

Listening to Parents' Voices: Methodological Concerns

Abstract

This article documents the challenges experienced in exploring the perceptions of quality education held by parents from different backgrounds. My respondents were parents (mostly mothers) of children studying in very different kinds of schools, namely a state government school, a central government school, a low fee charging private school and a high fee charging private school. The process of conducting interviews made me aware of some important considerations that make the voices of the parents from different backgrounds more accessible. I also realised the importance of language, transcription and translation in research methodologies and how these decisions taken in context of this specific research helped in bringing out authentic voices.

Introduction

Children are the most important stakeholders of their education in school as it is their future that is at stake. However, it is their parents who take one of the most important decisions i.e. school selection. This selection has far-reaching implications, especially in a country which offers a variety of public and private stratified schools to choose from. In India, the type of school a child is able to access is dependent on her/his socio-economic background. The poorest go to government schools providing free education and the economically well off to high fee-charging private schools. Even within government and private schools there are various layers of hierarchy. Though there are wide variety of schools available the parents often have a very limited number of schools to choose from as their choice is constrained by their socio-economic status. Thus, even though school selection is indicative of their perception of quality education, it may not be directly related to it, as their perception would not be constrained by the same factors that work upon the actual choice. In this

research study, an attempt has been made to bring out parents' voices on the burning question of what is quality education.

This paper is based on the research work undertaken towards the completion of my doctoral thesis. The paper has been divided into four sections. The first section talks about the research study; its objectives and methodological framework. The second section describes the site and process of sample selection. The third section talks about the process of data collection and the fourth section about the challenges faced and how they were resolved.

Section I

Research Objectives and the Methodological Framework

Objectives of the Study

With parents situated in multiple social locations and schools offering differential services, the notion of quality education is equally varied. Thus, the research was

undertaken with the objective to understand parental perceptions of desirable education for their children. The specific objectives of the doctoral research are:

- To unfold the meaning of quality as understood in different policy documents and academic discourse and the way it has evolved especially in the Indian context.
- To understand the perceptions of parents situated in different socio economic contexts and availing different types of schools, about quality in education
- To examine the elements, which constitute quality education according to stakeholders other than the parents i.e., school principal, management and teachers in those schools.
- To examine the relationship between parental perceptions of quality and its meaning as reflected in the educational discourse.

The objectives and data sources of the study are much wider than the scope of this paper. However, this paper is drawn from the research segment focussing on parents.

Methodological Framework

This is a qualitative study undertaken within the interpretative tradition. Interpretative studies attempt to seek the subjective meaning that people create of things, ideas and phenomenon like in this case quality education (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991). It is this meaning of quality education for the parents that the study attempts to unearth. The topic of research required explicitly asking parents their perceptions of quality education, the reasons for the school selected and whether their expectations were being fulfilled. The responses from parents then had to be situated and interpreted in the light of their socio-economic background and life experiences - their aspirations, education, occupational choices and expectations from school for their children.

In the Indian context, there are very few studies on parental perceptions and none

that try to understand what is desirable in education for the parents and whether 'quality' is a concern for them while selecting a school. This study thus tries to examine the hitherto unexplored area. To explain the notion of quality education from the data, the 'grounded theory' was applied and it offered useful insights.

Grounded theory is a methodological strategy to formulate a theory that can explain a phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is parental perception of quality education, the process of school selection and how they are related. The demands of the study required navigating through qualitative data and culling out themes and categories, which would help formulate a theory to explain this phenomenon. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967)

The study, as the title indicates, is about listening to the parents and making sense of their perceptions. Rather than framing a specific hypothesis the study commenced with some broad questions:

- What are the concerns of parents while selecting a school?
- Is quality education among these concerns?
- What do parents of school-going children, understand by quality?

Selection of Tools

The study required seeking parental opinion and thus the available choices for tools for data collection were questionnaires and interviews (structured, semi-structured and unstructured). Semi-structured interview was considered the most appropriate for the following reasons:

1. The sample of the study included parents from diverse backgrounds. For parents from very poor backgrounds, the literacy levels were likely to be low, and thus a questionnaire would not be suitable.
2. Given my own nature and disposition, I find it easy to establish rapport with people and in this case, I used it to my advantage, i.e. to solicit responses from

parents.

