



Exploring Economic Determinants of Educational Participation: A Participatory Rural Appraisal of an Alternative Rural School

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Abstract

Educational participation in rural communities is shaped by a range of economic and social factors, including livelihood insecurity, poverty, migration, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to basic services. Alternative education systems have been recognized as significant tools for overcoming some of these obstacles and ensuring inclusive and flexible learning. This research study analyzes the economic factors determining educational participation in an alternative rural school located in Haryana, India, applying Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Information was gathered from teachers and students through focus groups, community mapping, transect walks, and interaction with community members. Sampling involved purposive and convenience sampling. Data were analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method, which helped recognize various themes associated with educational participation. Five main themes have come up from the results of the analysis; democracy, shared responsibilities, non-hierarchical learning, experiential learning and skills development, barriers to education due to structure and culture and the role played by the school as an institution of stability in the community. The results show that participatory democracy, teacher-student relations and experiential pedagogy promote student engagement and inclusion. On the other hand, persisting economic issues such as migration during particular seasons, livelihood insecurity, lack of good housing and sanitation, and gender roles in the society still affect student participation in schools. The results of this paper indicate that alternative education systems have the potential to counter the negative influence of economic adversity on individuals by fostering supportive and inclusive educational institutions which promote prolonged involvement in education programs. The implications of this research lie in the fact that it adds to our knowledge of the manner in which community-based educational programs react to structural inequities in rural areas.

Keywords: Alternative education, Educational participation, Economic determinants, Participatory Rural Appraisal, Rural education, Inclusive education, Community engagement.

1. Introduction

Alternative education has gained recognition as one of the innovations in handling the varied educational needs of students especially for marginalized groups who are economically poor and socially disadvantaged hence cannot participate in education (Lock, 2024). Participation of education in rural and economically poor environments is characterized by various determinants including economic determinants like poverty, insecurity of livelihood, migrations, poor infrastructure, and social exclusion among others. These determinants affect the access of children to schools and effective learning process. In contrast to traditional education systems that emphasize standardized curricula and structured teaching, alternative education promotes inclusive learning, self-reliance, student agency, and flexible pedagogical practices that seek to reduce educational inequalities arising from socio-economic disadvantage (Kenny et al., 2023). Such learning environments encourage student engagement, participation, and collaborative decision-making while creating opportunities for children to overcome barriers associated with economic vulnerability (Dalimunthe et al., 2024). Additionally, holistic and democratic educational environments foster social responsibility, equality, and shared accountability by encouraging students to participate actively in maintaining the school environment and contributing to collective activities (Rosa, 1998).

1.1 Types of Alternative Education Programs

Alternative education encompasses a range of approaches designed to meet the diverse needs of students who are unable to thrive within conventional schooling systems because of structural, economic, or social challenges (see fig 1).

Type I	Type II	Type III
•Open grade structures offering specialized content or themes in line with student interests in domains of arts, science, etc.	•Programs for students considered disruptive or challenged and unable to cope in traditional environments, emphasizing behaviour modification rather than curriculum changes.	•Programs built to reintegrate or rehabilitate students once behavioural issues have been addressed and resolved.

Fig. 1: Three primary types of alternative education programs (Raywid, 1994)

These program models share a common objective of supporting students' individual learning needs through flexible, learner-centred educational practices that reduce the effects of economic vulnerability and social marginalization (Foley & Pang, 2006). The rise of alternative schooling can be attributed to the increasing number of school dropouts caused by poverty, economic instability, and seasonal migration among others (Rosa, 1998; Foley & Pang, 2006). Alternative schooling programs have created a conducive environment for the learners through which they are able to meet their learning and developmental needs, thus ensuring belongingness and resilience in education (Foley & Pang, 2006; Nurutdinova et al., 2016).

This case study is about a school which fits well within the Type I model proposed by Raywid, stressing inclusion, democracy, and child-centered approaches. The half of the places are occupied by poor children, with the other half provided on the basis of parents' voluntary contribution. The economic structure facilitates access to education for people living under poverty and ensures equal access to education, so that economic limits do not limit their access to educational opportunities. In other words, the school acts as an instrument to counteract educational exclusion.

