**Effective Methods in Educating the Children of Oral Learners in Varanasi, India: Parental Involvement**

**Sarah Hivner**

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**Azusa Pacific University**

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine methods implemented in NGO schools in Varanasi which are effective in educating children of oral or illiterate communities. Children whose parents have not received formal education are the most disadvantaged in becoming literate themselves, and frequently cannot keep up in government schools.

The research design was inductive in nature, using grounded theory as the overarching approach and data from both teachers and parents was triangulated during the analysis process. Qualitative data, in the form of semi-structured group interviews, was collected from five NGO schools in south Varanasi. Interview questions asked about challenges faced in teaching children of oral learners, what methods were proving effective, what the most important aspect in educating a child was, and ideas for improvement. Parents were asked about the challenges they faced, their opinions of the NGO schools and their goals for their children.

The theoretical framework used was Epstein et al. theory of overlapping spheres of influence, because the research found that parental involvement was crucial for student success, as Epstein theory explains. The research findings showed that teachers felt that building caring relationships had the most significant effect on a child’s ability to learn. While emphasis was placed on the importance of teacher-student relationships, the lack of parental involvement was a voiced concern. Parent interviews revealed that their worldview was outside of the educational systems and they did not have a framework for understanding how to be involved.

Suggestions were made on how teachers can help oral learner parents understand their role in their child’s education, and participate in learning at home and school. As action-research, these suggestions were presented to the participants, who discussed which ideas they would implement. The research contributes to international research that has proven the critical role parents play in their child’s education.

If children are loved,

   they will be loveable.

If children are encouraged,

   they will become confident.

If children are valued,

   they will learn to value.

If children are praised,

   they will become praiseworthy.

If children are respected,

   they will reciprocate.

If children are taught,

   they will learn.

If children are celebrated,

   they will rejuvenate.

If children are nurtured,

   they will blossom.

If children are healthy,

   the world will survive.

                   -Geneva Gay, Professor of Education

                          University of Washington, Seattle

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# 1. The Disconnect

“There is a beautiful thing lying within every child”

-teacher interviewee

## Entrance Story

I face many challenges as I teach my kindergarten class. The children sometimes come to school tired and hungry. Their home environment is unhealthy so they don’t sleep properly and sometimes are not fed. This makes it difficult for them to learn and remember what was taught. If children are hungry they will not want to study. In the morning, some children come to school after doing the housework; cooking, cleaning and collecting water. How children behave in class often depends on what is happening at home, for example if there was a recent fight. On a regular basis half of the children don’t complete their homework. At home they were playing without supervision and their parents do not tell them to do their homework. Children also misbehave because they are looking for attention. These are some of the challenges I experience as a teacher.

This experience of an NGO (Non Government organization) teacher in Varanasi is the entrance point into the context for this research. These are some of the challenges faced daily by educators dedicating their life to educating the children of oral learners.

## Statement of the Problem

Formal education is rapidly expanding in India, especially in urban areas. Simultaneously, the growth of rural to urban migration is increasing, therefore increasing the number of oral learners in cities. City schools are not equipped to deal with this oral, migrant, largely poverty stricken population. NGOs have become a primary vehicle in tackling the educational challenges of this community. Private NGO schools are implementing alternative educational methods from mainstream government schools, both inside and outside the classroom. This research explores what methods are effective in educating children of oral learner parents in Varanasi and where there can be improvement.

## Defining Oral Learner

For this paper the term oral learner, oral culture, and oral tradition have been chosen over the term illiterate. The only exception is when interviewees used the term in a quotation or it is used in referenced literature. Rao explains in his dissertation that in using terms like oral culture, the negative connotations of illiteracy are denied. He explains that “illiteracy implies an absence of literacy whereas orality emphasizes the presence of speech” (Rao, 1993, p. 7) and that in speech there is power and action (Rao, 1993). It should also be mentioned that the term “illiterate” was coined by the literate community, creating the marginalization of oral people, implying the superiority of those with the ability to read and write (Rao, 1993).

“Oral learner” in this paper will not only refer to people who have never attended school but also to adults that may have attended school for a few years but never became functionally literate. These oral learners, although they have attended school for a few years, dropped out early and still only function in an oral culture.

## Variables

From observing the current environment in Varanasi (through working at an NGO school and by living in a slum for two years) there seems to be a number of factors that affect how successfully the children of oral learners become educated. I will deal with the variables that seem to be the most influential here. The influence of the family plays a major role in any child’s life, including their education. Most children spend a lot more time at home than at school, and their parents usually have significantly more influence over them than a teacher does.

