Role Perceptions And Responsibilities In Children's Early Childhood Education: A Case Study Of Indian Migrants In Melbourne

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This qualitative case study explores Indian migrant parents' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities in relation to their children's early year education (ECE) in Australia. The study involves face to face in-depth interviews with a small sample of six parents who had migrated to Australia not more than five years ago and had children attending an Australian ECE. We explored their participation in their children's education, the factors that prevented or facilitated their engagement, including how they perceived their parental roles and responsibilities. A framework analysis of the data points to limited participation of the parents in their children's education in spite of several opportunities for involvement as they felt that their children's teachers had more power than them. In addition, the parents were not quite happy with the schools regarding behaviour management strategies the teachers employed for reducing children's misbehaviour. Based on the findings we argue for early childhood teachers to build effective partnerships between migrant parents and promote effective education for all children.

KEYWORDS: Role Perception, Indian Migrants, Early Childhood Education.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional thinking about child development and learning, positions the child at the centre of the world and removes the child from the cultural environment that influences their learning (Agbenyega, 2008; Fleer, 2006). Now the focus is shifting towards understanding the relationship and influence of the child's

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environment outside the school on their development. Christian (2006) argues that children do not appear from nowhere, land in our classrooms, and merely disappear at the end of the day, clearly emphasising the influence of the home environment on school. This broad understanding inspires early childhood teachers to involve parents in their child's educational trajectories. Epstein (1995) considers teachers as the key facilitators for initiating interaction between families and the school. This implies that designing an optimal pedagogical system based on their cultural elements catering to the developmental needs of the whole child should be the goal of a professional early childhood teacher.

Many researchers, educators and philosophers have expanded on the unique contribution, significance and role parents play in their children's education (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Fan & Chen, 2001; Garcia & Hasson, 2004; Hartas, 2008; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Jeynes, 2003; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Pomerantz, Grolnick & Price, 2005). Some other studies have predominantly focused on investigating parental involvement in the field of early childhood education (ECE) (Barnard, 2004; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Castro, Bryant, Peisner- Feinberg & Skinner, 2004; Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Krieder & Simpkins, 2004; Fantuzzo, Tighe, McWayne, Davis, & Childs, 2003; McWayne, Campos & Owsianik, 2008; Morrison, 2007). The Parent Teacher Association of Connecticut (2008) identifies "Parent involvement as the participation of parents in every facet of children's education and development from birth to adulthood, recognizing that parents are the primary influence in their children's lives" (n. p). Building upon the above ideas, we recognise parental involvement as a continuous participation of parents in their children's holistic learning, linking cultural experiences to every facet of the child's learning.

Research indicates that involving parents in their children's learning enhances children's meaning making processes (Husu & Tirri, 2001) as parents' involvement highlights importance on performance and offers prompt intervention due to detailed developmental information (Domina, 2005). By involving parents, teachers can exercise more culturally appropriate educational services (Waanders, Mandez & Downer, 2007) as their knowledge of their students' cultural context is enhanced. Research reviewed by Seitsinger, Felner, Brand and Burns (2008) also confirms that positive parent-teacher association results in creating encouraging spaces for children. Further, when parents get involved, they depict school as valuable, which reflects in children's perception of school as a valuable institution (Domina, 2005; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Most importantly, parental involvement in a child's early education not only boosts the child's academic achievement and cognitive abilities but also helps develop social and emotional strengths (Lynch, Anderson, Anderson & Shapiro, 2006) as teachers are able to effectively

communicate their strategies, plans and curriculum offering opportunities to enhance home and school based learning. Increased participation of parents also improves the child's academic self-confidence (Edwards, 2003; Hung, 2005) and has a positive impact on their later school achievement (McBride, Justin Dyer, Liu, Brown & Hong, 2009).