3. Semi-structured interview provides freedom to pursue unanticipated strands in contrast to a more structured interview format and yet helps maintain a fluid structure or focus during the interaction.
4. I was interviewing parents who had made the decision of school selection 5-8 years back. The conversation was aimed at invoking their memory. This would have been only possible in a conversation carried on for some sustained period of time. A very short and rigidly structured interaction would not have been able to achieve this as parents initially put forward socially desirable responses. As more time was spent with them, their level of comfort increased and a more complex picture emerged. Relaxed environment also revived buried memories, in many cases adding to the richness of the data.

Semi-structured interview however posed its own challenges. They were time-consuming and the responses, being free-floating and unstructured in nature, were difficult to collate. However, since the advantages outweighed the disadvantages, semi-structured interview was chosen.

To ensure authenticity of response it was important that the interaction 'encourage respondents to develop their own ideas, feelings, insights, expectations or attitudes and express these with greater richness and spontaneity' (Oppenheim, 1992:81 quoted from Opie, 2004).

The schedule used to guide the interviews with parents had four parts. The first part explored the educational background and experiences of the parents, the second part was about the reasons and process of school selection, the third part was largely about their ideas of quality education and the fourth part tried to understand their perceptions of the school that they had chosen. The schedule was informed by the literature review and prior knowledge about quality education and aspects that could influence parental perceptions. Parents' life experiences, their aspirations and

dreams for themselves and their children, conversations with near and dear ones, with teachers, media, etc. are some of the factors that may influence their perceptions about quality education. Similarly the factors that were included to understand their notions of quality education were textbooks, exam results, infrastructure, medium of instruction, teachers, inclusion, leadership, extra curricular activities etc.

It was decided to audio-record the interview with the permission of the parent so that no details of the interaction were missed. After considering both the advantages (objectivity, preserving the natural language, avoiding loss of data during note taking and having access to original data later on) and the disadvantages (too much data, time-consuming transcription and recorder effect) (Opie, 2004, pp:121), I realised that for this study the advantages of audio-recording outweighed the disadvantages.

It is important to mention here that the presence of the recorder during the interview initially made the respondents uncomfortable. All the respondents were assured that the audio recording was only for the research study and would not be shared with the school, government or the media, as these were the common concerns. Most parents, after some time, became sufficiently comfortable with the recorder for the interview to progress.

In addition to the interviews; a field diary was maintained. Every day after the field visit, notes of the observations from the field were written down. This would help build the rich context of the school and home setting and situate the interviews in the context. The fact that the field diary was written after many hours needs to be acknowledged here.

Section II

Selection of Site and Sample

The site for data collection was Udaipur city, in the state of Rajasthan, India. Udaipur is a small city in southwest Rajasthan.

The selection of Udaipur was a pragmatic decision as I am based in Udaipur and have

spent many years working with schools and education departments in the city.

Selection of Schools

To make the sample diverse and bring in different perspectives, schools catering to populations from varied socio-economic background were selected i.e. a government school run by the state of Rajasthan, a government school run by the central government, a low fee-charging private school and a high fee-charging private school.

To select the private schools (both low and high fee charging) basic data was sought from four low fee charging and six high fee-charging schools.¹ It was as follows:

- Fee charged from a Class 5 student
- Total number of students in the school
- Whether the school had a nursery section
- Infrastructure: whether playground and library were available in the school?
- Total number of teachers in the school
- The senior most class in the school

There was a lot of variation in the schools on these parameters. The low fee charging school, which was selected on the basis of this data charged the lowest fees amongst these. The total number of students and teachers in it were less than only one school. Besides this was the only school, which went up to Class X whereas all the others were only till VIII. Like most other low fee charging schools this school also did not have a library or a playground. It was built on a residential plot and the residence of the director was also in the same building. The school was selected as even in such a constrained set-up the school attracts around 400 students, making it look like a popular choice among parents.

¹ These parameters helped in understanding the character of the school. It is often seen that low fee charging schools compromise on teachers and infrastructure to make education affordable, so this was considered an important parameter to look for. Number of students enrolled in the school was also considered important as schools with very few students often become more like tuition centres and do not function in a school like manner.

In the high fee-charging category, all the schools had the basic infrastructural requirements (like nursery, playground, library, etc.). Here also, there was high variation in other parameters like the number of students, teachers, fees, etc.

