



The Qualitative Report

Volume 20 | Number 7

Article 8

7-20-2015

Education for All: Hearing Minority Parent Voice about Public Education in India

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Recommended APA Citation

Wilson, B. R. (2015). Education for All: Hearing Minority Parent Voice about Public Education in India. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(7), 1062-1082. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss7/8>

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Abstract

This research article explores minority parents' unique hopes, challenges and fears concerning public education in India. Global efforts to provide Education for All have fallen short of achieving educational equity. Lack of educational equity persists due to a variety of conditions, including the failure to take into account local peculiarities. To inform programming of one local school project, the perspectives of minority parents were collected during a focus group held in Aurangabad, India in 2013. Focus group comments were coded and analyzed to identify significant themes. The findings identified factors explaining why minority students are not successful attending public schools or participating in national exams in India. Results and recommendations from this focus group are shared to promote dialogue among school leaders, government organizations and parents to better understand the local public school context and implement practices and policies to reach international education targets and make progress towards Education for All.

Keywords

Educational Equity, Parent Involvement, Minority Parent Perspective, Preschool and Early School Programming, Global Education, Focus Group Methodology

Education for All: Hearing Minority Parent Voice about Public Education in India

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This research article explores minority parents' unique hopes, challenges and fears concerning public education in India. Global efforts to provide Education for All have fallen short of achieving educational equity. Lack of educational equity persists due to a variety of conditions, including the failure to take into account local peculiarities. To inform programming of one local school project, the perspectives of minority parents were collected during a focus group held in Aurangabad, India in 2013. Focus group comments were coded and analyzed to identify significant themes. The findings identified factors explaining why minority students are not successful attending public schools or participating in national exams in India. Results and recommendations from this focus group are shared to promote dialogue among school leaders, government organizations and parents to better understand the local public school context and implement practices and policies to reach international education targets and make progress towards Education for All. Keywords: Educational Equity, Parent Involvement, Minority Parent Perspective, Preschool and Early School Programming, Global Education, Focus Group Methodology

Children have a fundamental human right to an education. This principle has been accepted by nearly every nation. However, despite efforts to increase access to education around the world, there remain large gaps in the opportunity for learning, particularly for children in emerging Third World countries. Global efforts fall short of achieving educational equality because they do not address significant details pertinent to local communities. Each and every community and local organization needs specific research and feedback to make actual improvements to education and increase opportunities for its citizens. Part of the research needed to realize this local orientation includes reaching out to parents and asking for their perspective.

In the country of India, Hands of Freedom is one example of a local organization that works to address community concerns. It focuses on reducing poverty and improving the quality of life for families living in some of the poorest areas of both rural and urban India. Since these community initiatives meet local needs, the programming becomes embedded and self-sustaining (J. Borde, personal communication, June, 2014).

Hands of Freedom was started in early 2008 to address issues of extreme poverty in India. Hands of Freedom began in one district in India and now, in 2015, serves five urban districts across India. The people served by this agency live in extreme poverty, their families having been classified in the lowest levels of the old caste system, referred to as *Untouchables* in the Indian vernacular. To ensure sustainable community change, Hands of Freedom provides training, micro saving, and loan programs to support individuals and families as they open small businesses that provide goods and services to meet local community needs. Hands of Freedom also constructs clean water wells, and works to expand programming for basic health care services in local communities. Recently, they opened early school programs in two Indian urban districts to offer educational programming and meet local daycare needs. These schools are registered with the national government and use standardized formats and

curricula guides to structure programming (J. Borde, personal communication, February, 2012).

A group of educators from Minnesota traveled to India to help Hands of Freedom establish one of the organization's educational projects by providing both teacher and leadership training. The author, a member of the visiting team, helped provide leadership and teacher training, and oversaw the focus group research. As an assistant professor in Educational Leadership, Dr. Wilson was interested in working with minority parents through Hands of Freedom and doing qualitative field research in India.

In a focus group, the team interviewed parents who expressed their hopes and dreams for their children, along with the challenges and fears they deal with when sending their children to early school programs in India. This article will explain the operation and methodology of the focus group, present its findings, discuss the implications, and make recommendations for future initiatives in the areas of preschool and early elementary programs. These recommendations parallel the goals set up to improve educational opportunities for all children in the globally endorsed "Education for All" initiative and the "Dakar Framework," which will be briefly described in the following section.

Literature Review

In 1948, The General Assembly of The United Nations adopted The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, in Article 26, established that everyone has a right to education. However, despite countless efforts spanning over 40 years by individuals and numerous organizations to give children around the globe a chance to attend school, significant educational gaps persisted throughout the world into the late 1980's. In response, the World Declaration of Education for All (EFA) Conference was held in Jomtien, Thailand (World Declaration, 1990). The purpose of the Conference was to support international efforts to ensure that the right to education is provided to all people in all nations throughout the world. The Jomtien Document acknowledges the potential for education to transform individuals and societies. In addition to articulating a compelling call to all nations to commit to meeting the basic learning needs of all people, the EFA Initiative outlines an expanded vision of what global efforts might accomplish with additional focus on academic learning. This focus would require increased resources, improvements to educational policies and structures, and, perhaps most significantly, the active commitment of leaders and government agents to addressing issues of discrimination and other barriers hindering equal access to educational opportunities (World Declaration, 1990).

In the year 2000, The World Conference for Education called for an evaluation of the many programs spawned by the Jomtien EFA Initiative. This evaluation of educational programming resulted in the "Dakar Framework for Action" (UNESCO, 2000). The Dakar Framework provides a detailed analysis of the state of basic education across the globe and reports on six regions around the world that participate in the World Conference EFA Initiative.

The Dakar Framework outlines the accomplishments of educational efforts around the world during the first decade of the EFA initiative and confirms that some progress was made in improving educational access and opportunities. The following represent some of the more significant findings of global improvement in access to education (UNESCO, 2000):

- Primary school enrollments around the world have increased by 82 million students.
- By the end of the 1990s, net enrollment rates for school attendance in developing countries exceeded 80%.

