GRASS-ROOT LEVEL TEACHERS AND PARENTS’ UNDERSTANDINGS ON PRIMARY EDUCATION QUALITY IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Educational policies and programmes need to develop, giving special attention to rural teachers, parents and children. The policy has to develop by considering rural people’s (teachers and parents) understandings and perspectives on education quality in the local context. Therefore, it is an important matter to know the understandings in respect of primary education quality, as seen by rural parents and teachers, in order to formalize the appropriate policy to enhance the quality of primary education in the rural areas. In this regard, unveiling teachers’ and parents’ understandings on the quality of education in rural Bangladesh is one of the important steps on the way to framing policy for achieving quality education. In this study, qualitative data were captured by semi-structured interview and data interpretation was underpinned by concepts derived from human capital and social capital theories. This research suggested three types of understandings related to education quality (a) acquisition of academic results and awarded scholarship, (b) capability and skills and (c) the development of values and attitudes. Therefore, the concepts (integrated) of education quality carry the ‘Whole’ culture, i.e., the culture of Performance and the culture of ‘Well-being’.

Keywords: Quality of Education; Learners’ Achievement; Whole Culture; Culture of Well-being

INTRODUCTION

Achieving quality in primary education is a challenge for the government and the improvement is necessary in several aspects of the primary education system. In the past decade increasing investment in primary education in many cases led to a linear quantitative expansion in enrolment with little or no impact on the quality of education [1]. The Jomtien World Declaration on “Education for all” identified the quality of education as a prerequisite for achieving the fundamental goal of equity. It was recognized that expanding access to school alone would be insufficient for education to contribute fully to the development of the individual and society. In this respect, the Dakar Framework for Action (DFA) gave new impetus to the idea that expanding access to education is only beneficial to
individuals and society when the education is of good quality [2], and that children need good quality education to become productive workers, good parents and responsible citizens [3]. Considering this, emphasis was placed on assuring children’s learning achievements [4]. The economic and political future of Bangladesh will largely depend upon the quality of its population, and the quality of education is central to human resource development.

Both education Watch Reports of 2000 and 2003/4 suggest that there is a lack of common understanding about the quality of education. Therefore, a systematic and planned effort is needed to develop understanding and awareness about the important factors and concepts of education quality in order to develop a comprehensive and effective strategy for enhancing the quality of primary education [5, 6].

The aim of this paper is to describe the teachers’ and parents’ perceptions regarding education quality in rural context of Bangladesh. The concepts of education quality along with their perspectives are presented and discussed. These concepts include good results and scholarships, as well as skill and ability, and the development of values and attitudes. The paper also describes the parents’ understandings related to education quality. Parents’ perceptions on education quality include results and scholarships, as well as knowledge and values, and life skills. Finally, the integration of both teachers’ and parents’ perceptions which portray the comprehensive views of education quality is presented in this paper. The paper describes the findings that people (parents and teachers) have three essential types of understandings regarding education quality; namely, good results and scholarships; skills; and values and attitudes. However, teachers and parents have different contexts in conceiving these ideas of education quality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

By reviewing the definitions of education quality, it can be noted that understanding about the quality of education is described in many ways by researchers. The definition of quality seems to depend on the perspective of the person/institute who attempts to define it. However, the quality of education is adjudged by pupils’ achievement [3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15]. Therefore, quality of education presumably refers to its applied sense of virtue acquired by learners. Its effect is weight according to how it is evaluated or accepted in society, family and community, and according to how learning is organized and managed. Actually, the meaning of quality is not a settled matter.

However, UNESCO (2004) reached to a clear conclusion that, good quality in education should facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes that have intrinsic value and also help in addressing important human goals (p.39). The conceptual framework of data analysis and the interpretation of the findings of this study considered learner achievement as the indicator of the quality of
education in primary schools. Learner achievement refers to both cognitive and non-cognitive knowledge and skill [8, 14, 16]. These achievements then brought benefits (productivity, job mobility, social mobility, satisfaction, earnings, political stability) to the community and government systems through their outcomes, by changing attitudes, behaviour, literacy, generic skills, values and employment status [14]. In this regard, it is a timely and appropriate step to examine the local context of Bangladesh, in order to ascertain and highlight what educational quality means.

**METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative method (case studies) was used in this research. The case study, ethnographic in nature, illuminated the insights related to the understandings of parents and teachers about Education Quality. The epistemological position of this research stood on the constructivism-interpretivism spectrum. This research used the general inductive approach [17] and the mechanics of coding were developed on the basis of the data analysis process of [17]. The research design was delineated in such a way that the objective, design and methodology of the study allowed the study to bring out and highlight the local community and grass-roots level and the functions of primary education, considering the viewpoints of parents and teachers.