In choosing the high fee charging school, I had to make a compromise; the school initially chosen had the highest fees, highest number of teachers, second highest number of students, the best infrastructure amongst the schools and had a perceptible 'brand value' in the city. Gaining permission or even getting to meet the principal proved to be a difficult task. Even after many phone calls and visits to the school, I could not meet the principal and after two months of struggle, I decided to look for other schools. The second school I approached had equally impressive infrastructure and the fee was almost as high as the first school. In this school, an acquaintance was able to refer me to the principal and eased the initial interaction process. The principal here was very receptive and also introduced me to the other staff members who could help if needed.

State government schools and low fee charging schools both cater to poor children who live in the vicinity of the school². Therefore, if the government school and low fee charging schools are in the same neighbourhood they compete for children from the same population. And strategically it seemed to be a good idea to select these two schools in the same locality. There was only one government school available in this *basti*³, which was selected by default.⁴

There are only two Central Schools
² Many low fee charging schools provide transport and are thus able to attract children from other near-by bastis too. For example the selected school had two vans, which ply more than once in the morning and afternoon to collect and drop children. This is a chargeable service to the parents.
³ Basti: a slum like settlement
⁴ Fortunately, I knew the school heads of both the government and a private school in this basti. This was important as often getting permission to collect data poses a serious challenge.

(Kendriya Vidyalaya) in the city of Udaipur and both cater to children from all over the city. Thus, one of these two schools was selected on a random basis.

Selection of Parents

A total of 57 children's (23 girls, 34 boys) parents were interviewed across all schools. It was decided to include parents of children from Classes 1 and 5. Class 1 is the entry-level class in government schools but not in private schools. For consistency class 1 was included from all the four schools. Class 5 marks the end of primary school. At this point parents consider whether to continue or change the school. Therefore, this milestone class acts as a point of transition. It seemed appropriate to interact with parents of children from both these classes about how they select schools and what is it they are looking for. To select the parents, each school was contacted and the list of all the students in Classes 1 and 5 taken from them. Then, from each class, 10 students were randomly selected using the website www.random.org. The website explains that they use atmospheric noise instead of a mathematical formula to get the random numbers. Therefore, they claim that the numbers are generated in an unpredictable fashion and are really random. It was verified later that this random selection gave a more or less representative sample.

Section III

Process of Data Collection

Data collection requires both consent and co-operation from the respondents. Several factors contribute towards initiating and maintaining this co-operation. This includes how the researcher presents herself, how the context of the research, relevant details and process of data collection is communicated to the participants so that they can decide whether to participate or not. Keeping this in mind all the interactions were initiated by explaining the purpose of the research and

informing them that the interview would be audio-recorded.

Another important aspect of obtaining consent and establishing rapport is to build confidence in the participants that the information provided by them will not be misused. The research involved personal questions about them and their families. It also included questions probing the extent of their schooling and the reasons for not being able to continue which could make the respondent feel small or uncomfortable. Thus, building confidence and a relation of mutual respect was important.

Personal Journey of Conducting Interviews

Interviewing is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it and yet behind each closed door there is a world of secret.

Ann Oakley, 1981

In an interview set-up both sides assess and affect each other. Since interview is an intense face-to-face interaction between an interviewer and interviewee the emotional impact both have on each other is also profound. It is often pointed out how the interviewer may affect the interviewee and thus what the researcher should say or not say, how they should behave etc. However the analysis of how the interviewer is affected is not there to the same extent. Glass and Frankiel (1968) talk about the other side of the story i.e. influences that the subjects have on the researcher, their involvement in the situation, emotional engagement, etc. Another aspect of it is how the field situation affects the researcher. As a human being one is liable to get affected by the prevalent value systems. One such example was noticed when the prevalent stereotypical image of the kalbeliya⁵ community influenced me and I started acting in accordance to the bias and fear that was shared by the other residents of the *basti*. The other common phenomenon is the bond of emotion or frame of mind formed

5 Kalbeliya: a tribal community

between the interviewer and the interviewee. For example when a child's father said in a very desperate manner that there is 'some paranormal influence here and as a result no child of mine is able to study'. The researcher was able to empathise with this and felt a tug of extreme emotion and in such moments detached interest is not possible.

Almost all the interviews were conducted at the respondents' residence. This gave me an opportunity to understand the context of the respondent and make sense of the responses embedded in the context.

