

Exploring Hinders and the Pathways of Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

In the nooks of early childhood classrooms of community schools of Kathmandu Metropolitan, where little ones start to build their own worlds, the parents are missed more than the happiness that they bring. Parental involvement in Early Childhood Education (ECE)) is a crucial component of a learning experience. However, the learning experience and moments among most community school children in Kathmandu are not shared with the parents. This paper aims to unravel the social and structural accounts of why parents do not participate in ECE in community schools. This paper draws on the study that applied the narrative inquiry where teacher and parent stories were captured through in-depth interviews to develop findings that describe how social, structural, and cultural factors build invisible but potent barriers that prevent families from being part of their children's ECD environment. Despite the fact that there have been certain level of involvement of the families; the system and culture are some of the factors that help perpetuate exclusion in the context of education. This study aims to contribute to the development of practices and policies that break the barriers and provide families with a multitude of opportunities to participate in the early education of their children.

1. Introduction

Parental involvement is a multidimensional construct that includes a parent's commitment, time, values, and dedication to resources (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Parental involvement can be defined as "parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children" (Jeynes,

2005, p. 245). This would include actions like talking to teachers, going to school, and encouraging children to do their homework. The level and type can differ considerably in social and cultural contexts, particularly in urban poor neighborhoods. For many parents, it is not a matter of choice but a matter of barriers that limit their involvement. Dahal et al. (2024) emphasise the significance of

the full-fledged framework which will be able to embrace decentralised management and innovative flexibility to advance parental engagement.

Hornby & Lafaele (2011) highlights that structural barriers to parental involvement, including lack of time due to work commitments, limited transport, low parental education, and inadequate school outreach. Mostly, mothers are blamed for the education of their children, which can be partly attributed to tasks with household activities and may not have enough time to participate. The role of the father is to provide economic security for the family and is relatively disengaged from the activities of the school (Joshi, 2014). This division of responsibility makes the mothers feel the burden and also reduces partnership between the parents in child engagement process.

During my visit to an Early Childhood Development (ECD) classroom, the teacher shared, *"Parents do not visit often. Perhaps their schedules are too busy for their livelihood, or they do not perceive parental involvement as significant in this phase of education."* The words of the teacher somehow touched something within me. I found that the classroom was colorful, and the children were full of energy while their teacher was working hard to do her best. The absence of the children's parents in the classroom was obvious. Between the pace of life and the pace of children's footsteps, this study emerged from the gap between what was expected of the parents and what stood in their way. The unnoticeable gap was not only about how much the child's education was being compromised. Though the issues of poverty, illiteracy of parents, and time poverty have been recognised, there is a lack of information on how parents perceive these barriers and how their life situation influences their involvement in child's educational

experience. It is this wake-up call that leads to an examination of why parents, just a few miles from the school, are isolated from the very essence of early childhood education.

The role of school-family relations in engagement: School-family relations have also contributed to student engagement. As noted by Bryk & Schneider (2002), the cultivation of relational trust, respect, and regard, and a belief in the competency of teachers and parents, is central to parental involvement. If the school environment appears to be unwelcoming and overbearing, particularly to less-educated parents who may be less confident in their roles, they will be more inclined to disengage. Vincent (2017) notes that school practices often overlook alternative forms of parental knowledge and care, thereby further alienating families.

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital in terms of control of language and education awareness determines academic achievement in schools which directly affects on their social capital in the long term. The poor parents are those with low socio-economic status and find it hard to communicate with the education system. Moreover, they are also not exposed to the cultural resources needed to understand school operations and even support early childhood education. Parents with limited cultural capital often feel isolated from school settings, which leads to their low engagement in ECD activities. As Bourdieu concept of habitus, it is clear that parental action in schools is a product of dispositions that are in fact a product of their sociocultural environment which includes instilled beliefs and self-confidence. The parents who attend community schools in Kathmandu often feel inferior and alienated because they generally lack an educational background and adequate knowledge of school procedures. The involvement of parents is significantly hindered whereby caregivers feel alienated

and lack adequate information despite their strong interest in the academic progress of their children. Using the Cultural Capital Theory, this study assesses the interaction between socio-economic determinants, cultural milieus and institutional requisites in influencing parental participation in the educational arena. In the community schools that fall within the ECD environment in Kathmandu, different populations are served, and the rigid structures that govern them unintentionally exclude disadvantaged groups.