One of the key variables in a child’s education seems to be the health of the home environment. In Varanasi, among the poor and slum communities, alcoholism is a problem among fathers and also sometimes mothers. This creates an environment of abuse and often constant tension in the home, with verbal and domestic violence. This kind of stressful home situation leads to difficulties at school and in learning. Another family stressor on a child is insufficient money for food, rent and other basic needs. As most of these children live in one room brick houses, they are never unaware of the difficulties their families are facing, and often feel the burden their parents carry.

The relationship the parents have with their children is also a factor in a child’s education. Families living in slums, dealing with the stressors mentioned above, often have little physical, emotional, or mental energy, specifically positive energy, to spend on their children. The difficulties they face every day leave little room for positive, encouraging parent-child relationships. This may lead to child negligence in the home, decreasing the amount of parental supervision. In terms of their academics, even if oral learners want their children to be educated they often don’t understand the need to encourage children in going to school, doing their homework, or discussing what they have learned in school. Positive behaviors for parents include taking interest in their children and investing emotional energy into a relationship with their child. Although these factors have nothing to do with the school, they affect the way a child learns.

Furthermore, within the school environment there are multiple variables that determine how well the student may learn. A teacher’s motivation (or lack of motivation) will affect their teaching methods and how well the child learns. A lack of care on the teacher's part may lead to neglect of the children's academic needs. If a teacher does not desire for their students to comprehend and understand the lesson, students that fall behind in learning will be left behind in the educational process.

Curriculum and teaching philosophy are also factors in how well students learn. A relevant, engaging lesson is more likely to keep a child interested and able to comprehend material than a curriculum that has little in relation to their real life experience. For many decades, the primary teaching philosophy in Indian government schools has been rote learning, with critical thinking being almost completely absent from the learning process. Creativity and artistic expression are also often missing from mainstream schools, even though research has shown that creativity and self expression are important in a child’s learning and development.

Another key element in the school setting that affects student’s ability to learn is the student-teacher relationship. A teacher that cares for a student’s welfare, both at school and at home, will be more aware of the student’s life circumstances and the child’s emotional and mental state. Subsequently, this will give the teacher insight into why or why not the student may be struggling at school. Government schools in India often have 60+ children in a classroom, and unless a student is naturally assertive, the teacher may not even remember their name, let alone their family situation. If a teacher does not foster a caring, safe environment within a classroom, a student's ability to learn may be affected, especially if they do not have a caring home environment.

From my observations and conversations with educators in NGO schools, these variables seem to be what primarily affect how children in poor communities become educated. The research was designed around these observations and this paper examines these variables through interviews with teachers and parents.

## Research Question

This research is designed to provide more insight into the reality of teaching the children of oral learners, and to assist schools and teachers on what they can do to be more effective in teaching this population in Varanasi. My research question is, What are effective methods in educating traditionally oral learners in NGO schools in Varanasi?

The most disadvantaged children in the area of education are those who come from an oral tradition, whose parents are not literate. This has been my observation and also the observation of the NGO schools in Varanasi. If this is true, this population deserves extra attention. Paul Farmer’s “preferential option for the poor” (2004) in the arena of health can also be translated to education. Farmer states that precisely because the poor are disadvantaged is why they should get preference. Children of oral learners are given preference in this research and in the NGO schools that are often specifically designed for them, as Farmer states should be the case.

NGO schools in India, and in my experience in Varanasi, are attempting to teach disadvantaged children in new and less conventional ways. This includes more relevant curriculum, using a variety of teaching aids, encouraging more critical thinking and creativity, and doing away with rote memory learning. These schools seem to hire teachers that are invested in helping poor communities and teachers that genuinely want to help children learn. The NGO schools involved in this research were started through recognizing that government schools could not cater to the poorest children, whose parents had no formal education. The number of children that live in slums who are not in school is so significant that small NGO schools have been a current solution to this problem.

## Community Relevance

The southeastern neighborhoods in Varanasi are heavily inhabited by permanent migrants from the surrounding rural areas of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar. A majority of the adults who have migrated to the city are oral learners and have either spent no time or only a few years in schooling at the elementary level. In rural areas, the communities functioned in oral traditions, and this is normal for them. In the city, however, most of life functions around a very literate culture. As these migrants permanently settle in the city, there is a felt need, at the very least, to educate some of their children. It is also widely believed that formal education is the way to increased income.

