Impact of mother's education on the academic achievement of their children in Three Lower and Secondary Schools of Samtse Dzongkhag: An Enquiry

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Abstract

The study on "impact of mother's education on the academic achievement of their children in school" was conducted using a mixed methods design. The aim was to understand children's academic performance partly as a function of their mothers' level of education. The study was implemented in two stages, beginning in school academic year, July 2014. In both stages, focus group interviews were conducted with mothers, students and teachers. Progress reports and semi-open questionnaires were other data sources. Participants included 48 children, 48 mothers and 15 teachers, the two first-mentioned groups being our primary, teachers being our secondary target population. Past studies claim level of parental education to be an important indicator of children's academic achievement. This study also indicated that mother's education contributes to enhancing children's academic achievement. On the one hand, mothers may, irrespective of their educational level, provide 'content-free' support to their children: showing interest, motivating them, etc. On top of that, educated mothers have the capacity to render help with homework and explain scholastic stuff that is unclear to child.

Keywords: *Socialization, Social stratification, Mother-child Interaction, Social identity, Scholastic achievement*

Introduction

Parental involvement in children's education is important because children learn both at home and in school settings. Previous studies have shown that level of parents' education is an important predictor of children's academic achievement (Lee & Croninger, 1994; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995). Thus, involving parents in children's academic work seems important. One way to ensure that all children succeed and graduate from high schools is to ensure that they get good guidance and support from home. Studies assert that variables like parents' occupation, parents' education, family income, race, family structure, and parents' work patterns are all related to children's achievement (Coleman et al. 1966).

In addition, parental behaviours and attitudes including reading exercises, library trips, providing academically oriented activities, and supervising homework affect children's academic

ability (Griffin & Morrison, 1997; Gorges & Elliot, 1995). Furthermore, studies have confirmed that parents and family members are powerful influences on student achievement across grades (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993) and have consistently linked maternal educational attainment to children's academic achievement.

Despite the importance of parental education on children's academic learning, no study in this field has so far been done in a Bhutanese context. Our study aims to address this gap.

Literature Review

Research literature gives abundant evidence that parental support influences students' academic achievement positively. Of special relevance for our study, a distinction can be made between two generically different sets of parental support: 1) general, or, as we call it, content-free parental support, such as showing interest, motivating, reminding child to do her homework, etc.; 2) support of an academically related nature, i.e. explaining stuff that is unclear to child, helping with homework, commenting on school matters from an insider's perspective, etc. The former type of support can be rendered irrespective of parent's educational background. The latter is the privilege of parents with an educational background.

A number of studies claim that content-free, emotionally related parental support is actually the most important of the two support types. Thus, Flouri and Buchanan (2004) argue that parental involvement is a more powerful influence on child's academic success than any other family background variable such as social class, family size and level of parental education. Flouri (2006) likewise points at parental interest in child's education, through motivation, interest and support, as the major influence on children's educational attainment. Supporting Flouri (2006), Hill and Taylor (2004) assert that parental involvement and parents' interest in children's education is an important influence on children's educational outcome. Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquhar and Plewis (1988) also stressed that parent's attitude and support for their children's learning influence performance on literacy tests irrespective of socio-economic status. Yet, Hackman et al. (2014) found that parental education has a bearing on children's academic success. His study shows that children with better educated parents are more likely to excel at schools.

The majority of studies in the field tend to agree with this last-mentioned conclusion. According to Sabates, Duckworth, & Feinstein (2011) parental education is one of the key factors in promoting children's academic development and educational success. In their study, children of parents with high levels of educational qualification or whose parents spent longer in education,

achieved higher school grades than children whose parents have lower levels of education. In many studies, research focus is more narrowly aimed at locating a possible co-relation between mothers' educational level and children's academic achievement. One such study is by Fan and Chen (2001), showing that parental involvement in their child's literacy practices positively affects children's academic performance. Carneiro, Meghir & Parey (2013) found maternal education to have positive influence both on children's cognitive and behavioral skills. Maternal education has been connected to children's performance on cognitive tasks as early as three months (Davs-Kean & Schnabel, 2001; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Rumberger, 1983).