Schools often adopt middle-class norms and values that parents from lower classes may not have or be comfortable operating within (Lareau, 2003). In this manner, parents from this type of social class can feel alienated from the school, which does not recognise or include them in its culture. Kathmandu also adds the problems of urban poverty, low literacy, and the novelty of formal education, which exacerbates this gap.

The study aims to uncover the hindrances revealed and explained through the lived experience of parents and teachers. It allows for a deep exploration of the lived experience and the richness and depth of meaning in parental engagement issues in ECD, as this is the foundation of child development. The study attempts to analyse the invisible hindrances by listening and uncovering the reality of the unseen battles that city parents undergo in order to facilitate their children's early educational process.

2. Methods and Materials

This study adopts an interpretivist approach to understand how narrative inquiry treats teachers' experiences and perspectives as legitimate and important insights. In doing so, it applied narrative inquiry as a research technique, which entails

interactive storytelling and restoration as the investigation goes on (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Narrative inquiry was used in a bid to explore the experiences of early childhood education (ECE) for parents of children attending three community schools in Kathmandu Metropolitan. This format has presumed that stories possess structure and feeling which allowed to pick up on emotions such as anxiety, uncertainty, optimism, and struggle that are not typically taken into account in classrooms. The multiple barriers that parents must overcome in order to become invested were uncovered through extensive interviews with a purposeful but diverse sample of partners. Discussions were carried out with teachers and parents of three community schools in Kathmandu that are publicly funded.

I selected six research participants based on purposive sampling. The purposive sampling helped to recruit participants who possess insider knowledge of the phenomenon being investigated, which can lead to a more valuable contribution to the study (Gay & Airasian, 2003). There were three ECD teachers and three parents of children who were studying in the programme. Regarding the parents characteristic, there were from the middle class and marginalised communities. The experiences of the respondents differed since they worked in various sectors and studied in various institutions. The interviews were not collected merely to describe, but to construct an explanatory model, a way to connect daily experiences to underlying structural and cultural forces. The study examined how differences in cultural capital, communicative skills, and knowledge of the system affect the ability and confidence of parents to converse with schools. Their stories allow them to navigate the unknown landscape of exclusion and gain a better understanding of how schools can be more relational, more inclusive, and more connected to the many people they

serve. The qualitative data in this narrative inquiry were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve participants' voices. The transcripts were coded systematically, using initial codes to capture critical phrases, feelings, and narratives (Saldana, 2015, p. 4). I maintained the trustworthiness of the results by upholding multiple quality criteria that adhere to the guidelines of qualitative research- credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. To maintain ethical considerations, I took consent form that outlined all of the study's purposes, procedures and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were also used to ensure the anonymity of the participants, and interviews were held in their comfort zones, which were their homes and schools.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings were derived from in-depth narrative interviews with parents and ECD teachers from three purposively selected community schools in Kathmandu. While there were many common themes across these interviews, the discussion that follows focuses on the primary theme that emerged: the shared obstacle in each of these narratives was the systemic, social, and emotional barriers that converge to shape the lived experience of parental involvement in early learning.

3.1 Time and urban livelihood struggles

The three parents interviewed discussed how everyday life in the city leaves them with little time for anything beyond school, let alone attending meetings. *"By the time I get home, it's already dark. I have a difficult time even preparing food and feeding my kids, let alone going to school meetings,"* said parents. "Time poverty" is not a new phenomenon (Bhattarai, 2018). Working-class parents who engage in informal work in urban space face a considerable

burden that makes them feel exhausted and disconnected from their children's school.

One teacher told, *"Some children are so obviously lacking in support at home. They do not want to do anything as they are afraid of failure and so need to be reassured every day and do not like to do anything"*. An emotional void which we see in the classroom is caused by absentee parenting," said one of the people who responded to my study. The effect of quiet absentee parenting extends beyond the confines of the domestic environment and invades all facets of a child's intellectual as well as emotional life, as seen in the more intangible consequences like indifference, apathy, or lack of initiative.

3.2 Being intimidated by the school

The other problem was the perception that parents were scared to be in the school. The mothers who had limited education felt intimidated by being in the school building and did not know where to go. *"Teachers act like we should know all of this."* One parent said, *"Teachers talk as if we should already know everything. I'm embarrassed to ask. I have never attended school. I don't have the confidence to talk back to teachers."*

Parents shared their challenges *"we are not educated persons and we did not understand about the children education situation because we were worried to face with teacher as they are educated. We do not have an idea how to talk with teachers"*. Other studies too support this notion, where it was found that school officials make parents feel like strangers (Bista & Sharma, 2020).