The poorest communities, often where these migrants live, have access to government schools. Although the Indian government has tried to make provision in government schools to facilitate student attendance, frequently there are hidden fees at these schools that prevent children from attending. If a poor family does have access to a school, their child may drop out after a year or two because they cannot afford the yearly tuitions. The cost of after school classes, which most teachers expect students to take because they cannot keep up with regular class work, is also an obstacle. In either case, the child will eventually end up being out of school, without a chance to become literate.

It is for this reason that, in the last two decades, a number of NGO schools targeting these children that will not make it in government or mainstream schools have emerged in south Varanasi. These schools specifically target children whose parents are oral learners, because they understand the disadvantages stacked against them. However, as these NGO schools seek to educate these children, they experience the difficulties inherent in working with children whose parents cannot read and write. Out of concern, and also necessity, they have had to adjust their teaching philosophy and methodology to accommodate the children's needs.

In conversation with Asha Deep Vidyashram’s principal and vice-principal, a concern was voiced to better understand the critical elements needed to successfully educate the children of oral learners, in order to implement what would be most effective. This was the felt need for which a solution may potentially have the greatest impact on children through these schools.

## Theoretical Framework

The framework for this research is based on the theory of overlapping spheres of influence by Epstein et al. (2002). This theory identifies how a child is best supported as a student when the school, family and community work in partnership with each other, with the child as the focus of the partnership. If the school, family and community work together and support the child’s education in complementary ways, each reinforcing what the other is doing, the child is most likely to succeed as a student and later on in life (Epstein et al., 2002). As a result of these partnerships, Epstein et al. says that learning communities (or caring communities) are created, which are ultimately the best way to care for the child’s academic needs (2002).

Figure 1 shows the overlapping spheres of influence; family, school and community, with the child at the center. This diagram represents the positive influence on the child if each sphere is partnering together for the good of the child’s education.



Figure 1 Epstein et al. Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School and Community on Children’s Learning (2002, p. 163)

The starting point of this research comes from observations of the breakdown between these three spheres of influence on the student. In Varanasi, among many of the lowest income and lower caste groups who are also often from oral traditions, the school functions as a separate entity or sphere from the family and community. This is because the family often feels like it is the role of the school to educate, not theirs. Besides this detachment, there are very often negative influences from the family and community that affect the ability of the student to succeed in school. Therefore, the lack of partnership between these spheres to support a student decreases the effectiveness of how the school can best care for the child.

In this current reality, a child begins to function in two different environments (see Figure 2). On one hand, at home and in the community, the child is often surrounded by some forms of poverty, neglect, physical and emotional abuse, violence, substance abuse, negative language, etc. The child is in this environment for many hours of the day. The other environment where the child is influenced is the school. The NGO schools considered in this study are schools that encourage discipline, creativity, learning, respect, caring relationships, etc. This is a very different scene to a student's home life. So, in the child’s reality the school and family are actually working against each other in what they are trying to accomplish. The arrows in figure 2 show the movement of the child between the two environments. Additionally, since the child spends far more time at home than at school, family life has a stronger influence over the child. Besides teaching, the school has to address issues of behavior (swearing, hitting), hunger, neglect, lack of focus, substance abuse, etc. that children bring to school. Epstein’s et al. theory describes the ideal situation for a student’s growth, but the reality in Varanasi among oral learners’ children is far from ideal.



Figure 2 Break down of Spheres of Influence

This research will primarily focus on the school and family spheres of influence. In India, family and community influences heavily overlap, especially among migrant communities. These communities are often composed of extended families or come from the same native villages, with the same language and culture. Within a slum, there is a strong sense of community, a social cohesiveness, as there is often a need to stick together in a big city. Much of the behavior a child experiences at home is also seen and experienced in the community. The research will examine the family’s influence on students’ educational processes, with an understanding that the community has a significant influence on the family.

“Caring” is the core concept of Epstein et al. theory (2002, p. 7), in that each sphere of influence should care about the child as a student. Each school in this study was founded with the mission to care for some of the most disadvantaged students in Varanasi. The observation and experience of the lack of partnership between the school, family and community to care for the student has sparked interest to understand this situation further. This research specifically concentrates on;

* the methods teachers are implementing to care for students and help them learn.
* the challenges parents from oral traditions face in educating their children.
* what can be improved to help children of oral learners better learn.