1.2 Impact of Alternative Education

In an alternative school, learners are placed at the heart of the learning experience where teachers become facilitators who inspire questioning, cooperation, and experiential learning. Although such practices may pose certain difficulties for learners with less motivation, they promote thinking, autonomy, problem-solving skills, and self-learning techniques which help develop human capital (Nurutdinova et al., 2016). Nevertheless, alternative schools have remained vulnerable to negative perceptions by the public where they are perceived as schools meant for learners with academic weaknesses or social disadvantages. This kind of stigma is a product of wider socio-economic discrepancies (Geronimo, 2011).

Educational participation is more widely recognized as something influenced by wider economic and social circumstances rather than by factors at the school level alone. Children's participation in learning in rural areas and impoverished settings is influenced by the socio-economic conditions that impact households, including livelihood, shelter, sanitation, transportation, mobility, and many others (Hui, 2022). Therefore, alternative education must be viewed both as an innovative approach to teaching and learning and as a solution to socio-economic conditions impacting children's participation in education (Cappiali, 2025). Analyzing alternative education in terms of economic determinants allows for better insight into what inclusive approaches to education may do about structural challenges facing children in rural and impoverished areas.

2. Method

2.1 Aim

To investigate the factors of economy that affect educational participation in a rural alternative school in Haryana and to analyze how the educational practices in this school overcome the issues faced by poorer communities.

2.2 Objectives

1. To determine the factors that affect the education participation rate among the children in the rural setting.
2. To understand the perception of the students, teachers, and community members on the alternative approach to education.
3. To study the role of democratic participation, inclusive learning, and experiential pedagogy in education participation.
4. To understand the role of the alternative school in addressing barriers such as livelihood insecurity, seasonal migration, gender norms, housing conditions, and inadequate community infrastructure.
5. To analyse how the alternative education model contributes to educational inclusion and community engagement within an economically disadvantaged rural context.

2.3 Research Question

1. What economic and social factors influence children's educational participation in the rural community?
2. How do students, teachers, and community members perceive the alternative education model in promoting educational participation?
3. In what ways does the alternative school address economic and structural barriers affecting children's participation in education?
4. How does the alternative education model contribute to educational inclusion and community engagement in a rural setting?

2.4 Procedure

In the study, the researchers made use of the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) technique in order to study alternative education in its socio, economic, and community context. They made use of the PRA technique in order to concentrate on the actual experiences of the stakeholders and to understand the actual practices in the field of education along with the economic and community conditions. In the generation of the actual data, the active participation of the students, teachers, and community members was made through various activities. These events took place both at the school and in the rural area of Sonipat surrounding it, thus the study was able to connect the educational experiences with the daily realities of health, livelihoods, and social inclusion. After receiving the consent, the study picked an established alternative education school in Haryana.

2.4.1 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Teachers and Students : Separate FGDs were performed amongst teachers and students from grades 4 to 10 to get their insights on the alternative education model implementation. Each FGD had 6-10 members (Cortini et. al., 2019) to ensure higher engagement, fulfilment of standard procedure to ensure scientific rigour and objective fulfilment. Teachers who had been with the school for at least a year were selected by means of purposive sampling, while the students were selected with a range of ages and experiences within the school system. The FGDs of the students were facilitated by 7 moderators, while the FGD of the teachers was facilitated by two moderators, who encouraged the teachers to freely discuss the questions, which lasted for 40 minutes and 60 minutes, respectively. After the verbal consent was obtained, the discussions were held in a semi-structured manner within the school premises, which were audio-recorded for the accuracy of transcription.

2.4.2 Community Mapping and Transect Walk : A community mapping and transect walk were carried out by a small group of teachers, students, and researchers in the local area. The purpose of these activities was to "get an idea of the physical and social environment of the community, assess the resources, and identify social and educational interest areas." The participants helped in "developing a map of the local resources, landmarks, and infrastructures that are of most interest in the lives of the students and their families." It was also an opportunity for the participants "to become involved in conversations in the outdoors, exploring the local environment, the problems faced by the people, and the role of the school in the community as seen by the people."

2.4.3 Informal Interactions with Younger Students : Through casual interactions, young students were able to reveal much about their day-to-day life at school, such as their liking for the vibe. The interactions were informal and friendly, so they had the liberty to share their thoughts and feelings freely without the constraints of a formally arranged FGD.