However, research indicates that forming purposeful and successful partnerships in ECE between parents and teachers has been complicated (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; Ihmeideh, Khasawneh, Mahfouz & Khawaldeh, 2008) due to contrasting views and power relations. Further, teachers' lack of understanding about a traditional family could reduce the family's possibilities of getting involved in their child's education (Huss-Keeler, 1997). Most importantly, additional fresh challenges are identified by migrant families while getting involved in their child's education and understanding these difficulties is critical. For instance, subjective nature of the respective views of host countries (Billman, Geddes & Hedges, 2005), different perceptions about pedagogy and curriculum by migrants (Sharpe, 1991), stress related issues with regard to migration (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999) such as process of migration (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001), low income (Green & Hoover- Dempsey, 2007; Hung 2005, Huss- Keeler, 1997), available time (Cuckle, 1996), cultural differences and linguistic barriers (Ali, 2008) may create barriers to effective engagement with children of immigrant families in ECE. In filling some of these gaps, this study aims to explore the intercultural experiences of Indian migrant parents regarding their roles and responsibilities in their children's ECE.

The Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2008) reports that in the year 2008, 16 % of the total skilled migrant population came only from India. Therefore, this study provides insight into migrant parents' experiences in adapting and defining their roles, in regard to their children's ECE in Australia. This study intends to combine the challenges of parental involvement and migration, exploring the fresh struggles experienced in defining their roles and responsibilities of Indian migrant parents while making sense of their children's ECE in Melbourne, Australian. The study is situated on the premise that when Indian parents migrate to Australia their definition of parental involvement and role may experience significant shift with respect to their perception of Australian norms and practices because they are new to the Australian school system. This transition may impact on their interaction with the teachers and school significantly.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA AND IN INDIA

Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Australia is regulated in terms of licensing, quality, research, care, education and monitoring by many responsible organisations. Early Childhood Australia (2009) is an important

body dedicated to the needs and welfare of children in Australia (Farell, 2007). As Early Childhood Australia constantly updates its research, quality, ethics, professionalism and services for children in tune with the current trends professionals in the field of ECE and parents are always in constant transformation to cope with new ideas, policies and programs. For example, with the growing concerns of globalisation and sustainability, ECE professionals in Australia accept responsibility to work ethically with children and families (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; 2002). This principle of ethical practice is based on valuing and listening to all parents, including migrant families, to build a strong relation that respects the uniqueness of every family (Early Childhood Australia, 2006). The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, a national framework practiced and implemented in all early childhood settings in Australia (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2010) also "recognises culture and the context of family as central to children's sense of being and belonging and to success in lifelong learning", this is reflected in their curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (DEEWR, 2010).

Kaul's research (1992, cited in Joshi & Taylor, 2005) reveals that the quality, licensing, control and monitoring of ECE programs in India are inconsistent. This suggests that there is little government involvement in assessing the quality, practices, teachers' qualifications and regulations in the preschool sector. The lack of regulations and quality control procedures has resulted in a proliferation of preschools in all sorts of spaces such as neighbourhood houses, garages or compounds. In addition, the early childhood experience of Indian children has a bearing on future education, and is not age specific or appropriate (Anandalakshmy, 1998, cited in Joshi & Taylor, 2005). Indian parents consider ECE as a scheme for success in later years, which is rooted in their cultural expectations (Joshi & Taylor, 2005). The Indian education system worships the textbook and considers it as a symbol of sacred knowledge (Kumar, 2005). Students cannot contradict, argue or differ in their views in comparison to their textbooks. They are expected to memorise and reproduce the same concepts as per the text. Similarly, teachers follow a fixed academic based curriculum and frequently resort to top-down instructional strategies (Jambunathan & Caufield, 2008).

These are important considerations, as Indian parents who have experienced this system prior to migrating to Australia are likely to face a daunting task in adjusting to the new system. The Indian parents who migrate to Australia maybe connected, linked and attached to these approaches in the Indian education system where children at a young age learn by rote compared to the Australian situation where there is emphasis on active involvement of children and their parents.

