

PARENT & COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION: FOCUS ON OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN AND MOTHERS' ENGAGEMENT DRIVE EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

SANGAI SIKAUIN SANGAI BADHAUN (LEARNING & GROWING TOGETHER) PROJECT TECHNICAL BRIEF SERIES # 4

ABOUT THE PROJECT (2012-2016)

THE CHALLENGE:

In the 27 worst-performing schools in Banke and Dang, Nepal, marginalized children in former bonded labor communities had low levels of learning achievement and high dropout rates.

THE GOAL:

Demonstrate an education model in Nepal that enables marginalized children to complete a quality education up to Grade 8.

THE SOLUTION:

A multi-pronged approach to address the entire education continuum from early childhood to Grade 8 with interventions to improve teaching practice, classroom environment, governance and system support, assessment, and parent and community engagement.

THE IMPACT:

- ↗ **Learning outcomes** improved at every level from Grade 1 to Grade 10
- ↗ **Enrollment** in ECD increased to 93%
- ↗ **Attendance** increased at every level.
- ↘ **Dropout** declined from 22% to 3% for Grades 1-8

PARTNERS:

Implementing Partners: Backwards Society Education (BASE); Rural Women's Development Center (RWDC)

Technical Partners: Kathmandu University; National Center for Education Development (NCED); Rato Bangala Foundation; Seto Gurans National Child Development Center



Getting parents engaged in children's learning resulted in huge pressure on schools and teachers to change the way children are taught. Mothers have been most active in supporting children's education and have increased their economic participation so as to pay for the costs of education.

Is it possible to dramatically transform the entire educational landscape for children in marginalized communities where children face multiple barriers to learning? If it is, then interventions surely must go beyond the classroom. The Sangai Sikaun Sangai Badhaun (Learning & Growing Together) Project area included just this kind of marginalized communities: the project covered communities that had been marginalized by an economic system based on bonded labor. This system, called Kamaiya, was abolished just a decade before the start of the project. As a result, few people in the communities had more than minimal schooling themselves, and there was little foundation upon which incremental improvements could build.

The situation analysis found that parents rarely visited the schools. Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) and School Management Committees (SMC) were not functioning properly and were often at odds with the community as a result of lack of clarity about their roles. Schools were not open for the required 192 days, and when they were, teachers were often absent. When teachers did attend, they often arrived late and left early. Furthermore, even if teachers were there, student attendance was low—50-80%, depending on grade—meaning many students only attended the equivalent of every other day. Parents struggled to pay for uniforms, stationary and fees charged by schools.

KEY STRATEGIES

World Education’s community engagement strategy was adapted from the concept of “Opportunity to Learn”, which served as a framework for mobilization. The project especially emphasized the role of mothers in ensuring Opportunity to Learn, and aimed to increase their ability to support children’s development and education.

OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN AS A FRAMEWORK FOR PLANNING, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

World Education used the concept of Opportunity to Learn (OTL) to mobilize stakeholders and address environmental factors that influence the time and opportunity children have to actually learn. OTL incorporates the many things communities and parents can do to support schools and ensure children actually are attending, exposed to a quality environment, and learning—not simply registered as enrolled. OTL was a cross-cutting strategy toward achieving learning outcomes for children at all levels. Under the umbrella of OTL, the project aimed to:

- » **Build capacity of systems to support provision of quality education:** To this end, the project developed OTL guidelines and oriented students, parents, teachers, SMCs, and PTAs to the concept. School management and stakeholders from Village Development Committee (VDC) and district

governments were also oriented about their roles and responsibilities. Schools created rubrics based on OTL components (see below) to take stock of their situation, prioritize areas for improvement, set goals, and track progress. Semi-annual sharing meetings were organized at the VDC level and district level to allow stakeholders to share plans, processes, challenges, achievements, and lessons learned. Resource Centers were supported with material supplies in order to improve educational events and training for teachers to support students’ learning.