2.5 Sample

The sample for this PRA study included:

- Six teachers from the school, each with over a year of experience in the school's alternative education setting.
- Students from grades 4 to 10 who participated in the FGDs [10 in each group] and

community activities

- Community members, engaged through community mapping and transect walk, who provided perspectives on the school's impact within the locality.

Teachers and students were selected only from those that had educational model experiences and had deep insights into this new model through purposive sampling (Tajik et al., 2024). Informal discussions with junior students were carried out based on convenience sampling to consider their accessibility and willingness to talk. Identification of community members was done during transect walks and community mapping exercises (Mulopo et al., 2020) while participation depended on availability and interest. Combining both targeted and flexible sampling approaches allowed for gaining more in-depth understanding of how different stakeholders lived, their experiences, perceptions, and the role played by economic determinants in health and education in the context of a rural school.

2.6 Data Analysis

The qualitative data generated through focus group discussions (FGDs), community mapping, transect walks, and informal interactions were analysed using Directive Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). A directive approach was adopted because the study sought to explore educational participation through the lens of economic determinants while remaining open to new concepts emerging from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Lyhne et al., 2025). The audio recordings obtained through the FGDs were transcribed verbatim right after the data had been collected. The field notes gathered while conducting the transect walk, community mapping, and other informal conversations were then sorted out and analysed in conjunction with the transcripts. All transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly by the researchers to get acquainted with the data and understand the general experience of the participants. In the first stage of the analysis, significant text segments about education, economics, community experience, and schools' practices were isolated. The descriptive codes were applied to those segments according to the perspectives of the participants. Similar codes were then compared and combined into larger categories revealing various patterns and relationships between them. Coding was carried out manually by the researchers to ensure close attention to the data. Then the similar categories were synthesised into broader themes about the main economic and educational problems discussed by the participants. Themes emerged and were fine-tuned by comparing them continuously with the primary data to make sure they were a true reflection of the perspectives of the participants. Findings from FGDs were crosschecked using observations made during transect walks, community mapping, and informal discussions. This helped the researchers confirm the emerging patterns from different sources of data, thus increasing their credibility. The analysis led to the emergence of five major themes that described the perspectives of the participants concerning the alternative education model. Themes such as democratic participation and joint responsibility emphasized collaboration and the participation of students; non-hierarchical classroom settings which emphasized equal relations between teachers and students; experience-based and skills acquisition which was based on hands-on activities that made students gain confidence, think critically, and improve their life skills; structural obstacles to education participation that brought to light how livelihood insecurities, seasonal movement, gender roles, poor housing, and infrastructure affected children's participation in education; and finally, the importance of the school as a stable community institution which showed how the school played a vital role in ensuring inclusion in education, building community trust, and retention of teachers in a disadvantaged rural environment. These themes provided the framework for interpreting how economic determinants shape educational participation and how the alternative school responds to these challenges. Table 1 provides example of the coding process . To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers triangulated information obtained from multiple PRA techniques, including FGDs, community mapping, transect walks, and informal interactions. Regular discussions among the research team were conducted during coding and theme development to ensure consistency in interpretation and minimise individual researcher bias.

Table 1: Example of Coding Process

Participant Statement	Initial Code	Category	Theme
"Teachers listen to our opinions."	Student voice	Democratic classroom practices	Democratic participation and shared responsibility
"Girls are not allowed to travel alone."	Gender restriction	Social barriers	Structural barriers affecting educational participation
"Parents migrate for work."	Seasonal migration	Livelihood challenges	Structural barriers affecting educational participation
"We learn by doing activities."	Experiential learning	Student-centred pedagogy	Experiential learning and skill development
"Everyone helps keep the school clean."	Shared responsibility	Collaborative school culture	Democratic participation and shared responsibility

3. Results

The results have been analysed using directive qualitative content analysis (QCA) to bring out domains from the FGD (fig 2) along with transect walk (fig 3) and social mapping (fig 4). These findings have been triangulated based on the field notes, observations and audio transcription of the FGD's.