METHOD AND DESIGN

This study is positioned in a Cultural Historical (CH) framework as proposed by Vygotsky (1978) to understand Indian migrant parents' experiences in their children's ECE in Australia. CH theory provides a new lens of cultural sensitivity and historical knowledge that offers professionals and parents possibilities to participate in pedagogies that recognise the influence of the child's culturally symbolic meaning making on their development (Roth & Lee, 2007). Fleer and Richardson (2009) also state that "in cultural historical approaches to teaching and learning, we foreground the notion that learning is more than an individual construction - meaning occurs in the context of participation in the real world" (p. 133). Consequently, valuing Indian migrant parents' perspective will result in collaborative practices as they hold valuable information about the child and their involvement will help teachers tap this information, as children view the world through their interactions and experiences at home and at the early childhood setting (Elliott, 2005).

This qualitative case study sought to investigate in-depth description and detailed understanding of participants' experiences (Litchman, 2006) of their child's ECE in Australia. Qualitative research is a set of interpretive activities which neither privileges any single methodological practice over another nor has a distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This understanding located this study in an interpretive framework that facilitated negotiating insider accounts in order to understand the motives, beliefs, desires and thoughts that influence behaviour characteristics (Schwandt, 2000). The interpretivist epistemology (Creswell, 2003) for this study focused on Indian migrant parents' views of their children's ECE, particularly emphasising on the structure, approach, pedagogy and curriculum implemented in Australia. Qualitative case study analysis facilitated reflexivity in the study, deepening the interpretation process. We chose a case study approach as it has the power to be bounded, unique, contextual, interactive, reflective and descriptive (Stake, 2005). We examine the opinions and perceptions of six individual Indian migrant parents through interviews as one case.

DATA COLLECTION

The participants were approached in an Indian community forum. Indian migrant parents who have been in Australia for not more than five years were selected. This purposeful selection (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) was important, as it ensured the participants continued to experience the fresh challenges and adjustment issues presented by living in a new country. Single parents' and those who did not have children in early childhood were excluded to maintain uniformity. The final sample consisted of six Indian migrant

parents (three set of partners: three mothers and three fathers). To preserve the anonymity of the participants, codes such as PAT 1, PAT 2, PAT 3, PAT 4, PAT 5 and PAT 6 are used to refer to the parents who participated in the study. All the interviews were conducted in participants' home at the time of their convenience, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were taped to preserve the sequence of talks with the participants, so that they could be replayed (Silverman, 2001). The participants were asked to:

- describe their participation in their child's ECE in Australia;

- discuss factors that prevent or facilitate their engagement in their child's school; and

- describe how they perceive their role in their child's education.

A high quality digital voice recorder was used to record the proceedings, which ensured quality of sound. The purpose of conducting in-depth interviews with the participants was to hear their experiences in their own voice, words, language and narrative (Litchman, 2006) ensuring quality, reliability and validity of interview data (Punch, 1998).

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was initiated with transcription of data from the digital voice recorder. After transcribing the tapes, data was organised to "identify, analyse and report patterns within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). We then used the framework analysis processes for our analysis to familiarise, identify themes, index or code, and create charts to map and interpret the themes (Ritchie & Spencer, 1993, cited in Agbenyega, 2005).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nature of Participation

Drawing on the findings it can be deduced that the Indian migrant parents who participated in the study have conflicting perceptions of their roles. Some participants clearly defined their roles, while others seemed to be facing difficulty and adjustment issues in defining their roles.

I play a very important role. If I do not show interest in teaching her, she will say education is not that important. She will only learn what she can, when she is at school. (PAT 1)... *extremely important or equally important as her father; because I am the mother, my child relies on me and her dad as role models* (PAT 4).

The views expressed by parents demonstrate that children should be viewed as social beings, whose development occurs through interaction with the social cultural practices (Rogoff, 2003) and learning as an "interrelated

system involving the parent, family and community" (Prior & Gerard, 2007, p. 8). Children's development is influenced by constructive engagement, particularly when parents show interest and interact with cultural members of the school. Rogoff (2003) posits that the individual everyday learning opportunities and developments are linked, attached and inherently involved with the historical developments of the species, and cultural communities. Consequently, children's learning involves cultural historical experiences of their parents and teachers, and interactions with them produce new definitions and concepts within the child, offering possibilities of holistic development.