However, residential setting also implied that other people could join the interviews and if the interview happened to be in the open space outside the home then the possible participants in the interview increased even more. The students themselves, their siblings, neighbours, friends and extended family members all became part of the interaction. This led to some interviews becoming very long, with conversations on topics very far from the present concern and sometimes like group discussions. For example, interview of an aunt (who is the primary caregiver for her sister's children) also included her parents. Both the grandparents were happy to have a sympathetic and patient listener and kept on diverting the interview to discuss their current concerns, stories of olden times and political commentaries. While these other voices have made the data richer but polite management was essential as it sometimes led to the parents being unable to voice their opinion. This was done by bringing the focus back gently to the topic and by ensuring that the parent or the guardian got enough scope to articulate.

Each interview is a site where a unique relationship is formed. It is difficult to pinpoint what leads to this but as I reflect back some important factors were, the personalities of interviewer and interviewee, presence of other people, scope to take interest in other aspects of life (like their children, imminent delivery, an interest or hobby, etc.) and not being limited to the research area, possibility of finding some

commonality (being a migrant, parent to a young child, living with in-laws, etc.) Some of these factors are perhaps fixed and nothing can be done about them but for the others it is possible to take some time, make some effort and form a bond as one goes through the task at hand i.e. collect data.

While conducting the interviews an 'Informal conversational approach' (Thapar-Bjorket, 1999) or a 'conversation with a purpose approach' (Gopal, 1958) was used. The operational word here is conversation, which is as free flowing as conversations are, yet the researcher is aware of the particular purpose and can steer the conversation gradually. Interview setting, where the interviewer asks questions and the interviewee responds, promotes an unequal relationship between them. Being mindful of this, it was decided to entertain the questions from parents whenever they were raised, even during the interview and answer them truthfully. Only those questions were postponed which were directly related to the topic at hand i.e. school selection and quality education. Many parents asked questions during the interview both about the study and me. And I always responded to them (Oakley, 1981). It helped in forming a rapport with the parents and helped them be at ease. Many mothers in the beginning expressed a lack of confidence as they were not sure what they could say that would be useful to a researcher. Thus, as the questions were posed to them in a conversational manner, it helped in eliciting natural responses. As a result often the parents shared a lot of extra information, which has made the data much richer.

The rapport established during the interview ensured that it was possible to go back to the respondents to seek more clarification. Sometimes the parents themselves offered that if they were to recall anything that they felt was related to the questions being discussed then they would get in touch.

In both the private schools, access to the homes of the children was facilitated directly

by the schools⁶ and in government schools this was facilitated in an indirect manner⁷. The director in the low fee charging school also felt that it was unnecessary and probably socially inappropriate to go to their houses instead the parents were called to school. After my insistence to go to the house, as the need was mine and not to cause the parents any inconvenience, he reluctantly agreed. This incident was indicative of how the school treats the parents i.e the school and the researcher, for the director, were above the parents who were expected to come to the school when called.

In the state government school in my early visits itself, two sisters (class 3 and 5) who knew almost all the children's houses, were assigned to me as 'guide'. They accompanied me to the house where I intended to conduct the interview and often as both the parents were out for work, we used to go to many houses before finding a place where it was possible to conduct an interview.

Often many other children accompanied me in spite of my repeated requests and threats to dissuade them. This was an ethical concern for me as I was disrupting the school time for many children. The parents also wanted the children to go back as their presence meant noise. Because of my two 'guides', I was not dependent on the school to reach the houses and so could continue visiting the houses during vacation.

In both the government schools I was relatively independent of the school after the initial support and thus could continue the interviews during school vacations. In state government schools I was only dependent on my two 'guides' who were available in the *basti* during vacations. In the central government school, after the permission from the regional office was obtained, they were willing to co-operate and gave a detailed list of the parents with phone numbers and

6 Private schools provided me with the list of children, called the parents on my behalf, sent a child to accompany me, gave space to conduct interview etc.

7 Government schools provided the list and sometimes sent children to accompany me.

addresses. As a result I could independently contact the parents and conduct the interviews.

Section IV Challenges

This section will talk about the methodological challenges encountered in the study and learning emerging from them.