Based on the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, the goal of this research is, first, to begin the process of partnership between schools and families by understanding the situations and influences, even negative influences, the family may have on the student. Second, to investigate what schools can do to reverse some of those negative influences through the life and activity of the school. Eventually, the goal is to create partnerships between schools and families to care for students.

## Researcher’s Background and Motivations

My childhood was spent in India, except for a few of my infant years in Nepal. I lived and studied in various places during my first 18 years, and experienced the diversity of life in India. My first years at school were spent in Varanasi with my family, where I also began to learn Hindi in school. This is also where I became familiar with the way of life many lived in Varanasi, although my parents raised me with a western and biblical worldview. When I was 10 years old we moved to south India for the next 8 years, where Hindi is not spoken and the culture is different.

Fast forward to graduating in the USA with a bachelor’s degree, I decided to move back to Varanasi to work with an NGO I had visited the previous year, as an English and art teacher. By this time I had forgotten most of my Hindi, but immediately immersed myself in the culture and language around me. I worked at the Hindi medium school for two years, and for nine months lived in the slum where most of the children resided, which allowed my Hindi language to develop beyond just basic conversation to enable deeper conversations with those around me. These life experiences have played a major role in my desire to undertake this research project and also in the methodology of the research being action research (detailed in chapter 3).

I am a deeply spiritual person, raised with the Bible at the center of my belief system. From the reading of this scripture, I have come to understand God’s deep care and love for people, especially the oppressed. The scriptures are filled with His desire to bring freedom and justice to the poor and broken, and He often uses people to do this. In Isaiah 58: 6-7 we read,

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to lose the chains of injustice

   and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

   and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry

   and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

   and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

The God of the Bible cares about justice and people’s daily life. “If God were only interested with spiritual salvation why would he have bothered with all the instructions in the Old Testament concerning every aspect of life, including economics, society and politics?” (Hamilton, 2008, p. 54).

The life of Jesus typifies how God actually engages with the poor. Jesus’ central message to the people, both in his words and actions, was about the kingdom of God. Jesus spent the majority of his ministry preaching about and living out the kingdom of God. It is difficult to define what the kingdom of God is, but it is clear that the kingdom of God encompasses more than just the spiritual aspect of life. Jesus made it clear that the kingdom of God was about the transformation of all things on this earth, including the physical and emotional. In Luke 7:11-15 we see Jesus raise a widow’s son from the dead. This woman would have been destitute without her son to care for her. Jesus gave her back her livelihood, reputation and place in society, in raising her son from the dead. Jesus was concerned with the woman’s state of being, and this story is a picture of God’s work to restore people to proper community. I believe God care about people in a similar way today, even down to their education.

The God of the Bible is the same today and has compassion on the poor and oppressed just as he did in ancient times. From reading the Gospels, it seems clear that Jesus has an affection towards children (Matt. 19:13-14, Mark 9:37, Luke 18:15-16). Children are one of the populations in society that need to be cared for in every way. They need to be clothed, fed, given instruction and taught about life. In today’s society children primarily receive this care and instruction from parents and schools. When there are breakdowns in the family and schools preventing children from being taken care of in a healthy way, children experience abuse, oppression, injustice, brokenness, hunger, poverty, homelessness, etc. God is not pleased with these things and wants to see these children free and healed and cared for. One way this is happening in Varanasi is through some of the NGO schools which care for these children.  This is why I personally decided to take on this project, to be a part of seeking justice on behalf of children, because God desires for there to be justice as part of His kingdom.

# 2. The Indian System

“Don’t put a weapon in a child’s hand, put a pencil in it.” –a passionate teacher

## Oral Culture in Urban India

The 2001 Indian Census found that 64.8% of adults were literate, with a large proportion living in urban areas. A high percentage of adults from oral cultures are found in rural areas of India. However, in light of the increasing rate of rural to urban migration in India, recognizing that a large majority of these migrants come from oral traditions is important in understanding how they will function in an urban environment.

Populations of oral cultures are growing in cities. People who have always functioned in an oral tradition, such as in a village setting, without any need for reading and writing, now find themselves surrounded by a literate culture in which they are forced to function. Rao’s study of this phenomenon found that oral traditions change in urban areas as the way that contemporary oral subjects retain information is affected by their interaction in a literate culture (1993). Oral subjects become dependent on literate individuals within their community for remembering dates, time, and amounts (Rao, 1993). The culture of these migrants is further described as one where

Oral subjects live in close ethnic communities even after they migrate to urban cities. These bastis are closely knit communities where families maintain some of the traditional values and religious beliefs that they bring with them from their homelands. (Rao, 1993, p. 122)

It is widely accepted among researchers that children’s educational potential is influenced by their parents’ educational status. Therefore, children whose migrant parents have an oral tradition are the most disadvantaged when it comes to receiving formal education in an urban environment. A recent survey reported in the *Hindustan Times* (2015) found that one of the main reasons for children dropping out of school in Chandigarh is because their parents are oral learners.