However, detailed analysis of participants' perceptions, especially the fathers of their roles and responsibilities highlights that some of the Indian migrant parents do not recognise ECE as important in their children's learning processes. This limits and influences their participation and involvement in their child's ECE.

As of now not much, it is her mother's department. I will have to play a role model and teacher in my child's later stage, my child has just started. (PAT 5)…my role is nothing. Her mother is responsible for everything. I do not want to get involved at all in her education. Education is her mother's department, maybe in future (PAT 2).

In contrast, only one father recognised the importance of his involvement in children's ECE.

I will try my best to fill in the part which is left in my child's education. Try and educate her from my end, teach her what is right and wrong that includes punishment (PAT 3).

Factors limiting involvement by Indian fathers' in their children's education can be traced to their continued attachment to their traditional conception of child rearing, education and responsibility. In India, fathers are perceived as strong, independent and outgoing who solely undertakes the responsibility of earning bread while, mothers are considered to be more homely and sensitive. This gender hierarchy is evident from a study by Kakar (1978, cited in, Joshi & Taylor, 2005) which suggests that in India males are considered superior to females. Hence, educating a young child becomes a mother's responsibility. Second, is the concept of tuition in India: time and attention are given to students by professional teachers or educators to increase or meet student's potential and to prepare young children for school. In exchange parents pay huge sums of money to tutors, and mothers are responsible for assigning tutors for their children.

In Australia parents are encouraged to get more involved in their children's education as illustrated by the Early Childhood Australia (2006). The principle of ethical practice is based on valuing and listening to all parents, including migrant families, to build a strong relation that respects the uniqueness of

every family (Early Childhood Australia, 2006). The code of ethics also highlights the importance of social contexts in a child's acquisition of knowledge (Early Childhood Australia, 2006). This becomes a new learning challenge for the parents. The findings show that Indian migrant parents are offered several opportunities to get involved, and those who yield to these opportunities feel appreciated and valued. Participants also accepted full responsibility of their child. There was no blame directed towards the system, school or teacher.

Now I have changed the approach seeing that, that is what it is and it makes sense. I try to be spontaneous with my child as well. If my child is missing out on something than probably we would be the one who needs to be blamed. So the school or I cannot blame school for it, if my child misses out on something. (PAT 6)...In India there is a culture where children go to tuitions or classes. But here I would sit with her and her homework. Teach her if she does not understand, make her sit and understand (PAT 1).

The findings indicated that several opportunities exist for Indian migrant parents to interact and participate in their children's school, for example in teacher-parent meetings, mother's day celebrations, volunteer programs, and school events. Involvement is also made possible through updates and fortnightly newsletters, and journals outlining information about the school's curriculum and planned pedagogy for the children. Festivals and celebrations in particular offered additional chances for them to get involved in baking, organising a lolly shop, stalls or counters for children. The majority of the participants mentioned that this interaction significantly connected their involvement to their child's school during their interactions before and after school. This interaction seems an initial step towards developing "authentic partnership" (Wolfendale, 1985) between the teachers and Indian migrant parents in sharing their knowledge, and answering queries and doubts.

The teachers in the morning invite us to come more in the class and look at what our kid have done. Walk around and see what all they have done. What they are up to. (PAT 6)...They are really happy to listen to what I want to say. (PAT 3)...*They always communicate over the phone whenever I have called rather than telling us that they are teaching right now and we cannot take the phone. If they are in an outdoor activity, they have always called in the next half an hour* (PAT 4).

The findings also show that further opportunities exist for participation in children's exercise class activities often referred to as PNP and also for teaching in prep year.

PNP class is an exercise class and any parent who is free is happy to participate. There are 4 different stations. So there are around 3 children on each station. I have to take care of one station. They do an exercise on each station and go ahead (PAT 3)...the opportunities that they give us at every event facilitate our engagement (PAT 6)…here is a lot of space for personal involvement and participation (PAT 4)….they have a very

transparent system. The interaction regarding our child is very comfortable (PAT 5).