Hence, research seems to validate mother's educational level as having significant impact on her children's learning process. This notion is further elaborated in a recent study by Carneiro, Meghir, and Parey (2013). They found strong evidence that maternal education affects home environment and child's educational proficiency. Educated mothers provide better surroundings for their children by postponing and decreasing child bearing, by increasing family resources, and by assortative mating. They also invest more in their children through books, providing musical instruments, special lessons, or buying computer although they spend longer periods outside the home working and earning. Maternal education also seemed to reduce the incidence of behavioural problems and grade repetition. Even if educated mothers work more, they do not spend less time breastfeeding, reading to their children, or taking them on outings. In the same vein, Gratz and Kurth-Schai (2006) claimed that educated mothers are more involved in their children's learning and often interact with school while uneducated mothers had more unmanaged stress in their lives and hardly interact with their children and school.

Research Questions

Based on the knowledge gap identified in the research problem, one major question supplemented by three sub questions were formulated:

1. Does a significant quantitative correlation exist between mother's levels of education and; child's academic achievements in school as formally registered?

Sub-questions

2. Do mothers' school-related support activities vis-à-vis their children differ as a function of their level of education? – and if yes, how may such differences be described?
3. Do 'interesting differences' exist between the way in which research theme-related issues are perceived by members of the study's three different sub-target groups, mothers, students and teachers.

4. Are research findings from the study consistent with findings published internationally, or does the Bhutan context add a 'special flavor' to the research theme as lived reality?

Methodology, Data Collection and Analysis

Study approach was mixed method using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Study also carried out relevant document analysis, interviews, focus group discussion with informants from four different schools under Samtse District. Participants were chosen by respective school's heads and selection of schools was based on school type, and proximity. Quantitative data consisted in progress reports of two consecutive years (Class I and II) of the same school beginner students. End year examination scores were analysed during two consecutive years. In addition, all participants filled in structured questionnaires where Likert scale ratings were supplemented by both closed and open-ended questions, so as to record feelings not covered in the Likert's scale and also to understand informants' backgrounds and experiences. Same questionnaire was used for all student informants. Questionnaires for mothers covered similar themes, but in a suitably re-worded version. Researchers communicated well in local dialects which was useful in helping non-educated mothers in translation and writing of responses.

Qualitative data was derived from the following sources: (1) Focus group interviews with secondary school students (based on group members' quantitative self-ratings); (2) focus group interviews with mothers of secondary school students and school beginners (based on group members' quantitative self-ratings); (3) focus group interviews with teachers. Teachers were a valuable source of information in giving experience-based reflections on their observations of students coming from homes with educated and non-educated mothers respectively.

Samples

The research involved two Higher Secondary Schools, one Middle Secondary School and one Lower Secondary School of Samtse District.

Table 1. School and No. of participants

	Participants						
Schools	Mothers	Secondary Students		School Beginners		Teachers	
	Edu	Non-Edu	Edu.	Non-Edu	Edu	Non-Edu	
Tendu Higher SS	4	4	4	4	4	4	5
Ugyentse Middle SS	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Samtse Higher SS	4	4	4	4	4	4	
Samtse Lower SS	4	4	4	4	4	4	3
Total	**16**	**16**	**16**	**16**	**16**	**16**	**15**

Data were collected in two stages. The first stage (of six months' duration) was targeted at secondary school students and their mothers, and explored the research theme in a retrospective manner. The second stage which lasted for two years as from project start allowed for the construction and enrichment of meaning components and targeted the school beginners. During the second stage the research theme was explored in real time.

Stage 1 and stage 2 involved two Higher Secondary schools and one Lower Secondary School. In each of the stages, student respondents consisted of 16 students, 16 mothers (8 illiterate and 8 literate mothers) and 8 teachers. Schools were asked to assist (1) in selecting mothers for polarized focus group interviews (literate/illiterate); (2) in providing progress reports for target group students; (3) in identifying students whose mothers differed with regard to educational level. This is explained in the table 1 below:

Data Analyses

A tentative answer to the main research question was provided by examining the degree of quantitative correlation between mothers' level of education/students' academic achievements.