- Repetition and dropout rates consistently declined.
- Early childhood education increased modestly in urban areas.
- Nearly every nation has adopted the “Rights of the Child Act” and accepted the obligation to provide every child with a basic education.
- The overall adult literacy rate has risen to 85% for men and 74% for women.

However, despite the progress made in global education, some discouraging facts remain (UNESCO, 2000):

- As of the year 2000, less than 1/3 of the more than 800 million children under the age of six benefit from any early childhood education.
- Approximately 113 million children, 60% of whom are girls, have no access to primary schooling.
- At least 800 million adults remain illiterate.
- Due to a lack of education, youths and adults continue to be denied the skills and knowledge necessary for gainful employment.

In its extensive evaluation of educational efforts, the Dakar Framework affirmed the original tenets of the EFA act and re-energized the commitment to education “for every citizen in every society” (UNESCO, 2000). After an extensive evaluation of educational programs, the Dakar Framework also identified goals to continue to move global education efforts forward in a systematic and reasoned manner. The goals identified in the Dakar Framework are as follows (UNESCO, 2000):

- Expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- Ensure that, by 2015, all children—particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities—have access to and complete, free, and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- Ensure the learning needs of young adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs.
- Achieve a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
- Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieve gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
- Improve the quality in every aspect of education and ensure excellence so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills.

As a result of the Dakar Framework, specific goals were set for a group of nine countries known as the E-9 countries, which are home to more than 50% of the world’s population. India is one of the E-9 countries. These countries face a key challenge: “[T]he promotion of social and economic development with equity through quality education for all (UNESCO, 2000). In the preceding two decades, some improvements in educational opportunities have occurred in E-9 countries. However, serious challenges persist: illiteracy, especially in remote

areas; limited early childhood programming; poor quality of education, and inequity in educational access (Parker, Standing, & Pant, 2013; Phuyal, Wagle, Lamichhane, Thapa, Silwal, & Bhandari, 2005; Recife Declaration, 2000).

To address persistent challenges and reach EFA goals the international community acknowledges the unique role local organizations play. Once EFA action plans are established in each country, partnerships with local organizations are developed to coordinate efforts and provide coherent, sensible programming at the community level (UNESCO, 2000).

Furthermore, it has been noted over the past two decades that, where strong political commitment has backed partnerships and additional support from non- government funding agencies, significant progress toward the goals of the EFA Initiative has been realized (Phuyal et al., 2005; UNICEF, 2012). Mobilizing local organizations to support education in each community is a foundational thread of the EFA goals and the Dakar Framework (UNESCO, 2000; World Declaration, 1990).

To deepen and expand community partnerships, a situational analysis of the community is essential. This is the first step for establishing partnerships and designing effective early school programming at the local level. Situational analysis requires engagement of community stakeholders; specifically, informed program development relies on accurate data related to local children and their family's needs.

Parents provide indispensable insight for the community engagement phase of situational analysis (Naudeau et al., 2011). Participatory assessments are imperative to develop education programs and systems that are responsive to the needs and priorities of local communities, thereby effectively addressing EFA goals (UNESCO, 2000; UNICEF, 2012; United Way, 2011). However, collecting accurate data from parents about the public school experience presents its own unique set of burdens and problems. Parents, especially minority parents, may be hesitant to come forward on their own to report concerns and shortcomings of the established school system. This creates a need for concerted efforts by outside organizations to collect information from parents, especially minority parents, reporting their experiences, needs, and concerns about local public education.

Guiding Research Questions

To assist Hands of Freedom in the development and delivery of quality educational opportunities targeting minority families in designated communities three broad, general questions of study came to light. These questions guide the work in this research project.

- What factors keep minority parents and children from successfully completing public school in India?
- What can community and school leaders do to address barriers?
- How can local organizations “fill the gap” and provide equitable educational programs to local families?

To investigate these questions a qualitative phenomenological inquiry was undertaken. Phenomenological study involves collecting stories to describe individual lived experiences around a shared topic; in this case minority parents' perspective of the public school experience in India. This research is classified as a phenomenological study because the concept under study is clearly articulated, a defined group of individuals share their lived experiences, stories were collected through focus group interview, focus group comments were coded and analyzed identifying strong themes, and a description of the important commonalities are summarized (Creswell, 2013). This summary of common experiences leads to a better understanding of the educational needs of minority parents and will inform

practices and policies of local educational efforts.

Qualitative approaches, such as phenomenological inquiry, have been used to understand social realities in constructive research (Creswell, 2013; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Phuyal et al., 2005; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006; Sagoe, 2012). In focus groups, the participants and the researchers learn, as both gain understanding and knowledge of perspective and program dimensions (Affonso, Shibuya, & Frueh, 2007; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Snell, Miguel, & East, 2009). Focus groups are defined as groups of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss personal experiences on a selected topic (Affonso et al., 2007; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006; Sagoe, 2012). Designed to elicit sharing and answer “why” and “how” questions, focus groups are structured to provide the opportunity for everyone to learn others’ opinions and attitudes, gain knowledge, and generate new ideas (Breen, 2006; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Sagoe, 2012; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006; Snell, Miguel, & East, 2009). A focus group format is particularly appropriate in educational research, as it gives voice to under-represented groups and provides a meaningful context and formal structure to the discussion of important school issues (Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006; Snell et al., 2009).

Appropriate focus group methodology relies on four factors. First, an effective focus group moderator keeps the conversation on track, controls dominant voices, and monitors non-verbal feedback to successfully guide deep group discussion (Breen, 2006; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Sagoe, 2012; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006). Second, targeted stakeholders share their personal, yet likely common, experiences (Affonso et al., 2007; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006). Third, effective facilitators establish ground rules and set parameters so all members attending the focus group have an opportunity to share their perspective. Balanced interaction is maintained to reveal the reality of the target group and provide a view of how each member thinks (Affonso et al., 2007; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006; Sagoe, 2012). Fourth and finally, the benefits of participation are made apparent to ensure willing, honest feedback from focus group members. Generally, the rewards for participation are: (1) making a contribution to an important element, (2) raising awareness of personally significant issues, and/or (3) being a catalyst for productive change (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006; Sagoe, 2012).