3.3 Perception that schooling is the teacher and school's responsibility

Some parents felt that they did not have anything to do with their children's education

other than dropping them off at school. As one parent said, *“We send them to school to learn there. What else is needed of us?”* Likewise, a parent shared *“we send child to school which help us to go to work. So, we only need to care the child in school during our work. We are illiterate therefore we did not guide and it is responsibility of teachers to teach our child at school. We did not prefer to give the homework to our child”*. This is a reflection of a cultural dynamic where schooling is something that happens only in schools. Another study conducted in Nepal (Acharya & Luitel, 2016) found that most parents felt that schools were doing what parents were not supposed to do at home.

3.4 School failure to communicate and adopt inclusive practices

School policies weren't working effectively because the schools didn't even attempt to reach out to parents. They said their attempts to engage parents were only done formally. *“We only call the parents when we need something from them. Maybe we've never really built a culture where they feel they're welcome to come whenever they want to and whenever they have time,”* said one teacher. This mirrors the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015) assessment that schools in South Asia are not yet effective at integrating meaningful parental engagement into their daily practice.

3.5 Mothers shouldered the load, while fathers sat on the sidelines

Mothers were consistently the ones present at school interactions, while fathers were almost always absent. Even when mothers worked multiple jobs or were involved in informal labor, they still assumed the emotional and logistical burdens of managing school matters. *“Even if we invite both parents, it's*

always the mother who attends. We asked why the father is absent, and they informed us that the father is busy with work,” a teacher shared. According to Hornby & Lafaele (2011), this is the invisible work that mothers do, which is not valued, and for which fathers are excused because of traditional social norms.

The truth about economically disadvantaged families in the metropolitan area of Kathmandu is exposed in this study, and the rhetoric of parental involvement differs considerably. While the rhetoric of international and national policies promotes parental involvement in the early education of children, it is constrained by pedagogical, cultural, and institutional limitations.

Epstein's (2001) idea of overlapping spheres of influence illustrates the interconnection between the family, school, and community as parties involved in the child's learning process. However, this situation is often not adequately met. Economic difficulties are the main hindrance to involvement. Most parents who were involved in the construction and housekeeping sectors, with low pay, said that their days were tiring. According to Bourdieu (1986), economic capital, or a lack of it, limits parents' time and energy to interact with schools (Bhattarai, 2018). The capacity to be involved in school activities is also dependent on parents' ability to effectively manage their time (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Bista and Sharma (2020) also argue that time poverty prevents parents with lower literacy levels from being involved in the school system.

Another element that may influence the parents' desire to engage is cultural capital. Some parents were quoted as being averse to engaging with teachers and feeling uncomfortable in the school environment. *“Teachers speak as if we already know everything. I am embarrassed to ask.”*

This is an expression of Bourdieu's (1986) institutionalised cultural capital, whereby knowledge, language, and social interactions have been elevated in the education institution. Institutionalised cultural capital favors a certain mode of knowing and communicating, which makes other views less preferable (Bista & Sharma, 2020). Bista & Sharma (2020) also found that parents with lower levels of literacy were less engaged in formal education settings.

Another factor that may contribute to the challenge of parental participation is that parents' understanding of education may consider it as a separate task defined by the institution. Parents believe that education is the teacher's job and, therefore, there is no need for them to participate. As Acharya & Luitel (2016) argue, Nepali parents consider the schooling system as a separate institution from their families and, therefore, there is no need for them to work together. However, according to Vygotsky (1978), the learning and development process, as proposed by his theory, involves society and, therefore, the process is not limited to the classroom. Even in the institution, the engagement process is still transactional and not relational. This admission shows the disparity between policy and practice (UNESCO, 2015). Schools appreciate parent participation in theory but not in culture and practice. Females are forced to participate in school activities as it is a family responsibility, therefore, upholding traditional gender roles. These inferences support the observation that parental participation depends on broader societal expectations (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). According to Bourdieu (1986), this can also be considered an asymmetrical distribution of symbolic capital, as women's work in education is obscured.

In short, the education policies promote parents' engagement at school.

