, secondly, it maps out how the micro-scale dynamics of school institutions and local committee sub-systems are actively managed by the contextual forces. It also provides concrete suggestions to policy makers and educational institutions with regard to how to counteract political interference (36.3% of qualitative responses), absolute financial underfunding ($M = 3.84$), inflexible bureaucratic red tape, and socioeconomic and gendered marginalization of parents. Thus, the results indicate the need for the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education to move beyond symbolic creation of committees to making more profound structural changes. These must involve direct fiscal decentralization through non-discretionary block grants and independent electoral oversight to reduce elite capture, as well as pre-appointment induction programs that are standardized and based on competency, to help equalize the field between stakeholders. This study has two main limitations. First, the quantitative sample was relatively small ($N = 116$) and was drawn from 20 primary schools in a single district, so the findings cannot be generalized confidently to Bangladesh as a whole. Second, the quantitative-dominant, concurrent cross-sectional case-study design captures stakeholder perceptions at one point in time and cannot assess institutional change longitudinally. Future research should expand the analysis to multiple districts and divisions and, where feasible, use a nationally representative probability-based sample to improve external validity. Larger multi-site studies could also apply longitudinal designs and comparable measurement instruments to test whether the observed patterns persist across different administrative and socioeconomic contexts. Overall, results from this study highlight the need to move from a nominal administrative compliance to real local autonomy and inclusive capacity building in order to realize the equitable, quality primary education of SDGs 4 and 16.

Conflict of Interest Declarations

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical guidelines for social science research. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Departmental Academic and Research Ethics Committee, Department of Public Administration, Comilla University, Cumilla-3506, Bangladesh.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they participated in the survey. Participation was voluntary and the respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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