Answers to sub-questions were searched for through analyses of multiple responses collected from different target informants in questionnaires as well as focus group discussion, whereby closed and open-ended questions supplemented each other.

The complete data pool comprised of facts, opinions, observations, case stories, etc. The materials were classified into sub-categories. Through content analysis, thematic clusters were established. Triangulation of data sub-categories led to thematic integration and/or differentiation.

Findings

Our results were analysed and will be presented considering each of the four research questions shown above. Analysis of quantitative data comes first, followed by qualitative data analysis.

Significant quantitative correlation between mother's levels of education and child's academic achievements in school as formally registered in pre-schooling

School achievements (Comparisons of Progress Report of children of grades 1 and 2 of 24 students at three schools)

The quantitative data indicated (table 2) a significant difference ($p=0.047$; $F=4.403$) between the mean scores of children's academic performance, indicating that children of educated mothers perform better than un-educated mothers' children. This finding may be associated with the conducive learning environment provided by the educated mothers in terms of resources, guidance and support related to school tasks, affordability of the parents and so on. This finding is consistent with the finding of study undertaken by Fan & Chen (2001) that states children perform better in an intellectually stimulating environment. In addition, the 2-tailed Pearson correlation tests also supported the above test performed with the significant value of 0.047 (Table 3). These findings mean that research question one can be answered positively.

Table 4 deals with research questions 2 and 3. The Y- and X-axes show different sub-categories of maternal support that were included in the questionnaires given to children and mothers respectively. In later sections, we shall add qualitative comments on these sub-categories (cf. research question 2). Further than that, table statistics show the degrees of quantitative mother-child agreement as regards the actual prevalence of individual sub-categories in their relationship (cf research question 3). As appears, for many sub-categories no significant degree of agreement was found. Correlations were found for sub-categories Framing work Schedule, helping with homework, and Explaining stuff that is unclear to child. At this point, we will not go into further analysis of other information that may be drawn from table 4.

Table 2. Results of the Independent Paired Sample T-Test

Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Mean Avg. scores	Equal variances assumed	4.403	0.041	2.045	46	0.047	3.79167	1.85377
	Equal variances not assumed			2.045	40.949	0.047	3.79167	1.85377

Table 3: 2-tailed Pearson Correlation Test

Correlations		Mean marks	Parents Qualification
Mean	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.289*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.047
	N	48	48
Parents Qualification	Pearson Correlation	-0.289*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.047	
	N	48	192

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 4: 2-tailed Pearson Correlations between mother and child's opinion

	Encouraging me to study (Child)	Actively reminding me to study (Child)	Framing work schedule for me (Child)	Helping me in my homework (Child)	Explains stuff that is unclear to me (Child)	Guiding and supporting me in my future in school and after (Child)
Encouraging child to study (Mother)	-.021	-.021	.055	.159	.152	-.080
	.886	.886	.710	.282	.302	.591
	-.021	-.021	.125	.542	.521	-.229
	.000	.000	.003	.012	.011	-.005
	48	48	48	48	48	48
Activelyreminding child to study (Mother)	-.021	-.021	.055	.159	.152	-.080
	.886	.886	.710	.282	.302	.591
	-.021	-.021	.125	.542	.521	-.229
	.000	.000	.003	.012	.011	-.005
	48	48	48	48	48	48
Framing work schedule (Mother)	.055	.055	.429**	.348*	.363*	.056
	.710	.710	.002	.015	.011	.704
	.125	.125	2.250	2.750	2.875	.375
	.003	.003	.048	.059	.061	.008
	48	48	48	48	48	48
Helping with homework (Mother)	.134	.134	.158	.846**	.882**	.203
	.363	.363	.283	.000	.000	.166
	.458	.458	1.250	10.083	10.542	2.042
	.010	.010	.027	.215	.224	.043
	48	48	48	48	48	48
Explain stuff that is unclear to me (Mother)	.140	.140	.142	.882**	.920**	.225
	.343	.343	.336	.000	.000	.124
	.479	.479	1.125	10.542	11.021	2.271
	.010	.010	.024	.224	.234	.048
	48	48	48	48	48	48
Guiding and supporting child about future career issues (Mother)	-.065	-.065	.000	.486**	.466**	.155
	.660	.660	1.000	.000	.001	.292
	-.167	-.167	.000	4.333	4.167	1.167
	-.004	-.004	.000	.092	.089	.025
	48	48	48	48	48	48

