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PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLING ACTIVITIES: A CASE STUDY FROM RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BANGLADESH

MAHAMMAD ABUL HASNAT

Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to explore parents' perceptions of their involvement in their children's education. This study was conducted in secondary schools in a rural area of Bangladesh. People from this area mostly have low literacy and income rates. A qualitative case study research design was used. Five parents from five different schools in the rural context were interviewed. The findings from this study show that parents are not comfortable approaching the school and many parents do not consider their role as encompassing parental involvement in their children's education. The study concluded that parental attitudes and beliefs about involvement are the result of a lack of information about how they could be involved. This study recommends that policymakers and school administrators address parents' perceptions and not only make them aware of how they can become involved in schooling, but also create opportunities for them to do so.

Keywords

Parental involvement, perception, rural context, Bangladesh

Introduction

Parental and community engagement and collaboration between parents and school managing authorities are principles that are vigorously advocated by researchers worldwide (Agbo, 2007; Hands, 2010). However, many factors block engagement, either because of a school's actions or parental busyness or alienation. Such blocks occur in Europe as well as developing countries.

The present paper grew out of a study that examines how stakeholders' involvement in Bangladeshi rural secondary schools can improve so as to increase parental and community participation in education as well as students' learning achievements. This study was conducted in the rural context of Bangladesh, where different professional development initiatives have been undertaken for secondary school improvement. However, there is still little research on the process and results of such programs, including little research about how effective parental engagement could be facilitated for school improvement. Regarding rural schools in Bangladesh, it is important to explore the current practices of stakeholders' engagement and examine how involvement might further develop.

This paper discusses one particular issue that has arisen in the first year of collected data in the wider study: parents' perceptions of what engagement with schooling is possible for them and their practices.

Theoretical Framework

Parents are often called a child's first teachers, which is why in many international contexts parental engagement in education is considered to be highly relevant for education. A body of international research has developed around the term parental engagement, reflecting a range of global perspectives. One of the most common themes is the relationship between parents' involvement in educational activities and student success. Frequently, the most fundamental reason to involve parents in educational activities is student success. A range of different research studies have been conducted to explore methods of facilitating parental involvement in children's education so that parents can be involved in an efficient way. Involvement has different dimensions, not only because of differing research goals but also because the contexts involve various social structures and educational systems.

Flemmings (2013) points out that the relationship between parental involvement in schooling and student learning achievement is not a new concept. Yoder & Lopez (2013) explain parental involvement as an element in children's education by which children's academic achievement can be enhanced at the same time as positive behavior is promoted. Involving parents

in school activities is a real challenge, and, consequently, Hornby and Lafaele (2011, p. 39) developed a model delineating barriers. They talked about individual parent and family factors, child factors, parent–teacher factors, and societal factors. Among these groups of factors, two are important in the context of Bangladesh and in this study. The first is individual parent and family barriers, particularly focusing on parents' beliefs about parental involvement, parents' current life contexts, parents' perception of invitations for involvement, and parents' perceptions of the limitations around class and gender. The other is societal factors, including historical and demographic, political, and economic issues.

Any school can introduce a plan for a new program as well as practices for overcoming barriers to parental involvement, taking into consideration individual parents as well as the context (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Grace, Jethro, and Aina (2012) refer to helping with homework, talking to teachers, attending school functions, taking part in school governance as parental involvement activities. Rafiq et al. (2013) described four types of activities as parental involvement: helping children in reading, encouraging them to do their homework independently, monitoring their activity inside and outside the four walls of their house, and providing support for their learning in different subjects. Epstein et al. (2002) discuss six types of parental involvement. The first is parenting: assisting both parents and the school to understand family settings and family backgrounds to support children's learning. Next is communicating: creating two-way communications between home and school. The third is volunteering: recruiting parents into different school activities. The fourth is learning at home: sharing different information about various home activities where parents can support their children's learning. The fifth is decision-making: including parents in various decision-making processes in the school. The sixth is collaborating with the community: emphasizing the use of a number of community resources and services to support families, students and the school. In the rural context in Bangladesh, however, the reality is that in many cases parents cannot monitor their children's activities at home, provide support for their children's educational needs and expenses, attend different school activities when they are invited by the school, or communicate with teachers regarding their children's educational issues. Parents in Bangladesh are mostly busy with working for their daily livelihood as they are not rich enough to take time off of work or provide resources at home. Sometimes they find it hard to provide for their children's educational expenses; sometimes they do not want to do so. Communication between teachers and parents can work as a motivator in this situation and can build a relationship. Kovacs-Cerovic et al. (2010, p. 11) described three essential perspectives for a deeper understanding of the issues connected with parental participation:

1. the dimensions of parent participation: the types of school-level activities which are designed for parents to participate in, which are open for parents to take part in, and in which they are invited to contribute;
2. role attribution between schools and parents: who should do what, what schools expect from parents, and what parents expect from schools; and
3. the process of participation itself.

In many countries, various recent educational developments have shown the growing importance of the concept of parental involvement in the school (Vellymalay, 2012). Dushek (2001) states that to promote parental participation in school many countries have enacted policies at the local, state, and national levels. Considering the importance of parental engagement, the Government of Bangladesh's education policy emphasizes the importance of parental involvement in secondary schools. Parent representation in School Management Committees (SMCs) is an instance of how this policy is enacted in practice. SMCs are the sole authorities authorized to operate non-government schools in Bangladesh. Approximately 98% of schools in Bangladesh are non-government and managed by a SMC, and a competitive election process selects five parent representatives on the SMC. The principal aim of involving parents in the SMC is to empower parents and local people so that they can contribute to school management and the decision-making processes (BANBEIS, 2012). The government is trying to involve parents in school activities in another way through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs). These committees are formed of 16 members, with 11 of the members being parents, and they are mainly set up to assist SMCs with various issues. Policymakers emphasize the importance of both teachers at school and parents at home in helping students learn, and the PTAs have been formed with the aim of ensuring an education-friendly environment in both school and home settings (SEQAEP, 2014). However, these two initiatives are not functioning in a way that would ensure that such an expectation is fulfilled.

This study is significant in the context of Bangladesh for three main reasons. Firstly, parental involvement in this area is very limited and little research has been conducted to discover possible criteria for successful implementation. As Kabir & Akter (2014) pointed out, parental participation in Bangladeshi secondary schools is a relatively new concept even though government policies and initiatives emphasize the need for parental engagement. Secondly, academic interest and research-based studies on parental involvement are still inadequate to guide the government on the steps it needs to take to make its policy successful in practice. Finally, it is important to find out what parents think and feel about involvement in schooling, how they perceive their role, and the ways in which they could

become involved in the interaction. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore parents' perceptions of their involvement in their children's education. It is framed by the following questions.

Research Questions

The issues that guided the research are:

1. In rural Bangladesh, what are parents' perceptions about their involvement in schooling?
2. How aware are parents of what takes place in student learning?
3. How often do parents visit schools and communicate with teachers regarding students' education?

Within the context of rural Bangladesh, this current study looks at the way that parents perceive their role in their children's education. This research gives the opportunity to explore current parental beliefs and practices regarding their children's schooling.

Research Method

The overall methodological approach chosen for this study is a qualitative case study. The reason for choosing to conduct a case study is to get in-depth data (Nije & Asimiran, 2014) and make it possible to explore parent perceptions of their involvement in schooling within a particular context. In this regard, it was important to record what participants did and said (Suryani, 2008) as well as how they interacted and what types of interactions occurred (Morrell & Carroll, 2010).