**Methods of Data Collection**

Data were captured by semi-structured interview. The methods of data collection and sampling are briefly described below.

**Semi-structured Interviewing**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted because they are flexible, focused and time-effective. The interview data were recorded by both audio tape and field notes.

There were many strategies used in the interviewing process of this case study research. First, rapport was built with the informants by discussing some of their personal matters and by presenting token gifts. Then, the researcher briefed the informant on the purpose of the interview. Confirmation was given that anonymity and the confidentiality of the responses would be strictly protected. Since the researcher grew up in this community, he was familiar with the culture and norms of the community population and the locality as well. It was an added advantage for him to be able to capture the data in an easy way. With the assistance of the head teachers of the respective schools, the schedule was made for interviewing parents and teachers according to their availability and
convenience. The interviews were conducted in Bengali. The researcher was conversant in the local language of that community, which helped a lot in understanding their thinking and views clearly and in depth, since the local language is somewhat different from pure Bangla, both in utterance and style of speaking. With their permission, the interviews were audiotaped, although some of them asked that their voices not be recorded. In these cases, the researcher adopted a strategy, whereby the informants were humbly requested to give their consent to record the interview, after explaining that if they found anything wrong with it or felt it may harm them in any way, it would be deleted directly from the tape recorder in front of them. However, no informant asked for this after their interview.

Sampling

Multiple cases (two) were studied. Non-probability purposeful sampling was used for the collection of data. Teachers and parents were selected in consultation with the headmasters of the case schools concerned. Finally, 10 (ten) teachers and 10 (ten) parents were interviewed.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview was developed for capturing data as described. This was a device for collecting data systematically from the informants in the form of a list of questions. It also solicited background information in order to gather information on personal matters (optional), education level and professional training of the informant. According to the research framework, it included some questions on the quality of education, family, community, schools and students to help conceptualize the meanings of education quality and the factors of family and community that affect education quality in the rural context of Bangladesh. The questions were presented according to an order in the schedule; however, the order was not maintained during the interviews. The questions were asked according to the situations and perspectives of the informants.

Interview Schedules (Teachers And Parents)

Two interview schedules were prepared both for teachers and parents. The content of both schedules were basically the same as the intention of the research was to capture the data from teachers and parents on the same issues. There were minor differences in how the questions were described, in order to take into consideration, the differences within the teachers and parents’ perspectives. The schedule contained some questions about schools and students; however, the research intended to uncover the meaning of education quality and what factors
related to family and community. The reason for including the questions about schools and students was to bring out the factors of family and community that were not possible or easy to illuminate using the questions related directly to family and community. This strategy also helped conceptualize a broad spectrum of family and community that affect education quality in rural Bangladesh. The schedules were primarily prepared in Bengali (the mother language of Bangladesh) and then translated into English.

Data Analysis

Data analysis refers to three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data; data display is an organized, abstract form of information that permits conclusion drawing and action; and conclusion drawing is the critical evaluation of the research findings [18]. The analysis of data is termed “coding”. According to Auerbach and Silverstein [17], the main purpose of coding data is to move from the raw text to research concerns. The steps included: raw text, relevant text, repeating ideas, themes, theoretical constructs, theoretical narrative and finally research concerns.

In this study, the framework of analysis (coding mechanics) was developed on the basis of the data analysis processes of Auerbach and Silverstein [17]. Data analysis follows a process which is borrowed and adapted from grounded theory. The qualitative study of this research was conducted in two schools in rural areas as a miniature representative (case) of schools in rural Bangladesh, where the views of sample parents were analysed. The new concepts and knowledge base were built on the footing of prior knowledge in the field. The three steps used for data analysis included the following:
Step 1: Exploring Data and Identifying Relevant Text;
Step 2: Initial Coding and Categorizing;
Step 3: Developing Constructs and Answering Research Questions by Narration.

Finally, each step of the data analysis was revisited for checking and coding and for the emergent process of relevant texts, sub-themes, themes, and constructs, as well as the narration process of research findings. Therefore, these were revised according to any new objectives that were found to be important.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study sought teachers’ and parents’ perceptions related to primary education quality. Both groups were local inhabitants. There were two parties involved in any education system – the education provider and education receiver [1] as Buchmann and Hannum stated cited in Chua-oon [19]. This study considered parents to represent the role of education receiver, whereas teachers
represented the education provider. These two stakeholders are considered the key actors in the primary education setting of Bangladesh.