3.1 Emerging domains from the FGD

3.1.1 Domain 1: Democratic Participation and Shared Responsibility as Economic and Psychosocial Resources: Democratic participation was at the heart of the school's operations where students were deeply engaged in collective decision, making, leadership roles, and sharing of responsibilities. Student led committees, peer governance, and participatory problem, solving not only created agency but also brought about confidence and a feeling of ownership for the learning processes (Mburuki & Thinguri, 2022). Teachers too felt that democratic governance allowed them more professional autonomy and a greater say. Such social and educational capital, building activities through collaboration, delegation, and early introduction to economic concepts led to the social and human capital development (Vermeulen et al., 2023). The school by linking participation to psychosocial safety and collective accountability, illustrated that democratic educational practices are among the economic determinants affecting wellbeing, educational persistence, and future employability.

One student explained: *"We decide together what activities to do, and teachers always ask for our opinions before making decisions."*

In a similar vein, a teacher observed:

"Students are encouraged to be responsible for activities in class and school events, and hence become confident and responsible."

These examples clearly show that democracy at the school is a part of its daily operations. The students regard themselves as participants, not mere recipients of education, while the teachers recognize joint decision-making as an effective method of increasing involvement and responsibility.

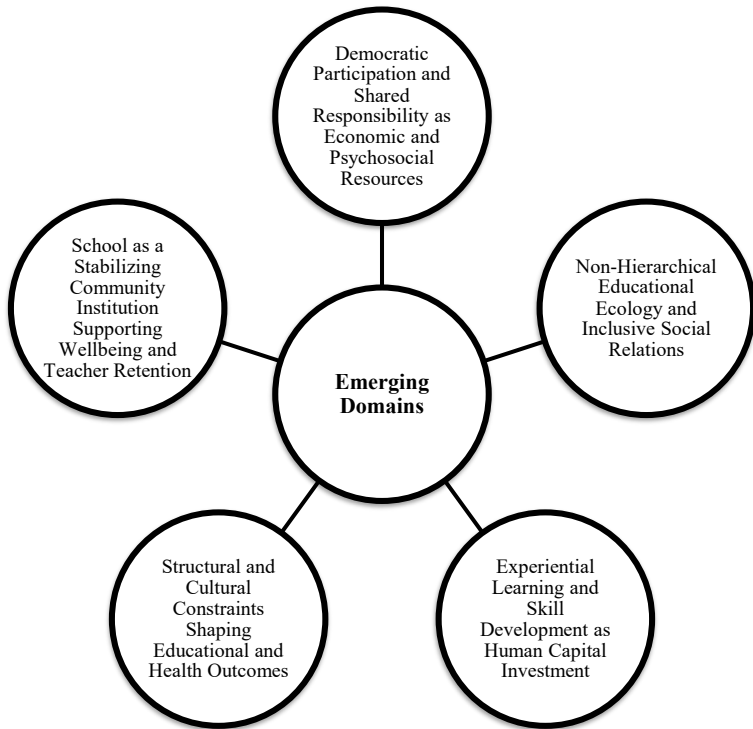


Fig 2: Domains Emerged from Student Focus Group and teacher focus group discussions

3.1.2 Domain 2: Non-Hierarchical Educational Ecology and Inclusive Social Relations : The school developed a non, hierarchical learning ecology in which teacher student relationships were equal, accompanied by mutual respect and emotional safety (Curtis, 2021). Students frequently described this atmosphere as being the opposite of an authoritarian one which they had previously experienced in other schools, emphasizing the greater freedom of expression and trust. The elimination of corporal punishment, abusive language, and caste based discrimination engendered the feeling of being welcomed and thus lowered the level of psychosocial stress (Kumar et al., 2022). Moreover, pedagogical flexibility was used as a tool to accommodate different learning needs, thereby further promoting equity among students in the classroom (Tampubolon et al., 2023). This set of relationships essentially transformed the school into a safe social space that sheltered its inhabitants, where education was a source of mental wellbeing, stable engagement, and social cohesion, the main social factors that influence health in the long run.

One student shared:

"Here we are not afraid to speak to teachers because they treat us like family."

Another teacher stated:

"We don't believe in punishment. We try to understand every child's situation before responding."

These responses indicate that non-hierarchical relationships create an emotionally supportive learning environment where students feel respected and motivated to participate actively in classroom activities.