A typical focus group operates according to a routine. Lasting 90 to 120 minutes, the moderator allocates a generous portion of the discussion time to probing participants’ experiences, asks members to share and compare experiences, and discusses the extent to which they agree or disagree with each other (Breen, 2006; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006). Questions must be clear and purposeful, collaboratively developed, and open-ended, which allows participants to expand on the topic according to their perspectives. Questions are sequenced so the most important information is discussed early in the session (Breen, 2006; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006). The protocols for recording focus group discussion are audio recording and note taking. The recording must catch the essence of what was said in order to understand the meaning of the discussion (Breen, 2006; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Sagoe, 2012). Notes typically include critical behaviors and mannerisms as well as verbal comments. The researcher then summarizes the discussion and develops codes that will be assigned to individual comments when the data are sorted (Breen, 2006; Sagoe, 2012).

Coding allows researchers to analyze the results of interviews, organize those results into useful information, and then make sure everyone on the research team interprets these results using the same framework. This is done by classifying the data collected into small categories, seeking evidence for the categories from multiple sections of the data source in the research study, then assigning a label or code (Creswell, 2013). This guides the research team in establishing connections in the data and facilitates data analysis. Axial coding of focus group comments identifies significant themes of discussion and assigns each theme a

reference number. Once themes are identified, multiple researchers review the focus group transcript and assign codes to comments (Affonso et al., 2007; Snell et al., 2009). Analysis of the codes assigned by multiple researchers makes it possible to calculate the frequency of themes. Code frequency provides the researchers with an objective measure of the prevalence of an attitude between and within groups on a topic. An agreement check should be made to ensure confidence in the researcher's claims about attitude prevalence. The agreement check measures the extent to which the researchers agree on the issues discussed in the focus group. Code-to-sentence match should reach at least 80% to claim high agreement; yet, even at this level of consistency, agreement should be viewed with a good deal of caution (Breen, 2006).

Reporting of focus group results uses descriptive and interpretive data analysis to draw conclusions and make recommendations based on a collective understanding of the participants view (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). Focus group analysis must appropriately balance qualitative and quantitative findings by reporting recurring themes, identifying significant items uncovered in the data analysis of coded comments, and using ample quotes from the recorded discussion to support conclusions and recommendations drawn from focus group results (Breen, 2006; Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Sagoe, 2012).

Method

In this research study, a focus group was conducted to guide the development of Hands of Freedom educational programming through the perspective of minority parents from the designated communities. IRB approval was gained from Minnesota State University Mankato prior to research and the approved protocol was followed throughout the investigation. In the spring of 2013, focus group questions were posed to a group of over 70 parents that participate in one or more Hands of Freedom community programs. Most of the focus group participants live in conditions of extreme poverty in urban slum areas and were never able to attend school as children; yet, despite these disadvantages, deeply desire better educational opportunities for their children and grandchildren.

Focus group participants gathered in a large rented space secured by Hands of Freedom. All participants were informed of their privacy and participation rights, the consent form was read, translated, and signatures were gathered. Parents and community members understood that their participation was voluntary. Four focus group questions were designed, and approved through the IRB process, to obtain minority parent perspective of the public school experience in India. The questions were presented in the following order:

- What hopes and dreams do you have for your child's education?
- What challenges do you have in sending your child to school?
- What fears do you have in sending your child to school?
- How could school leaders and teachers help you with your challenges and fears?

The research team consisted of three professional educators that were also on the leadership and teacher training group visiting India to support Hands of Freedom. The research team members consisted of an experienced parent educator, a K-12 teacher, and a university professor with experience in both K-12 teaching and administration (and is the author of this study). A translator assisted in leading the focus group discussion. The translator is a native born Indian, and the current executive Director of Hands of Freedom programming, establishing a high-level of trust for participants and confidence in accuracy of translation to the research team. All members of the research team were present, and actively assisted with the focus group discussion.

The focus group lasted ninety minutes. Responses were recorded using audiotape, handwritten notes, and the development of discussion posters as the focus group was conducted.

Parent responses were transcribed from hand-written recording of all parent comments and posters developed during the focus group interview. After initial review of focus group data each member of the research team individually developed a list of common themes that emerged as parents lived experience in public education. The research team met and winnowed down the categories from individual code lists. A master list of codes was developed collapsing ideas from individual lists. This kept the list of codes to a manageable number; and a descriptive meaning was established for each code to incorporate essential themes from all researchers' lists.

In this first stage of data analysis, focus group comments were coded using the following themes:

1. Poverty
2. Poor Health Care
3. Safety
4. Low quality of education available
5. Discrimination
6. Motivation
7. Parent Education
8. Character Development

Once these codes were identified, each research team member completed an independent coding of all focus group comments. Focus group codes were not mutually exclusive, as each researcher could assign multiple codes to a single statement. Coded results were analyzed to calculate the frequency of assigned codes for each prompt. The most frequently used codes for each prompt will be examined as significant themes of parent perception.

In the second phase of data analysis, inter-rater agreement was calculated for coded focus group comments using the Fleiss' Kappa statistic. Comments with moderate, substantial, and almost-perfect inter-rater agreement will be identified along with specific codes assigned to parent comments with high inter-rater agreement.

Results

Frequencies. Table 1 contains the frequencies for codes that surfaced the most often in the analysis of parent comments recorded for each focus group prompt.

Table 1. Frequency of Code Assignment by Focus Group Prompt

Code Categories	Focus Group Prompt			
	Hopes & Dreams	Challenges	Fears	Leadership Actions
Poverty	2	22	3	2
Poor Health Care	3	10	1	5
Safety	0	11	11	6
Low Quality of Ed. Available	5	7	19	6
Discrimination	0	9	9	12
Motivation	17	4	15	8
Parent Education	0	3	7	29
Character	15	0	0	2

Analysis of parent responses to the prompt “What hopes and dreams do you have for your child’s education?” Indicates that parents hope their child will gain significant motivation and a responsible “character from their school experience and “have a better life” as a result of participating in the educational process.