## Indian Education

In today’s modern world, formal educational systems are seen as the primary way to acquire human knowledge and skill. The Indian government has taken strides towards this end by implementing a number of education acts, most notably the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) act in 2001 and the Right to Education (RTE) act in 2009 (Singh and Sarkar, 2015). The government's primary efforts have been focused on rapidly expanding the quantity of schools in India and increasing access for all children. One of the most prominent international movements, Education for All (EFA) by UNESCO, focuses their goals on supporting governments in their endeavor to better education (Rose, 2009). Although India has made significant progress in increasing the quantity of schools and access to schools, research has shown that quality is still lacking and students are not acquiring the education they need to help them progress in India today (Sengupta and Pal, 2012, Singh and Sarkar, 2015). Like most developing countries, India’s push for education stems from the belief that access to education is the key to development (Sengupta and Pal, 2012), even though other research has made it clear that attending school does not guarantee literacy or even national development (Pritchett and Beatty, 2014, Masino and Nino-Zarazua, 2015).

Masino and Nino-Zarazua’s research on the quality of student learning in developing countries describes how there is growing evidence that countries develop economically when there is quality of education, not just enough quantity (2015). This is the direction he feels that post-2015 educational development will be taking; how to improve the quality of education. When half of all class 5 students’ reading ability is at a class 2 level in India, the quality of education needs to be seriously reconsidered (Masino and Nino-Zarazua, 2015).

In 2014, a study looking at student learning matching curriculum was conducted, with important results (Pritchett and Beatty). The data found that the number of years children spent in school and the number of years they needed to master core subjects were inconsistent. Many children in India were several levels behind what was being taught, and consecutive years of study did not improve the child’s learning in many cases. One study that was conducted in Andhra Pradesh found that three out of ten children who were enrolled in school till fifth grade never learned simple addition. Data showed that “of the 60 percent of children that did not already master addition by grade 2, less than half gained the skills in *three full years of additional schooling*” (Pritchett and Beatty, 2014, p.277). Pritchett and Beatty present the idea that instead of asking the question of why children are so far behind the curriculum, the more telling question is why the curriculum is so far ahead of the students.

Pritchett and Beatty explain that what they have found is nothing new and educational experts have expressed their concern over many countries’ “wildly overambitious” curriculum in both pace and content (2014, p. 280). Indian schools have a policy that allows all children who attend school regularly to pass the class (up until grade 5) despite what they have learned. However, if a school's curriculum is either too advanced, taught too fast or covers more than the child’s learning ability, a child can be left behind in class and stay behind. When a child does not acquire the necessary basic math or reasoning skills early on, fractions and critical thinking become impossible to learn later on (Pritchett and Beatty, 2014). This research points out that often schools continue to implement curricula above student skill levels because this gives the impression of a good school, even though it is not promoting learning. Slowing down the curricula would be seen as having negative results, even though the research has found that “paradoxically, there is greater learning potential if curricula and teachers slow down” (Pritchett and Beatty, 2014, p. 276). These overambitious curriculum is one of the reasons children of oral learners are not able to stay or progress in government schools.

## Non Government Schools

Since the lack of quality of education has been deeply felt in India, another type of school has emerged; private or non-government schools, both for profit and not for profit schools. Of these non-government schools, a significant number are set up for the poor. These schools tend to be grassroots, small-scale, and have a participatory approach; schools focusing on empowering communities through a bottom-up approach to development and social transformation (Shah, 2016).

Tooley’s research in developing countries revealed a phenomenon of small scale, private, for profit schools for the poor (2009). Quality education was the focus of these schools. Tooley discovered the poor were more interested in paying for a private quality school than a free government school where children did not learn because of the lack of quality. He also found that teachers in the private schools were far more invested in the lives of their students than in government schools. Teachers in these small private schools genuinely cared about the good of their students and worked toward that goal (Tooley, 2009).