1. Explaining the purpose of my research and the issue of informed consent:

A researcher is required to inform the respondents about the research and gain consent to participate in the study. When I started interviewing parents, on being asked the purpose of my visit, I told them about the research. However, I realised that not all parents across the schools understood the meaning of research. Most parents did not understand the academic frame of a research being situated in an institutional context. So, they continued to try and place me in roles that they were familiar with such as a teacher, school inspector, journalist etc. and speculate about whom the report will be submitted to. It was then that I decided to explain my role as a researcher in greater detail. And addressed their concerns by responding to all their questions pertaining to my research such as topic of the research, purpose of interaction, how I would conduct the interview, the fact that it would be long and that it would be audio-recorded etc. After this I asked them if they had any questions. While the parents asked most of the questions as the interview commenced but a few kept filtering in as the interview progressed. In this way, I feel that the formal consent gained in the beginning gradually became informed consent, as the interaction proceeded.

2. Access to Schools:

Research studies often focus on presenting data and findings. To my knowledge, very few discuss the problems encountered in accessing sites of data collection (barring

few researchers like Chawla-Duggan, 2007, Miller et al., 1969).

Among the four schools approached I faced difficulty in accessing two of them. The school selected in the high fee charging category did not allow me to meet the principal despite numerous phone calls and school visits.⁸ This seemed like a shut door and after a struggle of two months I gave this up and had to select another school in this category.

A similar trying situation was presented in gaining permission from the central government school. Here the challenge arose from lack of clarity about who was authorised to give permission on requests of this nature; whether the principal or the regional office. The regional office gave the permission after six months of follow up. The interaction and support in the school changed drastically after the permission letter was presented.

The experience in the government school is perhaps indicative of the fear of criticism that the public education system is experiencing. Increasingly, researchers, academicians and media are criticising the state of affairs in government schools and belittling their efforts.

Owing to the nature of the obstructions in each school, different strategies had to be employed to resolve the access related challenge.

1. Acknowledging Co-operation: Another dilemma was faced in deciding how to acknowledge and reciprocate the support extended by individuals and institutions towards the completion of the research study. The time and co-operation extended by the parents and the school was immense without which it would be impossible to complete this study. It is possible to be content with the consideration that I was working towards knowledge generation, but this would not be of any immediate benefit

⁸ Elite schools are often cagey, take pride in their exclusivity and are brand conscious. Thus they do not easily let a researcher inside for the fear of any critical reporting.

to the parents. I asked all the schools if there was anything that I could do to contribute to the school. Only the low fee charging school took up this offer and asked me to teach English.

As I was involved in part time teaching in the school it presented the pragmatic dilemma of being considered a teacher instead of a researcher. This was acutely experienced when a parent-teacher meeting was organised during the period when I was visiting the school. I wanted to attend the meeting to understand the relationship between the parents and the teachers, kind of issues being discussed, the general format of such an event and to meet the parents whom I wanted to interview. But the director insisted that I also share my inputs in this meeting with the parents as I was teaching English to the children and the parents were very interested in the English learning of their children. This was a tricky situation, as I did not want my identity as a part-time teacher to overshadow my identity of a researcher. But it was important to respect the school's wish so I sat with the Class 5 teacher, talked to some parents and avoided talking to those parents who were part of the selected sample.

2. School's desire to control the research:

The private schools I worked with try to manage communication with the parents and their perceptions about the school. They were wary about who I would talk to, what questions would be asked and how this may impact the parent-school relationship. Thus there were attempts at managing the parent-researcher interface in various ways:

- Influencing sample selection
- Overseeing interaction with the parents
- Not sharing contact details
- Looking through the interview schedule
- Managing researcher identity

Not all the above-mentioned approaches were visible in each school. I confronted

a dilemma when the school heads (with the intention to help) made suggestions, which would dilute the methodological rigour. In one school, the head suggested that I should interview those children who had houses in the vicinity. The other school offered to give me a list of selected children. I took a firm stand in both the cases and gently informed the school about the need for random selection.

Both the private schools wanted the interviews to be conducted in the school premises. This was inappropriate from the research point of view and during the pilot itself it was realised that to make the parents comfortable, the best setting of the interview would be their residence, for the following reasons:

- It was inconvenient for the parents to take out time and reach the school. Since it served no purpose for them they either refused to come or were not particular in keeping an appointment. As a result, the initial few days were spent waiting, as many parents who had fixed the time did not actually reach the school.
- Interviews with two mothers who did come to the school, made it further evident that when forced to come to the school they were constrained by time and had other pressing concerns to return to. It was realised that when the interview is conducted in their homes, they could talk comfortably and simultaneously attend to other tasks.
- A meeting, which was being conducted in the school premises, was more likely to be inadvertently influenced by the setting and the possibility of critical comments would be reduced to a large extent.