3.1.3 Domain 3: Experiential Learning and Skill Development as Human Capital Investment : It is in this context that the experiential and practical learning methods led to the elimination of rote learning methods. These methods helped students learn concepts profoundly by experimenting hands-on and applying the concepts in the real world. Students reported that their self-esteem, their ability to think critically, and their problem-solving skills have gone up. Apart from educational matters, getting involved in organizing school events and working together in doing other tasks has led to the acquisition of communication, planning, and teamwork skills. All these capabilities have made students more prepared for their future participation in the economy as well as for the accommodative and adaptive livelihoods. As a result of these factors being emphasized in the school setting, the institution served as an investment in human capital, which will have repercussions in the realms of economic mobility and health literacy throughout one's life.

One of the students commented,

"We learn by performing tasks instead of reading textbooks."

Whereas another student said,

"Group work makes things clear to us."

This implies that active learning facilitates greater involvement, confidence, and understanding among students.

3.1.4 Domain 4: Structural and Cultural Constraints Shaping Educational and Health Outcomes : School practices became more progressive, but long-standing structural and cultural limitations still played a major role in students wellbeing, according to the story of the two boys. Gender norms based on females being allowed to attend only certain activities and limited the girl's freedom to go out, which reflected the persistent inequities in the households (Ezekwu, 2025). Furthermore, the poor and insecure housing situations, seasonal work, and lack of adequate sanitation facilities that characterize the community influenced access to education and exposure to health hazards. These results demonstrate that although inclusive education has the potential to reduce vulnerabilities, the effects of poverty at the macro level still largely influence the outcomes (Valds & Martnez Lbano, 2025). Gaining a deeper insight into education under such multiple constraints also leads us to a better understanding of the interconnectedness of economic factors, social norms, health, and educational opportunity.

One of the members in the community stated:

"Occasionally, children do not go to school because of the movement of families in search of employment."

One of the other participants said:

"Not all activities are accessible for girls."

These statements show that educational involvement is still affected by structural elements.

3.1.5 Domain 5: School as a Stabilizing Community Institution Supporting Wellbeing and Teacher Retention: Participatory rural appraisal revealed the role of the school as a factor of social stabilization within the community suffering from socio-economic vulnerabilities. The school, because of providing uninterrupted education, psychosocial security, nutrition, and a governance model involving all stakeholders, gained the trust of the community and gradually changed the parental attitudes (Pulimeno et al., 2020). Of course, teachers also have a say in this as their wellbeing, job satisfaction, and retention were all improved through democratic decision, making and less competitive environment (Liu & Li, 2025). This continuous commitment from teachers allowed the educational sector to provide care, mentorship, and high-quality education, the three aspects of health that are still generally overlooked while being the most important economic determinants (Rathan et al., 2025). As a result of collaboration between the community and the leaders, two key elements of long-term wellbeing and inclusive development, trust in the community and workforce stability, were strengthened.

A teacher explained:

"Parents trust the school because children are happy here and continue coming regularly."

Another community member commented:

"The school has changed how families think about education."

The above reactions are indicative of the role that the school plays in building community trust and in retaining teachers as well as motivating children to stay in school from economically challenged backgrounds.

3.2 Transect Walk Report for the Community

3.2.1 Housing Conditions : Houses within the community are mostly made using sticks and canes, without using any form of permanent material such as bricks. The roofs on all houses are tarpaulins, giving limited coverage from the environment.

3.2.2 Public Transit Access Points: The community has easy access to a main road which lies directly in front of the community, leading towards the city. Such a location may provide ease of commuting to work, school, and other sources of service in the city.

3.2.3 Street Commerce : Previously, the people in the community used to carry out business at this point by selling iron utensils and tools. However, this is no longer the case as people are not conducting business at this point. Getting insight into the reasons for the change could give us a glimpse of the changing livelihood activities. In the past, people in the community used to conduct business on the street by selling iron utensils and tools. However, this has changed, and people are no longer selling their wares at this point. Getting insight into the reasons for the change may give us an idea of the changing livelihood activities.

3.2.4 Places of Worship : For the Hindus, there are 2 major places of worship. There is a mosque near the Shyam Mandir Kot Mohalla, which serves as a religious place of worship for the Muslims. This illustrates the religious diversity of the residents, which creates cultural meeting points.