The analysis and interpretation of data taken from teacher informants yielded the following different meanings of education quality, which were considered to be teachers’ perceptions on the quality of education:

1) Acquisition of Good Results and Awarded scholarships: teachers viewed good results and scholarships achieved by learners to be the dimension of the quality of education. The perspectives related to this perception are schools’ and teachers’ success, along with their reputations and prestige.

2) Skill and Ability: teachers viewed these together as one of the dimensions of understanding education quality in rural Bangladesh. The context of this perception is the teachers’ intention in viewing education quality as a source of earnings as well as an agent of promoting learners’ societal recognition in their life.

3) Development of Values and Attitudes: teachers perceived it necessary that learners should achieve some values and certain attitudes by the end of their primary schooling. They considered the cultural and religious context of the community in viewing this aspect of education.

In the same way, the coding and synchronizing of parents’ views reached the following conclusions about the concepts of education quality:

1) Results and Scholarships: parents saw results and scholarships achieved by pupils as a dimension of primary education quality. The perspective in perceiving this facet of education quality was to view this as a vehicle for the social and economic development of children and their families.

2) Knowledge and Values: the achievement in knowledge and values by learners emerged as one of the dimensions of education quality. Their outlook in conceiving this idea of education was to see this as a promoter of social recognition and as the elevator of job related skills.

3) Life skills: this is viewed as one of the aspects of quality education. This perspective was taken into consideration in order to conceive this idea of education quality as a paramount tool in getting and retaining jobs.

There was no major difference between teachers’ and parents’ understandings on education quality. However, the aspects of conceiving these concepts were not the same. Table I shows the similarities and dissimilarities in conceiving the ideas of education quality between teachers and parents.
TABLE I. UNDERSTANDINGS OF EDUCATION QUALITY BY TEACHERS AND PARENTS

| Teachers                                      | Parents                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Acquisition of good results and awarded       | Results and scholarships                      |
| scholarships                                  | Social and economic promoter of children and |
|                                               | family                                       |
| Skills and Ability                            | Confirmation of source of                    |
|                                               | earnings and societal recognition            |
| Values and Attitudes                          | Knowledge and Values                          |
|                                               | Agent of promotion for social                |
|                                               | status and capability of doing jobs          |

In perceiving good results and scholarships, teachers considered success and reputation of schools and teachers, whereas parents took into account the social and economic status of children and the family. Teachers were focused on schools, whereas parents were centred on children and family in conceiving the notion of the quality of education.

In perceiving second dimension (skill and ability by teachers, and life skills by parents), teachers were centred to the notion of making learners skilful for securing sources of living and promotion of societal recognition where parents viewed it as a tool of engaging in jobs that confirmed the means of living and
thereby their well-being. Finally, values and attitudes were perceived as a dimension of education quality by teachers in the cultural and religious context of the community. Similarly, parents viewed knowledge and values to represent education quality and they considered this to be an agent of status promotion and learner capability. Both teachers and parents put ‘values education’ at the centre of education quality. Figure 1 shows the synthesis of these two parties’ views for presenting the overarching thoughts. Skills and ability, and life skills are similar in nature and transformed into a conception – skills for enabling learners. Similarly, values and attitudes, and knowledge and values are combined in values and attitudes, since both concepts carry almost the same merit. The other conception: good results and scholarships are kept the same, because both concepts are alike.

The integration of the two results portrayed three types of understandings connected to education quality as shown in Figure 2. These included good results and scholarships, skills for enabling learners, and values and attitudes.

Figure 2. Understanding Education Quality

However, the perspectives of teachers and parents were different in conceiving these ideas of education quality. According to teachers, acquisition of good results and awarded scholarships indicated good performance on the part of a student. This was also related to the performance of teachers and schools. It also confirmed the reputation and success of the schools and teachers. Knowledge and
skill acquired by children is the vehicle of ensuring income sources that can enhance societal status. Of course, achieving knowledge and skills depends on the children’s performance. Students’ values and attitudes is the performance indicator related to the promotion of social networking however, the cultural context is also involved. Therefore, in perceiving these concepts of education quality, the perspective considered by the teachers are teacher and school performance, student performance, performance in the formation of social networking (social capital) and also the cultural context of the community. Therefore, it can be seen that the perspectives they considered are included in the notion of “Performance”. That means, the perspective conceived by the teachers in viewing these concepts of education quality is based on the “Performance” culture.