These findings are consistent with Wanders, Mandez & Downer's (2007) findings, that a majority of early childhood teachers in Australia appear to recognise the importance of parental involvement in children's learning, including awareness of the multicultural representations in their classrooms. Further, Fleer and Hedegaard (2010) assert that child's development is linked to activities and engagement within their cultural community. Hedegaard (2009) recognises three important institutions that influence a child's development: societal, institutional and personal arguing that friction is caused when a child's development deviates from the expected normal development acceptable by the cultural community. She articulates that "the societal perspective depicts the conditions for institutional practice as political material conditions, cultural traditions and values; the institutional practices depicts family, kindergarten, school, church and places within society having their own rules and traditions and finally the person's perspective is reflected in child's activities in different institutions" (as quoted in Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010, p.152). Thus understanding child's transition across and within these institutions is significant as it may offer opportunities for conflict. In this study, representing Indian migrant parents' problems helps link and understand their participation in these significant institutions in their child's development.

Barriers to Participation

In spite of these opportunities, it was observed that the majority of the Indian migrant parents' involvement in their children's ECE was limited. This limitation is inherent in the ways participants consider themselves somewhat powerless to influence decisions in the schools. The notion that they lack the power and agency to contribute to decision making, stem from the cultural attitudes and practices in India which regard teachers as the overall bosses that have final decisions regarding children's learning. In consequence, Indian migrant parents may be experiencing adjustment issues. This is likely to affect the link between school and home based learning.

There is no link between school and home learning… completely different. (PAT 1)…*it goes hand in hand. It is important to have coordination with the teacher because ultimately it is the child who is going to suffer, if we have a conflict. Then there will be a lot of problem. However, the school teacher has more power but not at home. I will have to allow her what the teacher does at school but once she comes home, it is my responsibility* (PAT 3)...*in case of difference in opinion regarding my child the teacher has an upper hand.* (PAT 2)... *teachers do not know what activities we do at home* (PAT 4)…*my child's class teacher has got a lot of power* (PAT 6).

These findings are consistent with Turner and Kao's research (2009) that shows that migrant parents become less involved in their children's education when they feel powerless and undervalued. Further, challenges that prevented

Indian migrant parents from participation were recognised as the cultural barriers, process of migration and self-confidence. Low self-confidence in the new environment may be due to the parents' feeling as an outsider. Most importantly, it was noted that one parent attempted to over participate in their child's education just to avoid criticism being an Indian.

They feel that we are inferior and they do what they want to do. They feel Bloody Indians. They don't appreciate us. It is like they neglect us. (PAT 2)...*We have just moved to Melbourne and I want my child to settle down. She will realise things as she will grow up* (PAT 3)... *I do not want my child to feel that she is an Indian and be left out. So I try to do more. I try to participate or do volunteer work as much as I can. Just to make sure that my child is not left out. At times I feel that but that is kind of inhibition that comes to me* (PAT 6).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study only reflect the experiences of six migrant participants in Melbourne. Since the participants were not selected randomly, to generalise the findings of the current study to other Indian migrant parents is not possible. This study is just an initiative to understand the experiences of these Indian migrant parents in their children's ECE in Australia. As the population of Indian migrants in Australia is increasing (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008) there is a need to conduct similar studies linking and exploring the perceptions and experiences on a larger sample and scale.

CONCLUSIONS

The issue that surrounds how Indian migrants in this study are involved in their children's education indicate problems with purposeful partnerships. Limited communication between parents and teachers can lead to unspoken perceptions and expectations which may further lead to misunderstanding and disappointment (Prior & Gerard, 2007). This seems to limit Indian migrant parents' involvement and full participation in their children's education. Differences of opinions between teachers and parents concerning the child are inevitable (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999). However, these should form the basis for creating a platform that respects differences and helps in deriving a mutually accepted pedagogy, which benefits the child emotionally, mentally and physically. Together, parents and teachers should create a platform for each other where they can be heard and where they can speak without any judgments or apprehensions. This collaboration creates a harmonious environment where teachers can draw on parental knowledge about the child's construction of knowledge and Indian migrant parents can be an active part of their children's learning.

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