In this study, participants were first selected randomly, and this was followed by purposive selection according to the criteria of which rural parents were willing to talk with me to explore the issues in the research questions. Bangladesh is predominately rural, more than 80% of all people in the country live in a rural context, and the level of poverty in rural areas is higher than that in urban areas (Ferdousi & Dehai, 2014). Five parents were selected from five different schools within the same area, and this range offered the opportunity to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of parental engagement within the context of rural Bangladesh (Sargeant, 2012). The reason for choosing parents who are illiterate and live in poverty is to bring out their voice, which needs to reach policymakers so they can initiate further, more strategic initiatives for parental involvement. The data collection strategy took the form of one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews. All parents allowed home visits and prepared arrangements for the interviews.

All parents were asked to read and sign a consent form confirming their agreement to participate in this study and gave permission to have the interviews recorded. In order to ensure confidentiality, all parents were assured that pseudonyms would always be used.

The study is situated in a rural context by one of the largest rivers in Bangladesh. People from this area are regularly affected by floods and struggle in their daily lives. Parents from this area are mostly engaged in different small types of business, agricultural work, daily labor, rickshaw pulling, and so on. Normally, fathers are the only family members who leave the home to earn money. Mothers are housewives who remain at home. Parents from this rural context are mostly illiterate and struggle for their daily life.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data in order to formulate findings. In qualitative research, thematic analysis is considered to be a useful and flexible method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that allows researchers to link various concepts and participant opinions with the given contextual situation (Alhojailan, 2012).

Findings

Parental involvement as a concept

The idea of parental involvement with student learning seems to be an entirely new concept to parents in Bangladesh. The parents whom I talked in the rural area had never thought about it before. At the beginning of conversations about parent involvement, they tended to squint or smile innocently. Their body language reflected the fact that they were hearing about this concept for the first time and had never paid attention to it previously. One parent started with a general statement, using a local way of framing his speech:

What can I say? I never thought of it before, and this is the first time you wanted to know about this topic from me. I never thought about involvement except to provide books and school fees. What else could I do?

I swiftly came to realize that any discussion about responsibilities, areas of work and ways of contribution would be fairly vague if parents did not think engagement with their children's schooling was part of their role. I wondered how to make parents aware of the possibility that they might be able, and also have a responsibility to contribute to their children's education. Parents in rural Bangladesh seem to have never considered parental involvement as part of their duties. This was evident when one parent stated:

My duty is to grow paddy in the field. I understand very well about field conditions and when and how to cultivate paddy in the field. I can tell you more about it if you want. Education! It is not my area; I do not know anything about it. It is the duty of the teacher, and I think they are playing their role very well.

A few parents I talked with considered that the meaning of parental involvement in children's education is to cover all required educational expenses. Some of them failed to do so smoothly because of their poverty. Parents in the rural context of Bangladesh are living below poverty level, it is sometimes tough for them to continue their daily life, and the difficulty of covering fees and other expenses for children is a cruel reality. Those who manage to provide this kind of support for their children consider it to be helping them or being involved very nicely. That is why one parent described his involvement in his child's education in this way:

I send my child to school and try to pay for his expenses. What else can I do? I think I am doing my job very well. Now it is the teacher's responsibility to educate them. It is not my job.

This comment shows how parents perceive and define responsibilities for their children's education. They define responsibilities from their own understanding, and the simple conclusion is that they are paying for their children's education while teachers receive a salary for teaching their children.

Parents' awareness about their children

Educational theorists and researchers around the world assert that parents' knowledge of their children's education plays a vital role in the learning. However, it is critical to consider the actual picture of how rural parents in Bangladesh understand their children's education. While the parents I interviewed may not represent all parents, it was the general opinion that their views would be echoed by most rural parents. Many parents do not even know their child's roll number or the section in which their child is studying. In schools throughout Bangladesh, every child has a roll number depending on their previous academic achievement. The lack of this knowledge seems to send a clear message about rural parents' lack of awareness of what happens to their children in school. This became evident when one parent spoke about his child in the following way:

I know he is reading in class seven, but I am not sure in which section or what his roll number is in his class. Rabim, Rabim [shouting to his son], please come here; tell him [indicating me] in which section do you read and what is your roll number this year.