3.2.5 Stores and Markets: The nearby market for fruits, vegetables, and other essential commodities, i.e., Local Sabzi Mandi, is the main market for the area, and its proximity ensures that the people here have easy access to these necessities of life. Nearby Local Sabzi Mandi serves as the primary market for fruits, vegetables, and other grocery essentials. The fact that this is near gives the people access to fresh foods and supplies even when they do not have to move much, hence improving the food security of the community.

3.2.6 Sanitation: The infrastructure of the community in terms of water, sewage, garbage, and any other blockage point is an important area that requires improvement. Not much was learned about this during the tour. Community's sanitation infrastructure, including water, sewage, garbage collection, and blockage points, remains a critical area for improvement. Limited information was gathered on these aspects during the walk; however, any observed issues with sanitation facilities could affect the health and well-being of residents and require immediate attention for interventions.

3.2.7 Location of Health Facilities : A local private Hospital is just a 10-minute walk away from the community. This close access to healthcare services is a significant asset, potentially allowing residents to receive timely medical assistance when necessary.

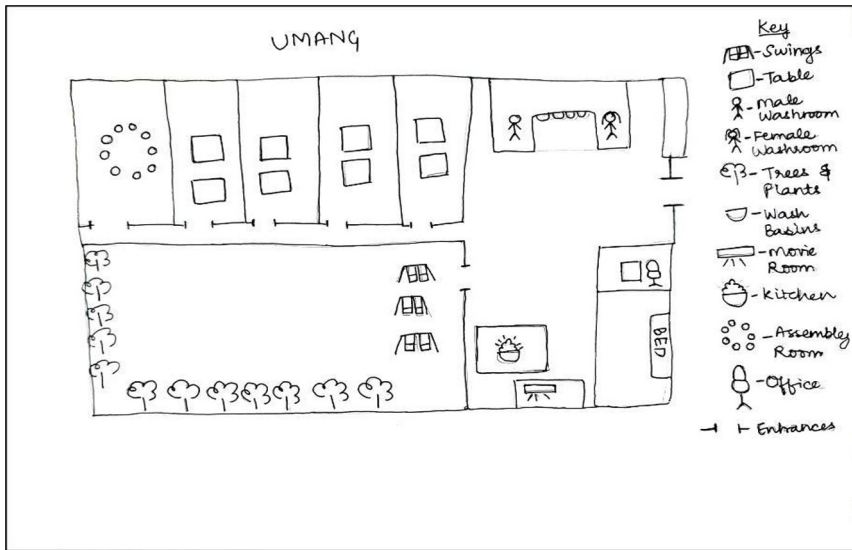


Fig 3: Transect Walk

3.2.8 Classroom Areas :

- *Infrastructural Facilities:* The school has an open infrastructure, with open classrooms, which improved ventilation and openness. Inside the classrooms, the infrastructure was such that there were tables but no chairs, and everyone, both teachers and students, would sit on the ground, creating a comfortable environment. There was an open class structure with a large assembly room at the far end. The school has been designed in the shape of the letter L, and the principal's office, the teacher's offices, and the computer lab have been in a separate building. There were plants all around the classrooms, which beautified the area and served as the entrance to each classroom. The students contributed to the beautification of the school by painting murals around the school.
- *Cleanliness:* Both the students and the teachers contributed to maintaining the level of cleanliness in the school, including the area where the water cooler is located.
- *Safety:* Though the open classrooms created a spacious environment, it could pose a problem in extreme weather conditions, such as a hot summer or a cold winter.

3.2.9 Playground and Outdoor Areas

- *Condition of Grounds:* The remaining school grounds included a large park with swings, where students could participate in recreational activities. Along with teachers, students contributed to horticulture in the playground, which provided space for play and experiential learning
- *Equipment:* The swings and other equipment in the playground were in good condition
- *Safety Issues:* There were no safety issues in the playground area, and regular checks of the equipment would be helpful in maintaining safety standards

3.2.10 Sanitation Facilities

- *Condition:* The sanitation facilities were located between the main school building and the principal's office. The urinals were placed indoors, but the hand-washing area was placed outside, which was very accessible.
- *Accessibility:* The washbasins were created in such a way that they were of different heights, with three being lower to cater to younger children aged 2-6 years.
- *Ventilation:* Since the facilities were open air, they provided sufficient ventilation for the bathrooms.