The issue in the first school resolved itself, because even though the school wanted the interviews to be conducted in the premises, there was space constraint. The high fee charging school on the other hand provided a room to conduct inter-

views. However, choosing methodological rigour over my convenience I decided to interview parents in their homes. To the schools I spoke about both methodological rigour and parental convenience (though emphasising the latter) in choosing the setting of the interview, which was residence or in some cases their place of work.

The other challenge was the policy of the school to not share the contact details with an outsider. As a result the school reception had to repeatedly make the calls to get the appointment from the parents. Though this was inconvenient for both the receptionist and myself, nothing could be done immediately to resolve the problem. Taking baby steps towards building mutual trust and subverting the school authority by offering to make the calls resolved the issue gradually.

Another challenge faced in both schools was their desire to examine the interview schedule prepared for the parents. It is indicative of the control the school tried to exercise on the research.

The other suggestion, which led to awkwardness, was to conceal the identity of being a researcher and just tell the parents that I was a teacher in the school and wanted to talk about their children's education. This was proposed after a father who had not understood the purpose of the visit came to the school to enquire⁹ about the purpose of my visit. It was not appropriate to ignore the suggestion considering the co-operation extended by the school and yet this was an uncomfortable suggestion, as I wanted to be honest with the parents. So I tried to use a middle path where I told the parents that I was doing my Ph.D. and was also associated with the school. The ensuing interaction with the parent was needed for the research study, but it would also be shared with the school to help improve it. This confused and labyrinthine introduction

⁹ This was the first interview in the study and gradually the explanatory introduction provided, became more elaborate.

made matters even more complicated for the parent to understand and the father during the second interview asked me twice as to why was I asking all this. So, from the next time on I just decided to be upfront about the purpose of the interview.

3. Bridging the social gap: In qualitative research, a researcher is the main instrument of data collection and her social position vis-à-vis the respondent is important. The status of any individual is neither fixed nor monolithic. It is a complex set of various inter-related statuses or identities (Merton, 1972). I am a woman, in my early 30s, wife, parent to a young child, Hindi speaking, educated, middle class, with roots in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi etc. I shared some of these identities with some parents and not with others. This led to varying social distance with different parents. Though it is not possible to eliminate the distance entirely but it is perhaps possible to try and reduce the visible social distance. In the Indian context, common manifestation of regard and being considered in a higher position is in the kind of seating offered. Like when visiting the houses in the *basti* I was often offered a chair, stool or box to sit on while the parent sat on the floor. I politely refused to accept a chair and insisted to sit on the floor with them. Accepting water and sharing tea with them at their house, selecting clothes that did not stand out were some of the attempts at minimising the social distance. I often consciously invoked my identity of being a parent of a young child to ease the process of rapport formation with the parents. Manifestation of social distance is not always linked to external determinants but is contingent on subjectivities of the people involved. I was aware of what I felt and thought while meeting a new person. This awareness can help in taking the extra step towards minimising the social distance. Generally I felt more comfortable and confident

in visiting the houses of middle-class parents who had children studying in a central school and a high fee charging school. I felt most hesitant and as an intruder while visiting the *basti* houses. I was neither aware of their work schedule nor about their leisure activities. I only had an assumption about their being busy. Thus, in every visit, I was weighed down by the fact that I am taking up their time.

4. Data accuracy: Getting a correct list of students was the first step in data collection. Ironically, even though the government school teachers are required to collect, consolidate and forward a 'mountain of data' (Ramachandran, 2005) and this work takes a significant amount of their time, I faced great difficulty getting correct and complete data from both the government schools. The challenge was due to two reasons:

- **Lack of Ownership:** In one school, the class register was neither complete nor was the entered data entirely correct. The current class teacher of class 1 felt no ownership towards the class. When I enquired about the discrepancies, he referred me to another teacher who was earlier responsible for Class 1. She was able to talk about most of the students correctly without referring to the papers and when needed was also able to retrieve the forms filled by the parents.
- **Lack of Clerical Rigour:** In the other school, the data from all the classes had been collated in the computer in the school office. But the list provided to me was of the previous Class 1 with wrong phone numbers. I first happened to call the last principal, and then conducted an interview of a parent whose child was now in Class 2. Finally the correct data was acquired from individual teachers' registers.