It is a rational expectation that parents will be informed by the school about their children's academic performance, at least about their term results. However, when I sat down to discuss these matters with parents and asked about their children's performance at school, I discovered a different picture, one where parents did not know much about their children's academic performance. It seemed like they did not care or did not know what to do to find out their children's results. One parent talked about the matter in this way:

I do not know about the first term result. I know a result card is provided from the school to inform parents of a student's results. Maybe his mother knows. [Looking at his wife:] Do you know it? I know about what he achieved but not about the total marks. My other neighbor's nephew would inform me because they are in the same class.

Parents are trying to interpret children's performance in their own way. That is why they very often became curious as we talked to know their children's performance or activities at school. However, it seems they avoid these critical issues based on a kind of faith they have in the school. Such faith was evident in a parent's description of his son's supposed progress:

Maybe he is doing well. Otherwise, the teachers would inform me or my other neighbor's nephew would tell me about my son because they are in the same class.

It seems that parents are not very curious to know about their children's performance at school and have a tendency to rely on the other sources. Such a perception leads parents not to visit the school.

Communication with the school

In the international literature, communication with the school and teachers is seen as a key part of the parental involvement process. In the rural context in Bangladesh, however, parents consider communicating only when teachers invite them to visit the school. Otherwise, they never think of it. The meaning of a school visit is seen by them as something crazy, not as a means of engagement. Such a different meaning can be seen in one parent's view:

Teachers are not asking me to visit them or the school, so why do I need to go there? I always met the requirements for my children; that is why they are not calling me.

There seem to be many parents who have never experienced a school visit during their children's entire period of study. It never crossed their mind to visit the school, and they are glad that their children have never created any incident or reason for them to visit the school. One parent stated:

I never visited the school when my two younger sons were studying to know about their learning conditions. My two younger sons completed their secondary education; they did well, and that is why they are graduating. I hope this younger one will also do well, and I will never need to visit the school for him.

Discussing the reasons for not visiting school was fascinating. Parents considered teachers to be the best to take care of their children, and thought that they did not have any further duties mainly based on this. One interesting point came forward in one parent's statement:

I never visit the school for my child because the teachers at that school were also my teachers, so what would I do during the visit? They know my child well, and then also me, because they taught me as well.

Visiting the school or communicating with the school seems to be considered in a negative way. Those I spoke with always seemed to keep in mind that parents visit schools only when their children have caused a problem, or when they are called in based on their children's poor results or to explain their difficulty in covering school fees and other expenses.

It is my bad luck that I am a poor parent. That is why I sometimes needed to visit the school to reduce exam fees. I cannot afford that amount of money.

When I asked the head teacher, he tried to cut out some amount, but not all.

Parents do not want to face teachers for this purpose, and this could be the worst part of communication in the rural context in Bangladesh. Those parents who need to communicate with the school considered it to be their bad fortune in life and blamed their current economic situation.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that while the national policy emphasizes parental involvement in their child's education, parents from rural Bangladesh do not consider it their responsibility to be involved in their children's education. This research indicates a gap between the expectations of policy on parental involvement and the actual reality of rural parents' beliefs and practices. There may be many reasons for the difference in the context of rural Bangladesh, including historical and particularly colonial factors, the distance between home and school, and the lack of overtures from schools. Within this research study, parents' perceptions of parental involvement identified some of the barriers that Hornby and Lafaele (2011) discussed in terms of the "individual parent and family factors" and "societal factors" discussed above. In Hornby and Lafael's writing, the views and beliefs of parents about involvement are crucial elements for involving them in their children's education. However, parents in rural Bangladesh have developed a different interpretation of involvement in their children's education which centers on covering the various expenses incurred in the education. They do not consider their participation in their children's learning in terms of any role they could take, and they do not seem to believe that it is possible for them to have a role that would contribute to their children's learning. Parents from a rural context appear to think they are completely outside their children's learning process, whereas parental involvement is considered internationally as one of the most relevant current topics in educational circles (Kordi & Baharudin, 2010).