3.2.11. Other Key Areas

- *Library:* There were a variety of Hindi and English books in the library, and fresh and interesting books were always available, motivating the students to read a lot.

- *Cafeteria/Food Area*: There is a cook available for the students who need the service, and in the absence of the cook, the students were informed to prepare in advance, so all the students could have access to food during school hours.

3.3 : Social Mapping

3.3.1 Places of Work

Most of the people in the community participate in iron work within the settlement area itself. As seasonal migrants, the people in the community often travel to other cities and regions to sell their goods, where they stay for 1-2 months at a time, taking along their entire family. Majority of the people in the community engage in ironwork within the settlement area itself. As seasonal migrants, they frequently travel to other cities and regions for 1-2 months at a time to sell their goods, often taking their entire family.

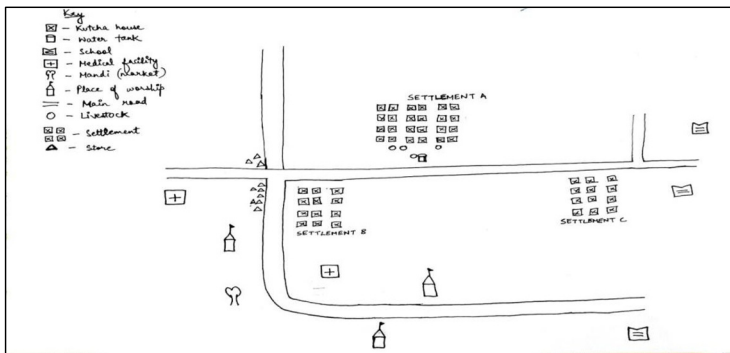


Fig 4 : Social Map of the Neighborhood

3.3.2 School

A government school near the area was identified as one of the choices of some of the parents to send their children to, while some of the other parents have sent their children to the same school.

3.3.3 Major Streets/Routes

The local road, which runs directly in front of the area, is one of the major routes used by the members of the community to move around.

3.3.4 Transit Services

The availability of public transport facilitates the easy accessibility of the area for the members of the community, where the school offers a transport service to drop off and pick up the children from and to school.

3.3.5 Places of Worship

There are some temples and mosques near the area, which are between 10 to 20 minutes away from the area, where the members of the community frequently go to perform their religious activities.

3.3.6 General/Grocery Stores

The members of the community get their daily needs from a mandi (market) that is 15 minutes away from the area.

3.3.7 Hospitals/Health Clinics

There is a health clinic located about 5-7 minutes away on foot. Local Hospital is another health facility that is often visited by the people in the area. It is located a bit further, about 10 minutes away.

3.3.8. Wild Spaces

There is a small, forested area behind the settlement, providing natural green spaces.

3.3.9. Water Facilities

Recently, a water tank was installed at the settlement by the zamindar, prior to which the community reported walking a considerable distance just to access clean drinking water.

4. Discussion

This participatory rural appraisal (PRA) study focused on alternative education. It did so by analyzing these educational options from the perspective of economic determinants of health. The research underlined how democratic schooling practices positively impact psychosocial wellbeing, human capital formation, and community development simultaneously. Concretely, the data suggest that alternative education is one of the methods through which a pedagogy of care can be empirically verified; at the same time, it constitutes a socio, economic measure that is deeply rooted in a larger rural environment.