5. Recorder effect: Audio recording is a necessary evil for data collection. It affects both the interviewer and interviewee and each interview, though to differing degrees. The presence of a recorder is often forgotten sufficiently to allow for authentic data collection. Though the anxiety of recording being experienced by the respondent resurfaced while answering questions which they were not confident about (like when a parent was discussing about how, bringing children from low economic background into the same school where their own children were studying, would impact their child's education), or felt that what they were sharing was probably an inappropriate topic (like when the government headmaster told me about how the teacher's union works and who has 'influence', or when the low fee charging Rajasthan Board school director talked about his critical views towards the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) the respondents asked me to stop recording. These wishes were always respected, though later on, I took notes from memory.

Even though audio recording is crucial for the study but for two common reasons some portions were lost. One has to be careful about these. One such problem was of accidentally pausing or putting the recording instrument on a standby. The other issue was regarding inputs received after a formal closure of the interview. Sometimes the parents after a pause or during an informal conversation over tea shared some insights, which may be important. In such situations, it is difficult to switch the recorder on again and hence one has to rely on mental notes and write them down as soon as possible.

6. Accessing the marginalised households: The residential *basti* from where most of the children for the state government school come is a big *basti* and many communities live here in their almost

exclusive streets. The challenge was encountered in trying to find the house of the Kalbeliya children. Kalbeliyas are a tribal population living in various parts of Udaipur. I found that most of them were involved in rag picking and some people work as scrap dealers. The perception of the community in the *basti* is that both men and women consume alcohol at all times of the day. Thus, whoever heard that I wanted to visit a Kalbeliya house, declined to accompany me, (even my 'guide' girls) and as a result, I was also a little wary of going on my own. The teachers and the Anganwadi worker also discouraged me from going there alone. The news of a death caused by a brawl between a Kalbeliya man and a lawyer of a higher caste¹⁰ was narrated to me by the Anganwadi worker as supporting evidence to her case of considering them dangerous and bad people¹¹. Then I got help from the mobile library being run by a non-governmental organisation, which visits the *basti* twice every week. The facilitator accompanied me and also assured me that contrary to the common propaganda against entering the Kalbeliya streets, there was absolutely no problem and I could do it whenever needed. With this incident I realised that even though partly an outsider, the researcher is also impacted by the biases and stereotypes prevalent in the community and I think it is important to acknowledge this and analyse the data in that light. As a researcher, one has to be on the guard towards not perpetuating social biases and stereotypes (Moffatt et al., 2005).

Conducting interviews of parents from government schools, who were amongst

¹⁰ <http://udaipurtimes.com/brawl-at-purbia-colony-after-death-of-65-year-old-man/> (accessed on 19th July 2016) this incident was narrated by the anganwadi worker as an example of why I should stay away from the Kalbeliya community.

¹¹ Though the Kalbeliya portion of the *basti* also comes under this Anganwadi she told me that she didn't allow them to come there, as the children were dirty and difficult to handle.

the most disadvantaged in the sample, posed an additional challenge as here often both the parents (and also elder siblings) go out to work. They work as wage labourers and leave early morning and come back after 6. They also do not enjoy the luxury of weekly breaks. This challenge was resolved by making repeated visits to the *basti* to see who was there and who was not, during the day and sometimes in the evening accompanied by the mobile library. I was always burdened by the realisation that they were severely constrained for time and interviews were further eating into the scarce time available to them.

7. Language barrier in conducting interviews:

Qualitative research is a process of constructing meaning from the subjective experiences, which are expressed and constructed through language (Nes et.al, 2010) and so it is important to discuss the associated challenges and decisions taken.

Interviews for this study have been conducted in Hindi, Mewari, and English and often in a constant switch between Hindi-English or Hindi-Mewari. I come from a Hindi-speaking background and am equally proficient in English. However, my competence in Mewari is highly constrained. Most parents interviewed were very comfortable in Hindi and some in English. Mostly the respondents assessed the limited knowledge of Mewari on my part and used more and more of Hindi, which most of them were familiar with as they live and work in an urban area. I encountered the language barrier with a few mothers from the government school, who were also economically the most backward parents in the sample. They were either more conversant or only able to talk in Mewari. In one interview, which was conducted with two mothers, who were neighbours, it was difficult to comprehend the responses as the mothers spoke entirely in Mewari and the interview proceeded in a very structured

and restricted manner. In one case a Mewari speaking person accompanied me and took up the role of a translator. His involvement had to be instantly discouraged as, instead of merely translating he also interpreted the question and added suggestions. For the sake of more authentic data, it seemed appropriate to conduct the interviews with limited understanding of Mewari as in this case, so that the essence of the question would more or less be unchanged, though further probing would be limited.