- » **Improve water, sanitation, and hygiene practices and facilities at schools:** Participants from SMC, PTA, teachers, students and parents were oriented about the importance of hygiene and sanitation practices through WASH sessions in project schools.
- » **Increase parental and community involvement in children’s learning:** Activities toward improved OTL included a radio program to raise awareness of the importance of using mother tongue in classrooms, inclusion of parents in educational activities, and organization of meetings with parents of students with high rates of absenteeism.
- » **Provide children with extracurricular activities and support:** In each VDC, the project organized annual reading fairs with competitions for students, exhibitions, and games to increase students’ motivation, community members’ engagement, and schools’ accountability to the community. Child clubs were formed at each school in order to provide students with life skills support.

OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN COMPONENTS FOR PLANNING AND TRACKING PROGRESS

CURRICULUM	SCHOOL ATMOSPHERE	PEDAGOGY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextually appropriate curriculum • Sufficient learning materials • Mother tongue as medium of instruction in early grades • Curriculum reflects realistic expectations of age-appropriate student achievement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional toilets • Drinking water • Boundary wall/fence • Classroom construction and repairs • Sanitation and cleanliness • Safety • Child-friendly learning environment • Good governance • Effective school management and leadership • Schools meet or exceed national standard for open and teaching days • Student-teacher ratio allows for learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skilled teachers • Teachers can speak local language and use as medium of instruction • Grade teaching (students have one teacher for all subjects rather than different teachers for different subjects) • Availability and use of teaching/learning materials • Time on task: teachers skilled in providing adequate instructional and practice time • Classroom management for both teacher-centered time and student-centered time • Differentiation and support to struggling students

KEY STRATEGIES

STRENGTHEN ABILITY OF PARENTS, ESPECIALLY MOTHERS, TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Given the absence of many fathers due to labor migration and mothers' traditional roles as caretakers, parent engagement activities focused especially on helping mothers better support their children's education. Project activities set out to build mothers' literacy and numeracy skills and develop parents' capacity to engage in their children's education. Finally, for the most disadvantaged households, the project aimed to improve livelihoods so families could gain resources to support their children's education and compensate for the opportunity costs of having children stay in school instead of dropping out to work.

The project aimed to:

- » **Develop mothers' literacy and financial literacy:** The most disadvantaged neighborhoods were identified and mothers were invited to participate in daily classes. Illiterate mothers attended basic literacy classes using a Tharu language curriculum for 6 months. After this, the literacy graduates were joined by other (already literate) mothers for 3-month classes on financial literacy. Health and social issues and parenting skills were also incorporated into the curricula.
- » **Encourage mothers to read with children:** Mothers' groups were provided with Tin Trunk Libraries to further develop their skills and encourage them to read to their children. Together, mothers and children met on a weekly basis and practiced reading together.
- » **Improve parenting skills:** In response to mothers' expressed lack of confidence to support their children, five module sessions were developed to help parents learn how to support their children. Modules focused on early childhood

development (ECD), supporting reading development, adolescence, mother tongue as the medium of instruction, and income generation to support education.

- » **Support mothers to increase their income through micro-finance and livelihoods trainings:** After the basic and financial literacy classes, NGO partner Rural Women Development Centre helped participants form and train new micro-finance groups (none existed in these communities prior to the project). Special trainings were given for agricultural businesses and entrepreneurship. Increased financial security allows mothers to better support children's education—e.g., by making it easier for them to purchase snacks or materials for children to take to school.

INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS TO ENGAGE WITH SCHOOLS AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Too often, parents are only invited to schools for Parents Day, when huge numbers attend. Schools in the project areas traditionally just held a concert, gave prizes, and combined this with the school's annual meeting. The project aimed to link these events more to children's learning and use them as a time to share results. In addition, the project encouraged schools to create more opportunities for parents to engage. These included opportunities for parents to help produce learning materials, participate in classroom interactions, reading fairs at the community level, and meetings to solicit parents' help in preparing School Improvement Plans. Parents are also engaged in supporting learning at home and in Neighborhood Reading Clubs.