Analysis of parent responses to the prompt “What challenges do you have in sending your child to school?” indicates that parents face challenges of poverty, safety concerns, health care issues, and limited parent education when sending their children to public school.

Analysis of parent responses to the prompt “What fears do you have sending your child to school?” indicates that parents do indeed face serious fears when their children attend public school. Common fears included the prevalence of low quality education, lack of motivation on the part of children and teachers, extreme safety concerns, and discrimination.

Analysis of parent responses to the prompt “How could school leaders and teachers help you with your challenges and fears?” indicates that parents look to school leaders and teachers to address fears and challenges through parent education. In addition, leaders are expected to address issues around discrimination and motivation in their school.

Fleiss’ Kappa Results. Fleiss’ Kappa was calculated for each coded comment recorded for each prompt to indicate the degree of consistency, or inter-rater agreement. Fleiss’ Kappa values are useful in determining a consensus of themes that surface in focus group results. High levels of inter-rater agreement indicate consensus of themes related to the focus group prompt. Values for the Fleiss’ Kappa coefficient can range from -1 to 1. Table 2 below indicates the degree of agreement associated with each value.

Table 2. Fleiss’ Kappa Result and Corresponding Level of Inter-Rater Agreement References

Fleiss’ Kappa Value	Interpretation
<0	Poor agreement
0.01 – 0.20	Slight agreement
0.21 – 0.40	Fair agreement
0.41 – 0.60	Moderate agreement
0.61 – 0.80	Substantial agreement
0.81 – 1.00	Almost perfect agreement

Tables 3 through 10 display inter-rater agreement results for the coded responses for each focus group prompt. Table 3 presents results for the hopes and dreams prompt. As shown in the table, there is substantial to almost perfect inter-rater agreement in the coding of three parent comments and moderate agreement in the coding of one additional response.

Table 3. Inter-Rater Agreement for Coded Responses to the Hopes and Dreams Prompt

Parent comments concerning hopes and dreams	Fleiss’ Kappa Value
“Vision is a good education and become something big, to stand on their own feet.”	1.0**
“They should be taught the word of God.”	
“Raised in Godly environment and be a good person. Live a good life.”	
“Safe environment and develop character.”	0.747**
“...to be well-educated and become a doctor so he can give back and help others.”	
“For my 10 th grade son to finish, pas test, and graduate.”	0.1
“...that he will become something big with his second life.”	0.25
“[My] Passion is that [my] son will be educated and be able to go overseas to finish education.”	
Mean Fleiss’ Kappa for hopes and dreams	.457

Notes: * Moderate Agreement, **Substantial or almost perfect agreement

Specific parent comments with high inter-rater agreement and the codes assigned to the response by each researcher are shared in Table 4.

Table 4. Specific Parent Responses and Assigned Codes – Hopes and Dreams

Level of Inter-Rater Assessment	Specific Parent Responses	Codes Assigned by Researchers
Almost perfect	“They should be taught the word of God.”	Character 3
Substantial	“Raised in Godly environment and be a good person. Live a good life.”	Character 3 Motivation 2
Substantial	“Safe environment and develop character.”	Motivation 2 Character 2 Poverty 1 Poor Health Care 1
Moderate	“[My] Passion is that [my] son will be educated and be able to go overseas to finish education.”	Motivation 3 Low Quality of Education 1 Character 1

We can summarize that parents hope their children gain both character and motivation as they move through the education process. Character and motivation were two commonly agreed-upon themes addressed by the participants in this focus group when they discussed their hopes for their child’s education.

Table 5 displays the Fleiss’ Kappa results for the challenge prompt. As shown in the table, there is substantial inter-rater agreement in the coding of two parent comments and moderate agreement in the coding of three additional responses.

Table 5. Inter-Rater Agreement for Coded Responses to the Challenges Prompt

Parent comments concerning challenges	Fleiss’ Kappa
“Financial concerns, my children work from 7-11 in a restaurant working to help the family. My hands are tied – we have to do it.”	0.747**
Survival concerns, both of us parents have to go out and find work and work during the day. My kid hangs out with us. Education becomes set against survival. If one parent stays home, we won’t eat.”	
“Kids are sent to work in brick kilns.”	0.4
“Kids work in construction.”	0.1
Parent crying, “My son just passed away. He was sick and the doctor could not help him.”	0.495*
“One earning member (of family) is out (sick) and we had to pull the other son out of school. Now we have to take care of our daughter-in-law too.”	
“Problem with addictions in villages and these parents do not focus on their children.”	0.556*
“Parents don’t focus on the child.”	0.495*
“[My] kids hardly have any clothes, and no regular food, no one is around to watch children (so the come to work with us.”	0.7**
“Self-esteem challenges (their clothes, no supplies, no food) and kids don’t feel they belong and stay away from school groups.”	
“Lack of access in rural areas and lack of transportation to get to school.”	0.111
“Lack of awareness and importance of school. Parents not educated so they don’t realize the importance of school and kids don’t know the importance of school, so they end up on streets.”	
Mean Fleiss’ Kappa	.370

Notes: * Moderate Agreement, ** Substantial Agreement

Specific parent comments with high inter-rater agreement and the codes assigned to the response by each researcher are shared in Table 6.