8. Transcription related concerns: An important step in research and as Bailey (2008) says the first step in analysing data is transcription. I was faced with three issues in this regard:

- Who will do the transcription?
- What is the level of detail to be included?
- Which languages to be selected for all the scripts?

Transcription is an immensely time-consuming task and it was impossible to do all of it by myself. I have transcribed more than two-thirds of the data on my own and the rest was outsourced to trusted and competent transcribers. To each transcriber the important research questions and the significance of getting the verbatim data was explicitly explained. As a corrective measure, I went over the outsourced interviews again, and filled the missing details wherever needed. Often questions and themes for analysis emerged in the process of transcription and were noted and elaborated during the process of transcription.

Transcription inevitably reduces data, as interaction in original is highly complex (Bailey, 2008). Care needs to be taken in the nature of the detail included in transcription, like when is it important to mention that the respondent coughed or laughed, or increased the pitch, etc. Apart from the verbal data, laughter (shy laugh or found it funny, etc.) and significantly long pauses have been noted. Other nonverbal data has been consciously left out as it would not be

used in analysis and would have increased the time needed to transcribe many fold.

The third challenge that transcription posed was of taking the decision regarding which language the final scripts should be produced in as the interviews were conducted in three languages. This decision was not taken lightly as many researchers have warned about the potential loss of meaning in translation (Birbili, 2000; Srivastava, 2006; Temple & Young, 2004; Nes et. al, 2010). Philips (1960, quoted from Temple & Young, 2004) calls it an 'unsolvable problem', yet it is essential to discuss the process of translation adopted and steps taken to ensure minimal loss of meaning. I decided to prepare all the scripts in English. As mentioned above since the interviews were in three languages, English being one of them, it made more pragmatic sense to have the scripts in one language. Secondly, the language of final submission of the thesis and sharing at other forums had to be English therefore translation to English was inevitable at some stage. In order to be true to the respondent, the practice in qualitative research is to present wherever needed the verbatim responses. In such situations, the author translates only the quotations to be included. In a text meaning is globally constructed and not inherent in small quotes, thus when a quotation is translated instead of the entire text then there is more probability of mistranslation or loss of meaning. For these reasons it was decided to translate entire interviews to English. The following strategies were adopted to ensure authentic translation:

- The focus during translation was on bringing in 'conceptual equivalence' instead of literal translation or 'lexical equivalence' (Birbili, 2000). Conceptual equivalence implies translating to get the correct meaning without worrying about getting the translation of each word. Lexical equivalence sometimes leads to unnatural or incorrect sentences in the recipient language, which may not represent what the interviewee may have

wanted to communicate.

- In cases where phrases and sentences in the interview carried metaphors or appropriate translation was not attained at that time, phrases in the original language were retained alongside the translation, to be revisited.
- I have native-like proficiency in Hindi and English but very limited knowledge of Mewari. Thus, for Mewari translation native speakers were included who helped build the meaning in Hindi and it was then translated to English. To check the correctness, portions of it were given to other native speakers to translate back and see whether the translation is close to the meaning or not.
- I kept going back to the audio recording in the original language and in several rounds worked with the data.

Conclusion

Research is complicated business and entering the field is an overwhelming experience with a lot to observe, comprehend and record. Amongst various methodological challenges; pragmatic and ethical, the important thing for the researcher is to be able to gather voices of respondents. This includes being able to access muffled whispers hidden amongst the loud ones. These are important to bring out, as they would help build contesting accounts of quality.

The challenge in front of the researcher is to juggle with various considerations and capture as much as possible so that the theory constructed is as close to truth as possible.

While conducting interviews I many a time felt that my probing pushed the parents to think about concerns that they may not have thought earlier, or felt obligated to justify their choice even when they themselves were aware that this was not quality education according to them. In such situations, I felt unable to further pursue some strands of questions.

The challenges, considerations and learnings being discussed in the paper are useful for researchers entering the field, which is similar to the one in this study. And also in conducting interviews with the parents.

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Web Resources

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