Mothers making learning materials



RESULTS

TRANSFORMATION: OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN AND QUALITY EDUCATION

Over the course of five years, the project saw significant impacts in multiple areas:

- » **Learning achievement increased** in multiple subjects at every grade from 1 to 8, with additional impacts seen beyond the project target groups at the Grade 10 level.
- » **Access to Early Childhood Development** increased.
- » **Attendance rates increased** at every grade level from 1 to 8.
- » **School open days and teaching days also increased** (which further amplifies the impact of increased attendance.)
- » **Dropout rate fell dramatically, from 23% to 3%** for Grades 1-8.

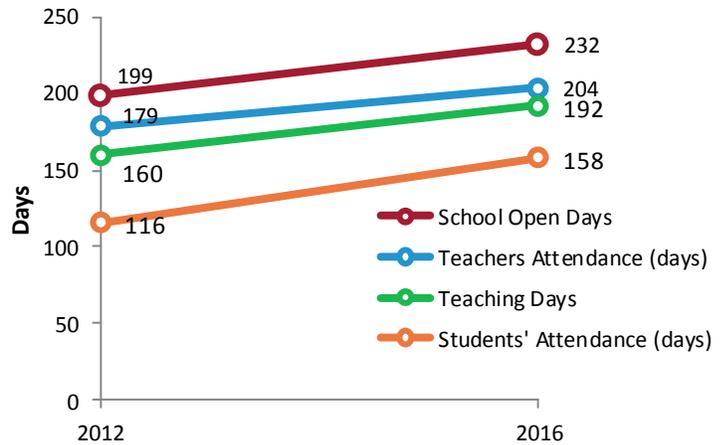
Classroom- and teacher-focused interventions certainly contributed to this success, but these results would not have been possible without the investment of parents and community members. Any one of the project's gains in ECD access, early grade learning, attendance, achievement of upper grade students, mothers' literacy, or mothers' savings would be substantial on its own. Taken together, however, these impacts paint a picture of community-wide change in educational environment and quality.

MOTHERS IMPACT CHILDREN'S LEARNING

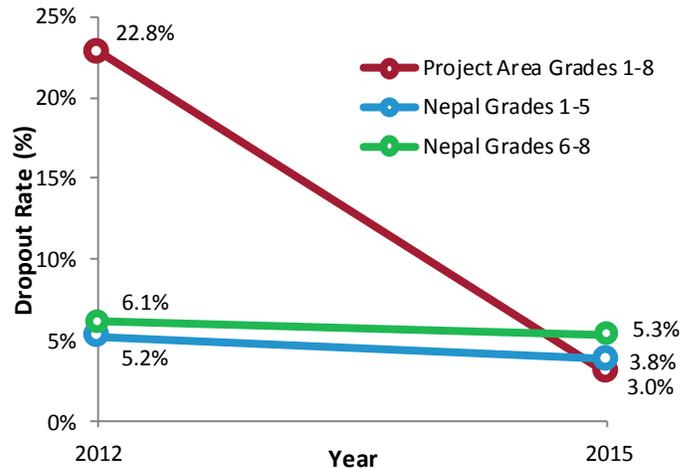
Results from the World Education Learning Assessment (WELA) showed a strong positive correlation between a mother's education and her child's achievement. Given that most mothers were illiterate at the start of the project, we can assume much (or all) of a mother's education (and thus associated learning gains) might be attributable to the project.

Second, both WELA data and a study conducted by Kathmandu University (KU) on the mothers' literacy and livelihoods activities found a significant positive relationship between mothers' participation in project activities and children's attendance. The KU study found the largest gains for poor children. In fact, the average attendance rate for the poorest children whose mothers participated in literacy and livelihoods activities was roughly equivalent to the attendance rate of children from better off families whose mothers did not participate. It is important to note that the mothers participating in the literacy and livelihood activities were not a random sample, but rather had been targeted because they were extremely poor, more marginalized than others, or their children were struggling.