Table 6. Specific Parent Responses and Assigned Codes – Challenges

Level of Inter-Rater Assessment	Specific Parent Responses	Codes Assigned by Researchers
Substantial	“Financial concerns, my children work from 7-11 in a restaurant working to help the family. My hands are tied – we have to do it.”	Poverty 3 Parent Education 2
Substantial	“[My] kids hardly have any clothes, and no regular food, no one is around to watch children (so they come to work with us).”	Poverty 3 Discrimination 1
Moderate	Parent crying, “My son just passed away. He was sick and the doctor could not help him.”	Poor Health Care 3 Poverty 1 Safety 1
Moderate	“Problem with addictions in villages and these parents do not focus on their children.”	Poor Health Care 2 Safety 2 Motivation 1
Moderate	“Parents don’t focus on the child.”	Parent Education 3 Poverty 1 Low Quality of Ed 1

The focus group participants discussed challenges they face when sending children to early school programming. Much of the participants’ feedback addressed the following themes: poverty, parent education, and poor health care.

Table 7 displays the Fleiss’ Kappa results for the fears prompt. As indicated in the table, there is substantial inter-rater agreement in the coding of two parent comments and moderate agreement in the coding of three additional responses.

Table 7. Inter-Rater Agreement for Coded Responses to the Fears Prompt

Parent comments concerning fears	Fleiss’ Kappa
“Even if they (our children) can go to school, if they fail [they will have] a dark future, we wonder what will happen to them?”	0.495*
“Teachers are always taking days off during school days – so my son stays home and works. He won’t be able to pass the exams because the teachers have not prepared him.”	0.495*
“[One] child comes to Hope Center told me he stole a pen during school and kids started harassing him and he dropped out. Parents fearful to send him back as kids call him a <i>thief</i> .”	0.395
“My son won’t go to school because he isn’t interested.”	0.7**
“I am helpless. How do I create interest or motivate my child. Son saw an airplane and then he saw what he wanted to do and now he is going to school.”	-0.008
“School system is militaristic and there is a fear of education.”	0.1
“There are so many books to read that children need wheels on backpacks to carry them.”	0.238
“Fear of even taking it (school) on.”	-0.111
“Very high pressure and expectations. There is a high suicide rate if they fail the test. The next day they don’t come home, they just kill themselves.”	
“Teachers are not dedicated or qualified. They get the job by paying a bribe.”	
	0.7**
“[They will] flunk [the] 10 th grade exams because not prepared.”	0.495*
“Corruption is widespread. At all levels, not just for schooling. Even if you finish education, they wouldn’t let my son get into police due to discrimination.”	0.333
“If you are a believer, they require more money to let your child into the school.”	0.333
Mean Fleiss Kappa	.584

Notes: * Moderate Agreement, ** Substantial Agreement

Specific parent comments with high inter-rater agreement and the codes assigned to the response by each researcher are shared in Table 8.

Table 8. Specific Parent Responses and Assigned Codes – Fears

Level of Inter-Rater Assessment	Specific Parent Responses	Codes Assigned by Researchers
Substantial	“My son won’t go to school because he isn’t interested.”	Motivation 3 Parent Education 1
Substantial	“Teachers are not dedicated or qualified. They get the job by paying a bribe.”	Low Quality of Ed 3 Parent Education 1
Moderate	“Even if they (our children) can go to school, if they fail [they will have] a dark future, we wonder what will happen to them?”	Motivation 3 Safety 1
Moderate	“Teachers are always taking days off during school days – so my son stays home and works. He won’t be able to pass the exam because the teachers have not prepared him.”	Low Quality of Ed 1 Low Quality of Ed 3 Poverty 1 Motivation 1
Moderate	“[They will] flunk [the] 10 th grade exams because not prepared.”	Low Quality of Ed 3 Motivation 1 Parent Education 1

Participant conversation identified low motivation and low quality of education available to their families as consistent themes when discussion fears for their children attending public school.

The Fleiss’ Kappa results for the leadership prompt are shown in Table 9. As the table indicates, there is substantial to almost perfect inter-rater agreement in the coding of five parent comments and moderate agreement in the coding of four additional responses.

Table 9. Inter-Rater Agreement for Coded Responses to the Leadership Actions Prompt

Parent comments concerning leadership	Fleiss’ Kappa
“More communication between school and parents, [have] more conferences.”	
	0.747**
“Prayer is going to be the key to address discrimination.”	-0.011
“Teachers who have a passion to teach and feel called to teach.”	0.7**
“[We] need dedicated Teachers.”	0.7**
“Build relationships with homes.”	0.747**
“Good communication and understanding of the partnership needed in education.”	0.747**
“Only rich kids’ parents have access to teachers. Poor kids’ parents are ignored.”	0.111
“Working with teachers to fix high-pressure environment and help suicide rate go down.”	0.063
“Communication – we need consistency in the teacher and school process[es].”	0.495*
“Anything teachers/leaders can do to help raise awareness.”	0.495*
“Meetings in communities to talk about education.”	1.0*
“Talk to adults about getting educated.”	0.495*
“Teach adults, some cannot even sign their names.”	0.495*
Mean Fleiss’ Kappa	.507

Notes: * Moderate Agreement, ** Substantial or almost perfect agreement

Specific parent comments with high inter-rater reliability and the codes assigned by each researcher to the response are shared in Table 10.

Table 10. Specific Parent Responses and Assigned Codes – Leadership Actions

Level of Inter-Rater Assessment	Specific Parent Responses	Codes Assigned by Researchers Parent
Almost Perfect	“Meetings in communities to talk about education.”	Education 3
Substantial	“More communication between school and parents, [have] more conferences.”	Parent Education 3 Low Quality of Ed 1
Substantial	“Teachers who have a passion to teach and feel called to teach.”	Low Quality of Ed 3 Motivation 1
Substantial	“[We] need dedicated teachers.”	Low Quality of Ed 3 Motivation 1
Substantial	“Build relationships with homes.”	Parent Education 3 Low Quality of Ed 2
Substantial	“Good communication and understanding of the partnership needed in education.”	Parent Education 3 Low Quality of Ed 2
Moderate	“Communication – we need consistency in the teacher and school process[es].”	Parent Education 3 Low Quality of Ed 1 Discrimination 1
Moderate	“Anything teachers/leaders can do to help raise awareness.”	Parent Education 3 Low Quality of Ed 1 Motivation 1
Moderate	“Talk to adults about getting educated.”	Parent Education 3 Low Quality of Ed 1 Motivation 1
Moderate	“Teach adults, some cannot even sign their names.”	Parent Education 3 Low Quality of Ed 1 Motivation 1

Almost perfect coding of one comment and substantial inter-rater agreement in five additional comments highlights significant agreement between the research team members on parents’ input regarding the support that teachers and leaders could provide to alleviate the parents’ challenges and fears as they send their children to public school programming in India. Parents believe that teachers and leaders can address issues around low motivation, low quality education, and practices of discrimination as action steps towards meeting the education needs of children and families in the local community (UNICEF, 2009). Parents are also looking for leaders to provide parent education as a means of addressing significant educational gaps.