Similarly, parents viewed good results and scholarships acquired by students from a perspective enhances the social and economic status of family and children. That promotes the well-being of children and the family. Life skills are the main tools for good job performance, and therefore for their well-being. Knowledge and values achieved by children is the agent of the promotion of social status and job capability. Children’s well-being is the ultimate target of these promotions. This is the underlying perspective considered here by the parents. Therefore, according to the parents, there are many perspectives behind these concepts of education quality. However, it shows that children’s well-being is in the centre of these perspectives. This indicates that parent’s perspectives in conceiving the notion of education are in the orbit of “Well-being”. Thus, it can be said that rural parent’s perspectives are based on the culture of “Well-being”. Parents are more concerned with their children’s well-being than with other perspectives. It is true that both teachers and parents consider the performance of both the students and the school and included students’ and the family’s well-being in conceiving these ideas regarding education quality. However, the degree of their emphasis on these perspectives was different. Therefore, the concepts (integrated) of education quality carry the “Whole” culture, i.e., the culture of “Performance”, as well as the culture of “Well-being”.

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers identified two dimensions of education quality in primary schools: academic achievements and functional education. In other words, children will achieve academic success, along with the skills and values necessary for living in society. Teachers put the reputation and success both of schools and teachers in the centre of their consideration to view academic results as a dimension of education quality. Teachers are also keen to provide the type of education that will improve the students’ skills and abilities beyond what is to be expected from their economic and societal position. From the cultural and religious context of
the community, teachers viewed that children’s development of the values and attitudes help them in the creation of positive social networking. In conclusion, it is evident that teachers understanding of quality education include three dimensions: acquisition of good academic results and awarded scholarships, skills and capabilities necessary for living, and healthy values and attitudes. One group of rural teachers perceived academic results to be the key concept of quality education in primary schools. They viewed academic achievement as essential to further study, and therefore saw this as the principal end product of primary education. In contrast, other teachers viewed children’s skills and ability in job performance to be a dimension of education quality. The teachers expressed these from the parents’ perspective and according to their own understandings and subjective experiences as they conceived from the society. Therefore, they understand quality education as not just acquiring good academic results in the examination; children need to achieve some kinds of skills and abilities that make them capable of performing in their jobs. That not only improves earning potential but also helps to ensure societal support for learning and recognition of the importance of learners in the community’s future life. Quality education generally helps improve the learner’s economic position; and in turn, earns the learner a better social position and recognition. Teachers’ another understanding of education quality is acquisition of values and attitudes regarded as human qualities. Education will not be complete without the development of the values and attitudes of children. Teachers also identify as reflection of quality education, acquisition of values and attitudes necessary in the character of the human condition. They see education as incomplete if it fails to help develop such values and attitudes in children. They view primary education as instilling key human qualities in children’s minds. Later, children grow up with these qualities that make them respected and contributing human being (Manus in Bengali).

Parents, being key stakeholders in children’s education, perceive two types of achievements as indicators of quality education in primary schools: academic achievements and the acquisition of human values or qualities. Parents expect that a primary graduate will achieve these two outcomes from their learning. Research showed that parents’ embrace three dimensions related to quality education: academic results and scholarships, development of knowledge and values, and acquisition of life skills. Parents considered academic achievements to be one of the dimensions of education quality from the perspective of the societal and economic status of children and their families. The development of knowledge and values is seen as enhancing social recognition and the ability to secure profitable work. The acquisition of life skills is viewed as necessary for doing well in jobs.

According to perceptions of both teachers and parents, this research concludes that there are three kinds of understandings in respect of primary education quality. These are: 1) achievements in academic results and awarded scholarships, 2) children’s skills, and 3) acquisition of human qualities. These dimensions of
education quality are viewed from different perspectives. They are not restricted to the area embraced by school boundaries. The effects and spheres of education quality are exhibited in family, community, job markets, society and beyond. Rural poor parents are concerned with the type of education that makes children capable of performing well in their jobs, in order to secure a means of living in society. On the other hand, rich parents are concerned that children achieve a high academic standard to that they can go on to higher education. Culturally, both teachers and parents perceived human qualities as one of the dimensions of quality education. They would be dismayed if academic results were the sole criteria for quality education regardless of the human qualities of the child. According to them, education is not complete without the development of good human qualities.

This study confirms that both teachers’ and parents’ perceptions regarding the quality of primary education are almost the same, however their perceptions are different. It would seem logical that their perception would be more or less the same, since they are living in the same locality. Nonetheless, the perspectives should also be different due to their professional point of view and their differing roles in child education.

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