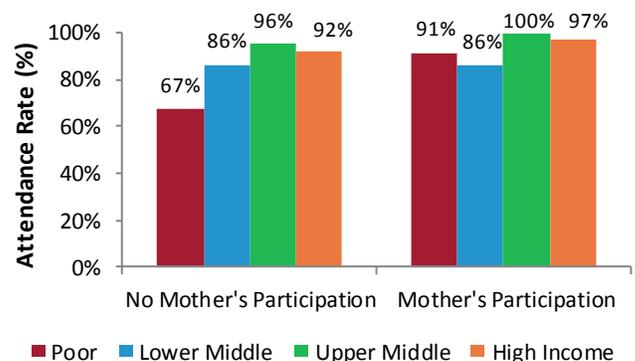
DAYS OF SCHOOL OPERATION, TEACHING DAYS, AND TEACHER AND STUDENT ATTENDANCE, ECD - GRADE 8, 2012 VS. 2016



DROPOUT RATE: PROJECT AREA COMPARED TO NATIONAL RATE, 2012 VS. 2015



STUDENT ATTENDANCE RATE BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND MOTHER'S PARTICIPATION



RESULTS

INCREASE IN COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

More difficult to measure, but no less important, is the increased community and local government engagement and investment in education. Schools are now not only meeting government standards (e.g., for instructional days), but going above and beyond requirements. Not only are parents and stakeholders more actively involved in students' learning both in and out of school, but they are investing their resources as well. The project team believes many of these gains are attributable to OTL-based strategies.

For example, while the project did not directly provide support for new classrooms and toilet blocks, as a result of planning, advocacy, and community mobilization, many improvements to physical infrastructure were made. During the project duration, 25 schools improved facilities, including 10 schools that built new classrooms and 10 that improved drinking water and constructed girls' toilets.

INCREASE IN LITERATE MOTHERS ABLE TO SUPPORT CHILDREN

905 mothers who had been illiterate before the literacy class gained literacy skills and, by the end of the course, were able to read books. 1,320 mothers formed into groups are helping their children to read and take books from the Tin Trunk Library home to read together. Saturday reading sessions and monthly competitions are continuing even as the project phases out.

MOTHERS ACTIVELY ENGAGE WITH SCHOOLS

1,307 mothers are visiting their children's school at least once a month and discussing with teachers about their children's education. These visits have improved the relationship between teacher and parents. Mothers who participated in the literacy program have also become more involved in other school activities.

MICROFINANCE GROUPS HELP MOTHERS INCREASE INCOME SUSTAINABLY

68 new women's groups were formed from the literacy program with 1,036 graduates saving regularly and accessing credit to improve their livelihoods. Group members have prioritized saving for their children's future educational expenses and are putting extra savings in to a special Education Fund. An additional 737 mothers have been inspired by their efforts and have subsequently joined the groups for access to microfinance and mutual support.



“*In the 7 days of livelihood training, we learned how to select a business, do a feasibility study, conduct business analysis, keep records, market our business, and form partnerships. The project also gave business-specific trainings such as poultry farming, pig farming, goat farming, vegetable farming, etc, but I chose to run a grocery shop. The training encouraged me to start my own business. In 2015, I took the loan of Rs. 60,000 on 11% interest from the RWDC to open a grocery shop. Now, I earn monthly Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 15,000 from the shop. Now my husband is also back from abroad helping me in running the shop.”*

- Parbati Dhital, entrepreneur and mother of two daughters

The savings and credit groups combined now have Rs.26,57,894 (~ \$25,760) capital in their groups. Of this Rs.9,08,873 (~\$8,740) is regular savings; Rs.17,45,940 (~ \$16,900) is in the Education Fund: and Rs.3,23,592 (~ \$3,130) in additional voluntary savings. At the conclusion of the project, savings worth Rs.96,17,500 (~ \$93,200) had been accessed by group members from their own capital and through access to loans from the larger network of 35,000 members. These loans have been invested in education and to upgrade agricultural and small business activities.

The majority of the participants have started to make investments in agricultural enterprises and small businesses. 608 of the mothers in the savings and credit groups were able to report increased cash incomes of greater than Rs.2,907 (~ \$28) monthly. These women reported spending an average of Rs.668 monthly on their children's education (~ \$6.50). (For context, the KU study used \$162/year as the maximum income for families in the “poor” category.)

LESSONS LEARNED AND WAY FORWARD

Opportunity to Learn provides a helpful framework for schoolwide improvement.