Discussion

Programming in Hands of Freedom is focused on accomplishing significant improvements in local communities of India. Gathering minority parent perspective on the public school experience in India and using this information to shape educational programming will help Hands of Freedom meet local needs and provide essential services. Focus group results provide evidence that the Hands of Freedom school programming promotes the accomplishment of four of the six goals set out the Dakar Framework (see Table 11 for a summary of this alignment) and is a viable partnership organization for local governments.

Table 11. Dakar Framework Goal Alignment to Hands of Freedom Programming

Dakar Framework Goal	Alignment
Expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children	✓✓

Ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality	✓✓
Ensure the learning needs of young adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs	✓✓
Improve all aspects of the quality of education and ensure excellence of all through the accomplishment of learning outcomes: especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.	✓✓

Results from the focus group also identify significant alignment between Hands of Freedom school projects and the goals for E-9 countries outlined in the Recife Declaration (2000). Educational programming provided by Hands of Freedom supports nine of the eleven goals for E-9 countries (see Table 12 for a summary of this alignment).

Table 12. Recife Declaration Goal Alignment to Hands of Freedom Programming

Recife Declaration Goals for E-9 Countries	Alignment
Support EFA and increase participation in basic, middle, and higher education	✓✓
Ensure access and equity	✓✓
Fortify the moral values in basic education	✓✓
Enhance the quality of education and ensure learning outcomes	✓✓
Improve teacher education/preparation	✓✓
Develop programs that directly respond to excluded groups	✓✓
Increase participation of civil society including the local community	✓✓
Continue reform of management and administration of schools	✓✓
Secure excellence for all in education	✓✓

Results from Thematic Analysis of Focus Group Comments

The analysis of code frequency tabulations and Fleiss Kappa inter-rater agreement values from the parent focus group—along with the backdrop of strong alignment to both Dakar Framework goals and the goals set for E-9 countries—reveal strong trends of parents’ perception about the current early public school experience in India and parents’ visions for the future.

Motivation and character are essential outcomes for quality education.

1. Parents hope their children gain both character and motivation as they move through the education process.

Parents expressed the desire to have character imparted to their children through the schooling process. In three of the seven comments shared (with noted inter-rater agreement) in response to the prompt about hopes and dreams, parents consistently discussed visions for their children receiving a quality education and making a better life for themselves. Thirty-eight parents agreed with this parent’s comment: “My vision for my child is that they would get a good education and become something big, to stand on their own feet.”

Poverty is a significant barrier to educational success.

2. Poverty, parent education, and poor health care are common challenges parents face when sending their children to school.

Poverty is a prevailing reality for the families of the India community represented in this focus group. One parent shared that their school-age children, as young as seven years old, work a wage earning job before beginning their school day. “My children work from

seven to eleven in a restaurant to help our family. Our hands are tied, we have to have our children do this to survive.” Over half of the participants in the focus group confirmed this problem.

India’s Integrated Child Development Services is one of the world’s largest intervention programs with a focus on providing integrated services, including affordable daycare, to address issues of access and successful attendance in educational programming (Naudeau et al., 2011). India, like many E-9 countries, is trying to make progress, but, despite laws mandating school attendance, parents shared heart-wrenching stories of children working in construction, picking up trash, and laboring in brick kilns just to survive. Adding to this problem, all the adults in the household must work – this creates a lack of supervision for young children in the home or community, which becomes an issue. Parents frequently labor from sun up to sundown and many children must attend work with their parents because there is no other option for the care of young children (J. Borde, personal communication, June, 2014). The longer a society postpones affordable quality childcare and educational programming, the more costly and ineffective education becomes in moving families and communities out of poverty (Lopez-Acevedo, 2002; Naudeau et al., 2011).

Poor healthcare is another problem that presents challenges for children’s school attendance. When a working family member becomes sick, the healthy family members must make up the income, even if that person is of school age.

Adding to the stark realities around poverty and poor healthcare, a general lack of awareness of the importance of education persists. An observation made by a local leader sums up the challenge: “Lack of awareness of the importance of school is a big challenge we face in getting children to school. Parents are not educated so they don’t realize the importance of school for their children and then their children end up on the streets.”

Low quality education and resulting low student motivation are consistent fears parents and students face in public school in India.

3. Low motivation and low quality of education are consistent fears parents identify they have for their children in the early public school experience.

Parental comments revealed an issue of availability of quality schooling to the general public in India. In the focus group, we heard stories about mediocre teachers, lack of supplies, and corruption in teacher assignment. Comments revealed experiences with poor teacher attendance, militaristic supervision of young children, and teachers paying bribes to secure a teaching job. Parents acknowledged that this is not every teacher, but the focus group estimated that 50% of the teachers are not dedicated or qualified for their job. These factors contribute to the low quality of public education in India.

Low quality of education can lead to catastrophic effects in poor families, especially when children fail school or high-pressure exams. It is normal for Indian parents to have serious worries about what will happen to their children if they fail. One parent shared a story about failure on the high-stakes tenth grade exam: “... Children are under very high pressure to meet expectations on the tenth grade exam. If they do not pass, they cannot go on to high school. If they fail the test, there is a very high suicide rate. The next day they don’t come home – they kill themselves.” And another parent shared: “...Even if my child does pass the school exams, I do not have enough money to pay the bribe to get them into high school, and, if they pass high school, we have to pay the bribe to get them into a job.”