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). **

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). *

Mother's School- related Support Activities for Children and Mother's, Student's and Teacher's perspectives on mother's school related support

The general trend in our study revealed that both educated and non-educated mothers encouraged, reminded and motivated their children to study. Yet, their style of support varied, and partly as an effect of mother's level of education. Both groups of mothers provided general support, i.e. content-free support, such as asking their child not to skip classes, not to indulge in bad behaviors, turn in homework, study for exam, do homework etc.

Although all 48 mothers encouraged, reminded and motivated their children to study, some differences can also be seen in the way their rendered their support. Most importantly, due to their educational status educated mothers were able to provide academically related support such as reading for the child, supervising and assisting them in their homework. In our data material, a sub-sample of 17 educated mothers provided academically related support, while 7 left it for their children to explore learning on their own initiatives. This latter position is exemplified in the following statement from an educated mother where she explains how she, even if she, so to speak, is capable of making herself her child's assistant teacher, has decided to do less than that:

> *I have withdrawn some of the support literally sitting beside him and guiding him through his home tasks. (Yangsa)*

While the non-educated mothers made it clear that they were unable to, fully, assist their children in school-related activities, they did, however, emphasize that they could contribute in general ways such as instilling motivation and encouragement:

> *I encourage my children to study. However, being uneducated, I cannot assist them with their school work. So, I ask them to seek help from friends.* (Dechen)

The findings from the mothers were further supported by data collected from the students' focus group interview. Among our full sample (48 students), we found three sub-samples who, with variations, all talked about their mothers giving them 'content-free', i. e. non-academic, motivational support and reminders.

a) Mother actively reminds me to study;
b) Mother encourages me to study;
c) Through general support mother motivates me.

When it came to areas related to school content, however, only educated mothers supported their children, and the reasons attributed were that uneducated mothers, even though they had the time to stay up late, providing emotional support, making tea for their children etc., were unable to extend their help in content related support areas since they lacked the required knowledge.

All our 48 student respondents asserted that motivation from their mothers is definitely an important key to scholastic success. Some respondents, however, added that students whose mothers were also capable of rendering academically related support, had an extra advantage:

> *In my opinion, children of educated mothers perform better as they get guidance from their mothers.* (Sonam)

Clearly, the general tenor among our student participants was that educated mothers, as compared to uneducated mothers, end up rendering stronger support to their children, thereby boosting their children's academic performance. This opinion was voiced by a majority of the grade II student and a few grade X respondents, most of whom had non-educated mothers. Teacher respondents were of the same mind. Reasons given were that educated mothers' children are groomed from small and that, in addition to their mothers' education-based resources, they have access to all sorts of additional learning facilities like computers and internet. Thus, student participants generally agreed that educated mothers had the needed skill to render help and support in relation to homework, reading, writing etc. By clarifying doubts as needed, providing ideas and giving feedback they helped improve their children's academic performance.

Furthermore, the findings from the mothers also indicated that as compared to non-educated mothers, educated mothers are more actively concerned with child's post-school career. According to some respondents, the educated mothers are more informed about the situation of the country like the issue of rising youth unemployment. With stiff competition existing among the school leavers and fewer employment opportunities, excelling in academic performance is pivotal to getting a good job in the future. With such awareness, the educated mothers are in a better position to render useful advice concerning their children's future.

One questionnaire item: 'Framing work schedule' for the child, indicates a very strong, possibly over-protective kind of support from mother to child. In our sample no mother, nor any student indicated that such support was given from mother to child.