However, structural and cultural challenges, such as economic pressures, a lack of cultural capital, traditional gender norms, and school practices, constrain parents from participating. Schools must therefore develop mechanisms to involve parents. For instance, communication strategies can be improved, school environments can be made more parent-friendly, and students can think critically about who has access to what, when, and where.

Parental involvement can influence a child's learning in their early years and in the long run. Parents are regarded as the first teacher and main source of emotional support for their children. However, there are many social, economic, and cultural restrictions on parents' active involvement in their child's early education. In other words, parents' lack of participation in their children's education, particularly during the crucial phase, has a detrimental effect on their children's education and development in all areas. The following are some of the key impacts on ECD resulting from a lack of effective parental involvement.

3.6 Pathways to effective parental involvement

Based on the experiences of parents, teachers, and teachers in community schools in Kathmandu, some measures that schools can follow to involve parents in their children's early learning in an active manner are given below. These are aligned with national policy and supported by research and theory.

3.6.1 Welcome parents in a supportive way

Many parents are uncomfortable visiting their children's school. They feel insecure and embarrassed even to ask a question about their children's learning journey, already assuming that they will be judged. Schools need to communicate with parents in basic,

respectful terms and create a friendly and safe environment. As Bourdieu (1986) described, those who are less endowed in cultural capital often feel out of place and uneasy in formal institutions such as schools. Parents who feel respected will, over time, begin to build confidence and their communication will start to increase in meaningful ways. The empowerment of parents creates a stronger sense of partnership, which in turn strengthens the learning experiences of children in both home and school settings. A slight shift in school culture can have a significant impact on the parent-school relationships.

3.6.2 Find practical ways to communicate

Parents may work long hours or have informal jobs that prevent them from meeting at a designated time. Instead of having parents come at specific times, teachers can call parents at opportune times and schedule a quick meeting if possible. This is in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Teachers might remember that parents do not always have the option to leave work; it is important to understand the microsystem of the child, the home environment, and the struggles that the family faces. This will allow the mesosystem to be stronger because the connection between school and home will be more flexible.

3.6.3 Invite fathers to balance gender disparity

It was the mothers who were often carrying the bulk of the responsibilities in the school, despite the fact that they too were working outside the home. The fathers are becoming less and less involved in their children's lives. Research by Hornby & Lafaele (2011) found that, because of cultural beliefs and the expectations of women in society, the mothers are left to raise the children. Fathers

were less involved in children's development and education compared to mothers. Schools should try to involve both parents in meetings to talk about their children's education, with equal participation and accountability.

3.6.4 Support parents to feel confident and informed

Parents may not want to question teachers or become involved at meetings if they have little knowledge about how children learn and develop. Schools can help by offering parents small-group sessions to inform them about various aspects of their child's development and education. The more informed and involved parents are, the more willing they will be to help in ways that benefit their child's learning. Parents are more likely to become involved in ways that will improve their child's learning if they are aware of what is happening at the school. Parents can also gain cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) by being involved. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable a person to successfully navigate and contribute to school life.

3.6.5 Lost in transition: children without a compass

There have been cases that demonstrates how children become lost without their compass during their early learning transition. Bowlby's Attachment Theory uses the parental figures as a secure base to provide emotional safety and support. In their absence, children lack a secure base to soothe their emotions and form an insecure attachment style, causing anxiety, withdrawal, or aggressive behaviors. The lack of parental guidance leaves children without a primary "more knowledgeable other," as proposed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Parents are responsible for providing the proper scaffolding to the child within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Without the right guidance, children will not develop basic cognitive and language skills. Additionally, children without parental involvement may internalize feelings of failure and develop low self-esteem.

3.6.6 Confidence gap starts at home

A child's sense of self-belief and confidence in learning actually begins at home. If a parent is not able to be an active participant in a child's early education, it may leave them with a confidence gap in the classroom. Erikson's psychosocial theory talks about the Industry vs. Inferiority stage (ages 5–12), in which "if children are encouraged and reinforced for their initiative, they feel competent to achieve goals and tasks. They begin to feel a sense of pride and accomplishment in their schoolwork (McLeod, 2008)". However, if a child is left with no encouragement and support, especially from a parent, he/she will quickly begin to doubt their abilities. *"I notice a difference in children with the parents who are involved,"* said one teacher. *"The ones without support are reluctant to try and always want our approval to do even the simplest tasks."* It shows that they not only fail to get the right kind of reinforcement for their academic skills at home, but also lack a stronger emotional safety net to take risks and feel confident in the classroom.