Leaders have the responsibility of addressing quality issues and discrimination in public schools.

4. Parents believe that it is the responsibility of leaders and teachers to

address issues around low motivation, discrimination, and the overall low quality of the educational system.

Focus group participants eagerly shared their desires for higher levels of leader and teacher support. First and foremost, parents desire more frequent communication between home and school so children stay motivated in their educational pursuits.

Second, parents expect leaders to put an end to discrimination against their children based on poverty or remnants of the now-illegal caste system. This is serious problem in India, where caste discrimination is estimated to effect up to 50% of the general population (UNICEF, 2009). And third, parents want higher-quality learning opportunities for their children, along with more effort and better role modeling by teachers and leaders.

Specific examples of how leaders and teachers could support parents included more conferences to better understand children's progress, prompt teacher and leader communication, and increased availability of leaders and teachers to all parents, not just the wealthy ones. One parent commented, "We desire good communication and understanding of the partnership needed in education. Only rich kids have access to teachers. Poor kids' parents are ignored."

While it might seem that discrimination based on poverty is the perception of one parent or a small group of parents, discrimination against those in poverty is a well-substantiated barrier to improving educational access and opportunity around the globe. In a 2012 study, "Opportunities Lost: The Impact of Grade Repetition and Early School Leaving," researchers examined data from 13 countries and reported a lower percentage of grade repetition for children from wealthy families compared to grade repetition rates for children from poor families. They noted at least 5% greater likelihood of grade repetition for children from families living in poverty. The researchers also found that poor students completed fewer years of education than their well-off peers, citing the startling statistic that 31 million marginalized children reached by early education programming left their educational program before reaching the later parts of primary school (UNESCO, 2012).

Without quality teachers and leaders, quality education is impossible. Parents shared many concerns about teachers and leaders while discussing their situation in local public schools in India. Their comments include the following examples:

- "We need dedicated teachers, teachers who have a passion to teach and feel called to teach."
- "Teachers are not dedicated or qualified. They get the job by a bribe."
- "Teachers take days off during school days and no one shows up, so my children stay home and work instead."
- "[My child] won't be able to pass the exams because the teachers have not been there to prepare him."

Providing parent education is necessary to address inequities in access to quality educational programs.

5. Parents recommended leaders and teachers provide parent education to increase their literacy skills, build an understanding of the importance of education, and engage in discussions to gain insight on the current conditions of local educational programming.

During the group discussion, parents made many comments about the necessity for parent education in their community, including the following:

- “Lack of awareness on the importance of school is an obstacle.”
- “Leaders need to do whatever they can to raise awareness.”
- “Hold meetings in the community about education.”
- “Talking to the parents and adults about getting educated. Many cannot even sign their names.”

The parents of the local Indian community believe in their leaders' capacity to address obstacles getting in the way of education for all children and they also believe in each other. Focus group participants were unanimous (70 participants in agreement) when identifying parent education as an essential part of helping the families in their community get out of poverty. Parents want their children to do well but have to meet pressing survival needs. As participants in the study observed, “[T]he parents of children in this community are truly stuck between a rock and a hard place.” The rock is the amount of work needed to earn enough to survive day-to-day and the hard place is giving up these essential resources to keep children in school and realize a better future.

Cautions and Limitations

Focus group data must be treated with caution and not generalized to imply equal distribution of attitudes or beliefs across the population (Affonso et al., 2007; Breen, 2006; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006; Sagoe, 2012). Generalization, the degree to which results from a sample group can accurately be extended to others, is to be done carefully and with purposed steps to ensure confidence of comments and shared understanding of results (Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006; Sagoe, 2012). This study used axial coding and Fleiss' Kappa analysis to ensure a level of confidence in results; however, caution must be exercised in applying results from this focus group to other communities in India.

Confidence in focus group responses is enhanced with a high level of trust among the group and the facilitators. In this case, the research team was not familiar with focus group participants; however, the translator was a highly trusted leader in the Hands of Freedom Program and knew participants and their families well, increasing the level of trust among the focus group participants and the research team.

Quality focus group data relies on the representation of the targeted population within the focus group (Breen, 2006). This focus group consisted of over 70 parents from the local community, providing a sizable sample of local residents and valuable information for the development of programs to meet local needs. While the sample is a healthy size, creating the opportunity for equal participation within this large group was challenging. In an effort to provide balanced participation, the research team used two group facilitators - one watched the focus group while the other facilitated the conversation, trading roles for each prompt.

The primary intended use of the results from this study is to inform Hands of Freedom leaders as they plan their ongoing work in India. The secondary application of these results is to add to a broader discussion concerning issues in global education. Any other application should be performed with caution.

Finally, there is a need for a thorough program evaluation of Hands of Freedom's education projects. While this focus group gathered important information identifying the need and community support for quality early school programming, no prompts or questions dealt specifically with quality factors for such programming. Future research is needed to verify that Hands of Freedom delivers quality educational programs.

Recommendations

Gathering parent and community perspectives can, and should, lead to change and promote social justice. Parent and community input must inform action on the part of local and national educational leaders if it is to have full effect and bring equal access to quality education to all children, fulfilling the mandates of EFA (Naudeau et al., 2011; Snell et al., 2009; UNICEF, 2012; United Way, 2011). When schools, families, and community members work together, children do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. These worthwhile outcomes align with the goals outlined in the Dakar Framework, the EFA Initiative, and Hands of Freedom Educational programming. If we are to realize the goal of “education for all,” school leaders and local officials must take to heart the voices heard in this focus group.

We propose the following recommendations to change current educational practices in early school programming and better meet the needs of children and families in this Indian community.

1. Character education and affective elements of learning must be addressed and supported in each local school.

Teachers and leaders must realize the significance of their position to positively affect the level of hope and determination they instill in the next generation of children in India. The Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) is grounded in the moral imperative to ensure fundamental educational rights for all and improve the life situations of people around the globe. Declarations and political initiatives grounded in these fundamental truths assume an educated and ethical population. Schools have been a significant tool for development of an educated and ethical population since their inception, through the natural social construction that takes place in the educational process. Focus group participants clarified the connection between educational processes and the promotion of motivated and ethical citizenship.