Dissenting student voices

As apparent in the earlier section the majority of student respondents attached great importance to mother's educational level as differentially affecting child's school performance. Yet a not insignificant number of students from grade X (n=10; children of educated as well as non-educated mothers) strongly favoured the student's own inner drive as the main predictor of their academic success. These older students clearly indicated that, by the end of the day, the drive to perform well has to come from their own initiative no matter the kind of support received from the mothers. Cf. student statements like the following:

> "*You may have access to all kinds of study resources and an educated mother who is there to guide and scaffold your learning. Yet, if you lack the inner drive to study, these external factors really did not matter*." (Karma)

In this way, these participants unanimously believed that educated and non-educated students performed equally well scholastically in so far as they were prepared to takes personal initiatives for their own learning. Incidentally, such a stance may draw support from Teachman (1987) who concludes that children's educational achievement may not all together be explained as a function of such external variables as father's education, mother's education, parental income and number of siblings. The student's own perseverance, motivation, and enthusiasm for learning has an overriding significance.

Teachers' voices

The data from focus group interview with teachers indicated that the fifteen teachers were indeed mindful of school children's family background as a conditioning factor for them in dealing with students. On this background, they shared their views on issues related to relationships between school / parents / children.

One notable teacher statement ran as follows:

> *The kids are the losers. Educated parents have the capacity to help their children but don't have time. Uneducated parents would so much like to help their children, but they don't have the capacity, so, they're helpless.* (Teacher 1)

Teachers also relay that the educated mother's children perform better as they receive support and help related to school work from their mothers, while uneducated children are left on their own to find solutions for their study problems. In this regard, peer tutoring comes in handy.

Children can, and do assist each other in their learning by teaching each other. Higher performing students can help lower performing students.

Some teachers made it a strong point, based on professional values, that *when in the classroom* they deliberately paid no attention to students' family background. In the normal classroom context, they are primarily interested in the students' scholastic performance and shouldn't be overly occupied with the fact that each and every student brings along a particular family history, including parental support patterns, which would in part shape the student's learning potential. This valur-based stance is something interesting that came out from this study which can be an area for further exploration.

Yet, teachers also pointed out that they were indeed very attentive to parents' educational level (literate/illiterate) when they, e.g., met them at professional meetings related to their children's performance or behavior in school. They further aired the view that since educated mother's children are guided in a home atmosphere reigned by academic values, their school behaviour seems better than that of non-educated mothers' children. Hence, comparatively speaking, the latter, as students, show more bad behaviour and indulge in undesirable activities. This is apt to affect their academic performance negatively.

Additionally, teachers claimed that mothers, as compared to fathers, ave a stronger role in gearing up their children's academic achievement. Their soft nature (it was said) attracts them to render care and support while the father does not have time unless he specifically intends to take on the role of caring, supporting father. Yet, it was also mentioned that gender roles are, today, changing rapidly in Bhutan.

One teacher used his own life-course as illustration of the "strains and stresses belonging to a Bhutan-in-extremely-rapid-development":

> *My parents (illiterate farmers) scolded me when I used school homework as an excuse for not helping with farm affairs (and [said with a smile] of course it did happen that 'the excuse' was not altogether justified). To them education was 'something foreign'. They could ignore it. Today (illiterate) parents don't dare to ignore school – yet they can't do anything constructive to 'tame' school. So, they feel trapped.* (Teacher 3)

Same teacher also stated that uneducated mother's children perform well only if they are gifted by birth and educated mother's children perform well if they are guided. Otherwise, it remains the same for both, unless the child takes initiative for his or her own learning.

Comparison of our research findings with international findings; cf. research question 4

Most findings from this study align well with international study findings. However, one interesting theme was voiced in our study, namely that inner motivation good will should not be over-emphasized as predictor of the child's academic success. Besides parent-induced motivation, the child's personal initiative and drive can be important in gearing up his or her performance. Incidentally, this stance goes against findings by Stright and Yeo (2014) who posit mother's warmth as the main predictor in lower grade children's academic success. In our study, a significant number of – mostly older respondents – argued that inner drive, will power and determination help determine the course of their academic performance irrespective of their mother's education level. In this way, grit and initiative are found to be the most effective tool for them to excel academically.