Opportunity To Learn (OTL) proved a useful framework to guide school leaders and motivate community members for action. By documenting many of the most important factors for children’s learning, the OTL framework helped schools and communities hold themselves accountable for school-based interventions. The project also found that using data on attendance, school conditions and learning for evidence-based planning motivated changes in teaching and school management practices, and helped convince parents of the value of using mother-tongue instruction in the early grades. By clarifying gaps, supporting goal-setting, and tracking success, the OTL framework also created a platform for effective government stakeholders to engage in project activities. Training and exposure has also helped government Resource Centers replicate the project’s strategies and learnings beyond the 27 project schools.

Link parental engagement to livelihoods development.

For a parent struggling to put food on the table, supporting his/her child(ren)’s education may be a secondary priority. Many interventions seek to increase parental engagement, but fail to account for parents’ primary concerns. The project provides a valuable model for how financial literacy, livelihoods development, and support for children’s education can be linked to generate sustainable parent engagement that reaches the most disadvantaged children. Such a link not only increases parental support for education, but also addresses a root cause—poverty—of a host of other barriers to children’s learning.

Construction work requires thorough planning to avoid impeding student learning.

Many of the schools were in poor physical condition at the start of the project and the District Education Offices, BASE, local government and communities came together to gather the funds and labor needed to upgrade the schools. Construction work though had negative impacts on the learning of children in the early grades with these children doing poorer than previous cohorts in their own school and in comparison to neighboring schools. As Nepal faces the huge challenge of reconstructing 8,000 schools lost in the earthquake and rebuilding many more to be earthquake safe in other parts of the country this has major implications. More effort is needed to ensure younger children are less impacted by construction and remedial efforts ensure they catch up after construction.

BEFORE AND AFTER AT JANABHAWANA MAHU SCHOOL: A LESSON LEARNED



Before

School upgrades and reconstruction are essential to improve learning conditions. However, the reconstruction process can prove distracting for students and teachers causing reduced learning outcomes for students. In this case, physical improvements were remarkable, but learning achievement dipped during the construction period.



After

LESSONS LEARNED AND WAY FORWARD

Economic empowerment can be more efficient and sustainable than scholarships.

In many of its projects for working children World Education spends about Rs.2,400 (~ \$23.25) per child each year to provide uniforms and stationery to the poorest children. In contrast, the Learning & Growing Together Project did not provide scholarships, but invested in livelihood development instead. Early signs suggest that in this case, the investment will prove a more sustainable way to help the poorest families to cover education costs, since income generation will continue while scholarship funds are exhausted each year. Many mothers have now increased their cash incomes to meet the costs of education.

COMPARISON OF SCHOOL COSTS, NGO PROGRAM COSTS, AND RETURN ON LITERACY & LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES

Annual School Expenses Per Child (uniform, supplies, fees)	Grades 1 – 8 Rs. 4,800 (~ \$46.50)	High School Rs. 9,800 (~ \$95)
Typical World Education Scholarship (per child, yearly)	Rs. 2,400 (~ \$23.26)	
Average Cost of Mothers' Literacy & Livelihood (per household)	Rs. 3,860 (~ \$27.40)	
Average income of mothers who used loans to start or expand businesses (608 mothers)	Monthly: Rs. 2,907 (~ \$28.18) Annually: Rs. 34,884 (~ \$338.16)	
Average amount spent on education by mothers who used loans to start or expand businesses	Monthly: Rs. 668 (~ \$6.50) Annually: Rs. 8016 (~ \$78)	

CASE STUDY: PHIRULI'S TRANSFORMATION FROM ILLITERATE HOUSEWIFE TO ENTREPRENEUR

Phiruli, now 32 and with two children, was born into the Kamaiya system of bonded labor. She gets emotional sharing her past:

"I was born into a very poor family. I spent 13 years of my life as a Kamlari [female bonded laborer] working in other people's houses. We had to wait for festivals to have good food and clothes. It was not possible to learn to read and write while working for other people. When I was still working as a Kamlari, my parents arranged my marriage."