In addition to addressing ethical and character development in children, the ethics and morals desirable for children should be role-modeled by the leaders and teachers who work in public school programming. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily always the case. National discussion and policy development on the essential ethics for teachers and leaders in public education in India may bring about clarity and consensus on the responsibilities of those who hold these roles.

Increased hopelessness and loss of motivation as children engage in the educational process indicate that public education in India has a long way to go before the basic human right to an education is universally provided in an adequate manner. However, evidence from the focus group demonstrates that immense progress is being made through the work of organizations such as Hands of Freedom.

2. Parent education must be embedded alongside local educational programming for children.

Parent education plays a mediating role in academic success for children (Naudeau et al., 2011) and serves two purposes in helping meet the EFA global initiative. First, parent education generates support and commitment to the educational process.

This is accomplished by explaining to parents how giving up current resources for greater future profits is better for everyone in the family, overall.

Second, through the parent education process comes an understanding of the power

and dignity education brings, which should make parents more likely to participate in educational opportunities themselves, as well as ensure that their own children attend school. There is a spillover effect with respect to increased literacy, enhanced job skills, and overall improvement in social and civic well-being (Naudeau et al., 2011; Snell et al., 2009; United Way, 2011).

3. Government agencies must increase and improve their collaboration with local partners to meet EFA goals.

There are many barriers to education due to the extreme poverty that persists in India and many communities around the world. Addressing the barriers poverty presents is essential if we are to increase the number of communities meeting EFA targets, especially those set for the E-9 countries. Collaboration among local agencies is one avenue for addressing issues associated with families living in poverty (Naudeau et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2009). Listing every needed remedial measure is beyond the scope of this article; however, a variety of measures should immediately be taken to improve access to education. Healthcare, transportation, quality control, and childcare initiatives connected to schooling should be undertaken by local governments to address the entangled issues around poverty (United Way, 2011). Hands of Freedom programming addresses many of these barriers, demonstrating that these critical needs can be effectively met through collaborative partnerships with business and organizations in each local community.

4. Partnerships between government entities and private organizations are essential to increase access and opportunity for valid, quality, educational alternatives to meet the Universal Human Right of Education for All.

In addition to meeting the goals set forth in the Dakar Framework and the goals for E-9 countries, educational programming through private organizations remains outside the reach of bribery and other political corruption. These organizations are able to draw from diverse supporters to provide resources, training, and qualified staff for programming. Partnerships with private organizations also alleviate some of the pressure on public government budgets, which must spread limited funds equitably to meet many compelling and competing demands. Organizations such as Hands of Freedom are paving the way for the expansion of social justice into some of the most significant poverty areas existing today (J. Borde, personal communication, June, 2014).

5. Steps must be taken to ensure quality teachers are in place in each local school and that schools operate under a set of best practice guidelines to standardize staff evaluations, staff absences, days off of school, fair grading, and disciplinary practices.

India has taken steps to ensure quality curricula and learning targets in educational programming. Most local schools operate under standardized formats and national curriculum requirements; however, the most significant factor in school quality is teacher quality (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003). Meta-analysis of research studies has helped researchers to outline specific school practices that improve educational quality for children (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003). Local dialogue and policy development around teacher quality and best practice guidelines will improve the quality of education provided to all children in every nation, and India's communities are no exception (Parker et al., 2013; United Way, 2011; UNICEF, 2009).

6. Courageous leadership is required to address discrimination that surfaces in the local school system.

Discrimination persists due to remnants of the old caste system, the existence of diverse faith groups, and the abundance of communities in extreme poverty despite the growth of the middle and wealthy classes in India. Cultural awareness around poverty and faith beliefs has worked in many countries working to improve quality education for all citizens (Parker et al., 2013; UNICEF, 2009). Improved cultural awareness is needed in this community studied in India as well. Leaders can best address these issues within a system that is determined to provide education for all and abolish practices and belief systems that do not embrace freedom from discrimination. School leaders need to be courageous as they address issues of discrimination and they need courageous political leaders in each community to support their work.

Conclusion

Serious global problems are seldom solved through cheap and/or quick solutions, and global illiteracy is no exception. This article reviews a research team's contribution to Hands of Freedom's ongoing efforts to provide educational access to a people formerly classified as Untouchables, thereby furthering the goals of the Dakar Framework to provide high quality educational programs throughout the world. The research team that conducted this study provided assistance in the areas of teacher and leadership training and held a parent focus group to identify parent perceptions of local needs to guide program development. A one-size-fits-all philosophy has been tried in education and has failed miserably. Local diversity must be considered.

To understand the data collected in the focus group, responses were coded to identify themes and make recommendations to address practical problems faced by local educational officials. In this case, the research team found that lack of parent education, the routine use of child labor, health needs within the family, and other factors emanating from extreme poverty (e.g., the continued existence of the outlawed caste system) created barriers to local educational access. Focus group comments also indicated other obstacles, such as inequitable distribution of educational resources and systemic corruption. In addition, some of the harsh realities faced by parents and children were articulated in focus group comments (e.g., what kind of parents would encourage their child to attend several years of school in preparation to take a test if they believed there was a chance their child would fail and feel so hopeless they would commit suicide?). The global academic community must mobilize and support local organizations that provide options for education and address gaps in access and opportunity. Through the process of conducting parent focus groups in local communities, the right resources in the proper amounts can be directed to local organizations like Hands of Freedom to provide integrated programming that meets a wide-spectrum of local needs and advances quality of education for all. By doing so, the nations of the world can move closer to fulfilling the universal human right of education.

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Article Citation

Wilson, B. R. (2015). Education for all: Hearing minority parent voice about public education in India. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(7), 1062-1082. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR20/7/wilson6.pdf>