Discussion

Previous studies have associated parental monitoring positively with a variety of desirable school-related outcomes such as children's grades, their interest in school and their self-initiation of school related work (Spera, 2006). Parents also matter for student behavior in the classroom. For example, Masten et al. (2009) found students' compliance in the classroom (e.g. following rules) to be related to students' perceptions of how important it is for their parents that they display or do not display certain behaviors. Because parents frequently remind their children to go to class, turn in homework etc., adolescents perceive their academic behavior to be particularly important to their parents. Especially, adolescents who receive high parental monitoring perceive their parents as holding strong educational goals and values, wanting their children to work hard and succeed in school (Spera, 2006). Generally speaking, these findings by Magnuson et al. (2009) and Spera (2006) resonated with our study finding. Yet, in our study we also registered instances – of relevance for our third research question – where parental support activities apparently went un-noticed by their children. A small sub-sample of students did in fact not perceive their academic behaviour to be important to their parents nor did they believe parental education automatically led to more qualified support. Yet, even in the case of these students, it appeared that the mothers provided timely general support which included advising children to behave well and avoid skipping classes, doing school related tasks on time including homework, and comply with school's norms and rules.

As a comment to studies reporting positive links between parental involvement in their children's education and these children's academic performance (Hara & Burke, 1998; Hill & Craft, 2003; Marcon, 1999; Stevenson & Baker, 1987), two thirds of our student sample (n=30) stated that educated mothers' children have added benefits in the form of a mother capable of providing qualified academically related support and help. Students from this sub-sample who had educated mothers definitely believed that these factors had enhanced their own academic

performance. They, thus, echo Ara (2012) who claims that “mother’s education is the means of support to polish her children deeds, activities, behaviour, academics and performance in education". Similar ideas can be found in Fraja, Oliveira and Zanchi, (2010) for whom parental effort is more important than the school's. Summing up, motivational support from the mother may be described as a separate support system for children’s learning.

Conclusion

Research shows mother's education to be one key factor in promoting children’s academic development and educational success. Evidence shows that children of parents with high levels of educational qualifications, or whose parents spent longer in education, achieve higher school grades than children whose parents have lower levels of education. The results of this study generally provide positive support for the view that mother’s education is associated with increased academic achievement of her children. Thus, our major research question receives a positive answer. Based on our second research question, we found that the specific support and guidance ingredients provided by educated mothers were based on their academically relevant, experiential knowledge. Yet, apart from the *relative* support advantages enjoyed by children of educated mothers, our study did not point at any negative impact stemming from a child’s having an uneducated mother. Even if uneducated mothers might be relatively more burdened in terms of social and economic issues, they were still portrayed, and portrayed themselves as delivering emotional and motivation, so-called content-free support to their school children.

Apart from registering apparent positive correlation between mother’s level of education and children’s academic performance, our study also gave voice to student participants for whom inner drive and personal initiative were the all-important factors behind their academic performance. This interesting disparity, and the fact that our study has its limitations in terms of study participants, makes us conclude that more in-depth studies involving a bigger student sample from both urban and rural areas should be carried out in order to obtain more nuances to our study hypothesis. We further suggest that financial status of the child’s family might be included as one more potentially interrelated variable influencing children’s educational achievement.

Recommendations

Our study’s affirmation of a significant co-relation between mother’s education and children’s academic performance leads us to make the following recommendations.

As part of their community-directed policies, schools should to call for more participation from mother in school activities as well as to embark on accelerating their children’s academic

performance through active participation and support and also by maintaining balance between childcare, domestic work and job performance. Through such efforts, the quality differences between educated and uneducated mothers might to some degree be lessened.

In line with research reporting that parent-child interactions, specifically stimulating and responsive parenting practices, are important influences on a child's academic development (Christian, Morrison, & Bryant, 1998), the Ministry of Education should include in their policies to promote female education at the grass root level, not just for the sake of building a productive work force, but also for better parenting. Girl students are the mothers of future and if they are educated our future generations would progress academically, socially and economically.

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