Even after the Kamaiya system was abolished and Phiruli was grown with a family of her own, she still faced many challenges:

"My husband and I did not have any source of income for household expenditures or our children's education. It was a miserable situation. We did not want to make our children illiterate and suffer these miserable conditions like us so we enrolled them in Laxmipur Lower Secondary School, but it was a challenge to meet the expenses. Occasionally my husband would bring some money after doing the daily wage work in the village. This supported at least some costs."

Nowadays, Phiruli is proud to earn and save money by raising and selling livestock. When the Learning & Growing Together Project invited low-income mothers and mothers of



weak or irregular students to participate in literacy and livelihood classes, Phiruli jumped at the chance. She says:

"I was selected and the program conducted adult literacy class for the mothers like me. I regularly attended the classes for eight months [April to November 2013]. I learned to write my name, address, do math calculation and much more! After we finished the class, a savings group was

established. I also received livelihood training where I learned useful skills. I decided to do something then so I took a loan of Rs.12,000 [~\$120], and I bought some sheep and pigs to rear. I did not feel the passing of time looking after the sheep and pigs.

"When I sold my first lamb I was so excited to get the first income I'd earned in my whole life. My happiness had no limit. In this way, I am selling the animals regularly and it has been easy to pay back the loan, meet household expenses and pay for my children's education."

Phiruli has paid back her first and second loans and has now taken her third loan to expand her business. Each time she sells a piglet for Rs.10,000 [~\$100], she is able to raise her family's standard of living. The community now recognizes her as a skillful farmer and businesswoman. Paying for her children's education is no longer a worry.

CASE STUDY

When we first visited Namuna Pra Vi in 2012 we were shocked by the conditions. The school is in one of the remote corners of Duruwa VDC, far from the VDC office, and has poor road access. There were 166 students in ECD and Grades 1 through 5 crammed into two classrooms in a bamboo and thatch shack (below, left), with just two teachers teaching all the children. The school had the worst teacher-student ratio of any of the project schools in Dang district. Inside the school structure, it was hot and noisy on a good day, and the rain came through the roof on a bad day. There was nowhere to keep teaching materials. The school received little support from the government: salary and non-salary per-child funding (PCF), school scholarships and textbooks. Children often missed school during the rainy season due to the lack of good roads and local trails.

The Learning & Growing Together Project started by facilitating a School Self-Assessment involving teachers, parents, students, the SMC and PTA. Based on the self-assessment, the school community developed an "Opportunity to Learn-based School Improvement Plan". Namuna School prioritized upgrading the school building; increasing the number of teachers, including some teachers with permanent status; increasing student attendance; engaging parents; and ensuring learning achievement. As this is a poor community there was little potential for the construction of new school buildings without government or donor help. The parents and teachers mapped the school catchment area and presented the data to the government officials at the VDC, Cluster (Resource Centre) and District levels. The school held "Open School Days" as part of the Welcome to School campaign to raise the school's visibility and increase community leaders' and government officials' awareness of the need for school upgrades. As a result of this advocacy, the school was given priority for a block grant for a new classroom block and toilets. Local implementing partner BASE connected the school to additional donor support. The parents contributed time and resources as well during construction. The VDC and DDC WASH Committee provided support for drinking water and sanitation.

Five years later the school is transformed (below, right). Namuna School now has an ECD room, 5 classrooms, a library and office for 155 students in ECD through Grade 5. Attendance is still a challenge because the nearby Babai River floods during monsoon season and prevents children from attending school. However, teachers are very motivated and use the local Tharu language as the medium of instruction and the students perform well on tests. Now, Namuna School has the best results of all schools in the VDC.

The reason this school has progressed so much is that parents used data along with advocacy to make their case for increased support. The school now shares learning results with parents, and strong parental engagement in the planning process and school management resulted in rapid change. Strong leadership by the Head Teacher and the SMC Chairperson helped focus attention on this school and secure the support it needed both from the education system and parents.



SANGAI SIKAU SANGAI BADHAUN (LEARNING & GROWING TOGETHER) PROJECT TECHNICAL BRIEF SERIES

Summary Brief

1. Early Childhood Education

2. Early Grade Reading

3. Medium of Instruction

4. Community Mobilization

5. Remedial Instruction

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