3.6.7 Invisible impact of involvement gaps

It is a subtle influence that is very easy to miss but has a profound impact. These "involvement gaps" are invisible to most people, but their influence is very real and evident. I considered it in relation to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, in which the family is the central microsystem that impacts the immediate environment of the child, in which they develop and learn (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This microsystem's influence, or lack thereof, directly impacts the child's response to other systems, such as the school and society,

for example. Without the dynamic interaction and stimulation, learning becomes piecemeal and is almost always incomplete because the children are not getting the support they need.

This was especially the case in the majority of the teacher interviews that I carried out. "You can see them. The children who are missing the regular boost of encouragement at home seem lost, during activities, not because they can't do it, but because no one has ever cheered them on to try," was the insight that one of my research participants had to share with me. These quotes have made me realise that being uninvolved does not always mean that the child will be one who loudly disrupts and rebels against instruction, but also one who is quietly disinterested, loses confidence, and is reluctant to socialise with others. The effects are not as obvious, but they are nonetheless present and have a profound impact on a child's education and emotions in the long run.

3.6.8 Silent absentee parenting: The ripple effect essay

Silent absentee parenting creates long-term ripples in the otherwise smooth water of child's development. Bowlby's Attachment Theory illustrates the way emotional disconnection may lead to insecurity of a child (Khadka, 2025). This insecurity accumulates into anxiety, low self-esteem, and failure to build trusting relationships in adulthood. Examining Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the Industry vs. Inferiority phase suggests a lack of parental involvement in a child's life and praising them for success as a form of discouragement to the child. The lack of reinforcement could easily make the child feel incapable, therefore, avoiding learning new things.

4. Conclusion

The complexities such as long working hours, intimidation, expectations because of gender,

and communication from the school affect the level of parental involvement such that they are not at the center of the children's learning process. Listening to the stories underscores the fact that the reason is not that they lack the desire or care. In conclusion, parental absence impedes children's development compass and they become lost both emotionally and cognitively.

When parents are treated with respect, empathy, and given real chances of engagement, parental input in maximising benefits towards the affected individuals can be achieved. Positive intentions and strong support may turn challenges into paths of cooperation so that parents should be able to support and serve the needs of their children fully in terms of their educational and developmental processes. When parents are heard, they signal their willingness to participate, recognising that their realities are taken seriously. Parents possess latent power, and the challenge and promise lie in bridging between schools and parents, policies and practice, and barriers and meaningful participation. Parental absence impedes children's development compass and they become lost both emotionally and cognitively.

The Nepal National ECD Strategy (2018) and the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016–2023 emphasise on effective participation of parents in their children's early learning journey. However, many schools do not adhere to the policies they have in place. Schools need their own set of plans to support policy work in an open and inclusive manner.

Teachers require enhancement on the knowledge and skills so that they can involve parents more in their children's learning. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory demonstrates how the child is affected by interrelated systems of school

and home. The home and school systems are in the microsystem, and the connection between the two is the mesosystem. For the mesosystem to be healthy and working well, both systems must have effective and positive communication (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The teacher can be trained so that they can work with parents and communicate well with them. Professional development will enable teachers to acquire skills and knowledge in communication, active listening, and culturally responsive strategies for working with all families. Teachers can learn how to create partnerships with parents and involve them in their child's learning when they receive training.

Teachers need to monitor their own actions and train intrapersonal abilities so that they may establish trust among parents. Teachers, by utilising empathetic listening to properly comprehend the issues of parents and to assist them, can possibly construct supportive school–home relationships. Teachers may also help parents comprehend child growth and effective strategies to facilitate their child's learning and cultivate greater involvement. Professional development can help teachers build skills in relationship-building, active listening, and culturally responsive communication, enabling them to successfully engage with diverse families. This is in line with Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement, that has components such as communication, parenting support, and school-family collaboration, all aimed at effectively supporting children.

While majority of urban parents face daily challenges and stresses as discussed above, teachers should recognise the difficulties and be sensitive in approaching the parents.

Summing up, active parental involvement is not a natural phenomenon. The internal school practices should be open,

flexible, and respectful in a manner that is responsive to the diverse backgrounds of the parents they serve. Parents can serve as effective partners in early childhood education with their children if communication is enhanced, they remain respectful, and they seek help from the community and the policies.

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