Knowledge and awareness are necessary prerequisites for changes in beliefs, including performance related to parental involvement. Because parents' expectations and aspirations have a positive impact on their children's

school results and academic performance (Porumbu & Necsoi, 2013), it might be seen as a standard expectation from parents that they will be informed about their children's academic performance. The findings from this study show that rural parents do not even know their children's roll numbers, or the class section in which their children are studying. Moreover, they do not pay attention to their children's academic performance, including how their children perform at school activities and even in the final result. They do not even display curiosity about their children's progress report card. Their attitude is one of perplexity about what they could do with the result, and so they do not have anything to do with it. They cannot distinguish whether they are informed or not about their children's progress. Considering this situation, it can be said that parental expectations are largely absent in this rural context, whereas research findings indicate a positive relationship when parents have expectations for their children (Wilder, 2014).

Further results from this study suggest that, for rural parents, the meaning of communication with the school is that it is something that occurs when the school authority demands the communication to convey their children's wrongdoing or misbehavior. At the same time, it is clear that parents communicate with the school only when they need to reduce payments for school expenses. Some parents consider communication with the school to be bad luck. This understanding of communication offers a negative message to parents and functions as a barrier to efficient communication. Given the importance of communication with the school, active steps need to be taken so that the school authority communicates with parents to share not only negative issues but also any positive issues, and so to encourage parents to become involved. Available communication tools (such as mobiles) may bring such a change among teachers and parents for healthy relationships.

Parents also expressed that they do not have anything to do with their children's learning, that it is only the teachers' duty to ensure a good education for the children. Parents in this context have little idea about any possible role they may have in contributing to their children's education, which is why they do not find any reason to visit the school or communicate with teachers.

Other research has concluded that parental attitudes towards educational involvement affect student performance (Oundo, Poipoi, & Were, 2014). However, findings from this study indicate depressing parental attitudes in the rural context in Bangladesh. This does not necessarily mean that parents are negligent or do not care about their children's education, nor does it mean they would not become more involved if they were shown how to do so. The reason for non-involvement may be a lack of proper messaging to parents. Further research is needed to investigate the situation.

Conclusion

To develop strong educational settings that allow and invite parental involvement, school professionals needed to explore and appreciate their students' home settings. Policy in Bangladesh expresses the importance of parental participation in SMCs and PTAs and sees these as creating opportunities for parents to be active partners in school settings. However, the findings from this study show that parents are not participating meaningfully. Parents have a different and negative understanding of what is involved in engaging with their children's school. There is a lack of awareness of other, more pro-active roles that might encourage engagement, and the communication process between school and parents seems to be far from effective.

Examining parent's beliefs, awareness, and practices regarding parental involvement may create opportunities to enhance active participation by parents, teachers, and policymakers in Bangladesh. In order to increase meaningful and spontaneous parental involvement in this context, decision makers and school administrators need to find new ways to communicate with rural parents, and such communication probably needs to be developed at the rural level rather than in administrative offices. Rural areas predominate in Bangladesh, and most of the people in these rural areas are poor. There is a visible difference between urban and rural parents; urban parents are more conscious about educational issues than rural parents (Ali, 2011). Policymakers need to consider the empirical realities of the rural context and find ways to enable parents to become more involved. School authorities also have a responsibility to create the means to allow parents to become more involved. Policymakers can be flexible and persuade school authorities to enhance communication and build relationships with parents in order to reduce the gap between them in ways that consider their context. Wikeley et al. (2005) in their case study in eight European countries emphasized the importance of the individual school context rather than the marketization of theories in any context. While much of the theoretical writing about parental engagement comes from Europe, areas in Europe also experience similar problems with alienation of parents from schools, especially when schools are dealing with a large number of culturally diverse people from all over the world. Such diversity is likely to grow more apparent with time. Parents from different cultures may have different views and beliefs about parental involvement, so it is important to investigate parents' perceptions of and attitudes towards involvement.

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