As a result, the discovery that democratic participation increased the level of confidence and responsibility of students shows that participatory governance provides a chance for engagement in education as opposed to just the engagement of students in decision-making in classrooms. It is possible that the practice of democracy increases the ownership of students towards their educational experiences and this may increase their participation in education especially among children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. This understanding is supported by Boat et al. (2022), who found that the provision of chances of peer leadership and collaborative decision making increases social capital and engagement of students. Additionally, Kamalakar and Kamala (2025) maintain that participatory governance ensures institutional trust and responsibility. The supportive teacher-student relationships that have been found in this current study provide evidence that the removal of hierarchical distances between teachers and their pupils can lead to increased willingness of students to participate in the classroom activities. Emotional safety and mutual respect seem to foster consistent involvement in learning, especially for children who have been subjected to exclusion or punitive educational settings before. Such observations coincide with the results found by Phelps et al. (2024) about the role of positive school climate as one of the predictors of student engagement and with the findings of Curtis (2021) regarding the importance of trustful teacher-student relationship in creating inclusive school culture. Instead of focusing on academic learning exclusively, experiential pedagogies seem to foster confidence of the students in participating in educational activities due to bridging between classroom knowledge and everyday life experience of students. Experiential learning may help overcome the lack of participation typical for students experiencing economic hardship. This conclusion coincides with the observations made by U-senyang (2024) concerning the benefits of experiential learning in promoting critical thinking and motivation of learners and with the description of education provided by Atef (2025).

The present findings further suggest that experiential learning can promote educational participation by making learning more relevant and accessible within rural contexts.

The persistence of livelihood insecurity, seasonal migration, inadequate housing, poor sanitation, and restrictive gender norms demonstrates that educational participation is influenced by broader structural conditions beyond the school environment. These findings suggest that improving educational access requires interventions that extend beyond classroom practices and address community-level socio-economic inequalities. Similar relationships between economic disadvantage and educational participation have been reported by Nabunya et al. (2021) and Jani et al. (2022), who argue that education and socio-economic development are mutually reinforcing. The present study contributes additional evidence from a rural Indian context by illustrating how Participatory Rural Appraisal can identify community-level barriers affecting children's educational continuity. The school's role as a stabilising community institution suggests that alternative education extends beyond academic instruction to become an important community resource. High teacher retention and increased parental trust appear to strengthen educational continuity and encourage sustained student participation. These findings are consistent with Pagán-Castaño et al. (2021), who reported that supportive organisational cultures improve teacher wellbeing, and Farahmandpour and Voelkel (2025), who identified teacher retention as an important determinant of institutional effectiveness. In the present study, these institutional characteristics also contributed to greater community confidence in education among economically disadvantaged families. In general, the results highlight the importance of not viewing the educational participation of rural areas as an issue arising only within the school setting but rather as a result of the interplay among the economic state of the family, resources, norms, and inclusive educational practices of the community. Although the alternative school was successful in overcoming many challenges related to these issues through such principles as democracy, learning by experience, and community involvement, certain structural inequalities still remained and had a bearing on the children's access to education.

Limitations

It must be noted, however, that the results of the study must be understood in the light of the limitations, which were created by the small and age, student population, resulting in a lack of diverse viewpoints, particularly on the part of the elder adolescents. The geographical and territorial boundaries of the study area, created a constraint in engaging the community at a larger scale, while the language barriers may have contributed to the limitation of the scope of the data obtained.

Future Directions

It is proposed that future studies involve with the aim of gaining deeper insights into the long-term educational, economic, and health outcomes and therefore having a deeper understanding of life and course impacts. More stakeholder involvement and the utilization of visual mapping tools could be the way to open the process and make it more accurately represent the context. By involving the local governance structures such as the panchayat and the primary government structures with the local health authorities, more trust and ownership could be established. Finally, by using longitudinal designs, deeper insights could be gained regarding the role of alternative education in the long-term development of wellbeing and the retention of teachers within the communities.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the economic determinants influencing educational participation in an alternative rural school using a Participatory Rural Appraisal approach. By integrating the perspectives of students, teachers, and community members, the study examined how economic conditions shape children's participation in education and how an alternative education model responds to these challenges. The results have shown that alternative education can serve an important role in overcoming economic barriers to participation in education. The democratic nature of governance, participatory relations between teachers and students, learning through experiences, and high community engagement provided an appropriate learning setting that facilitated participation of children from economically underprivileged families. Nonetheless, structural barriers such as livelihood instability, seasonal movement, social norms regarding gender, poor housing, and lack of necessary infrastructure still influenced educational continuity. These results indicate that increased participation in education is achieved not only by the application of an inclusive approach at schools, but also requires wider socio-economic actions. This research makes a contribution to the existing academic literature on alternative education because it has shown that educational participation is inseparable from the economic context of rural communities. Thus, alternative schools should not only be regarded as innovative educational institutions, but also as a community-based approach to the problem of educational exclusion.

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