Another discovery Tooley made was that, contrary to popular belief, poor parents who may have had little to no formal education actually do care about their child’s education. One mother said, “I am concerned with high-quality subject teaching offered in private schools” (Tooley, 2009, p. 121). Interviews with parents revealed that they actively evaluated children in their communities, and compared those that go to government schools versus private schools. Although teachers may not have credentials at private schools, the quality and motivation of teachers is evident to parents. These teachers often come from the community the schools are in and do not discriminate or ostracize children for being poor. Teachers understand the situation of the children, both the joys and struggles, and can bring a more contextual approach to teaching (Tooley, 2009). Tooley’s research on the effectiveness of small private schools in educating the most disadvantaged influenced the decision of this research project to focus on small private schools.

Shah suggests that in an empowerment framework towards development, or a bottom-up approach, governments have to rely on NGOs to do the grassroots work to close the gap between the rich and poor (2016). The development community considers NGO’s as one of the primary agents enabling countries to respond to marginalized communities’ situations (Shah, 2016). NGO schools, however, are still often seen as “second-best” compared to government schools (Rose, 2009). In Varanasi, it seems that these NGO private schools are the active players in educating the children of oral traditions, and therefore these schools are the focus of this research.

## Student Success

Similar to Tooley’s findings, another study done in India looked at student outcomes based on characteristics of teachers (Singh and Sarkar, 2015). The study was conducted at both low fee private schools and government schools and found that, characteristics in teachers such as educational qualifications, content knowledge, experience and gender had no significance on the student’s learning outcome. Factors that did have a significant impact on student’s outcomes included the teacher’s attitude towards the school, students and teaching practices, the teacher’s professional qualifications and the teacher’s residence in proximity to the school (Singh and Sarkar, 2015).

Another important area to consider in terms of student success is parental involvement. Research has shown over many years and in a wide variety of contexts that children are more successful in school when parents are involved with their education (Domina, 2005, Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, 2014). In Epstein et al. research on the influence of the school, family and community over a student, Epstein et al., like Tooley, found that parents did fundamentally care about the education of their children, regardless of their economic status (2002). Emerson et al. describes the positive impact parental engagement has on student achievement, according to research;

* higher grades and test scores,
* enrolment in higher level programs and advanced classes,
* higher successful completion of classes,
* lower drop-out rates,
* higher graduation rates, and
* greater likelihood of commencing postsecondary education.

Emerson et al. also describes how parental engagement is associated with factors of student development, beyond just their educational development. For example:

* increased school attendance,
* better social skills,
* improved behavior,
* better adaptation to school,
* increased social capital,
* a greater sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning,
* greater engagement in school work, and
* a stronger belief in the importance of education.

                                                                                (Emerson et al., 2012, p.8-9)

These results were proved in another study done in Jamaica that tracked students from early childhood till adulthood (Tough, 2016). The research divided families of infants and toddlers into three groups; one group received one long home visit once a week, the second group received a kilogram of supplements and the third group received nothing. This intervention lasted for two years, but researchers tracked with families beyond that time. Results found that families who received home visits and were encouraged to play with their children, had children who were less aggressive, did better on I.Q. tests and earned an average of 25% more than their peers who did not receive home visits. This research shows that when looking at the success of students, “one of the most powerful potential levels of change is not the children themselves, but rather the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of the adults who surround them” (Tough, 2016, p.1).

Another study on improving child learning in developing countries found that when schools design policies that consider the dual factors of social norms and intertemporal choices, and when a combination of approaches is implemented, interventions are more effective. This study described three types of interventions; supply-side capabilities, incentives for changing preferences and behavior, and participatory and community management (Masino and Nino-Zarazua, 2015). Supply-side intervention consists of improving the infrastructure, organization and teacher training. This research found that supply-side interventions alone were not as effective as when coupled with either community participation or incentives that changed preferences and behavior (Masino and Nino-Zarazua, 2015). This is useful research to consider when determining what suggestions should be made on how to educate the children of oral learners more effectively.

## Conclusion

This chapter considers how oral cultures are increasingly moving to cities, how increasing access to school is not equivalent to quality education, the important role non-government schools are playing in developing countries’ education and different implementations for student success. These are relevant issues to consider in discussing this research. From research, it is clear that NGO schools have a critical role to play, as has been observed in Varanasi. A number of different implementations for student success have been discussed based on research, but this research will reveal what is most important for the context of participants in Varanasi. Before data findings are discussed, the next chapter will detail the methodology of the research.

# 3. Methodology

“I gave students the summer assignment to teach their parents to sign their name.”

-teacher interviewee

## Overview

To answer the research question, primary data collection was conducted at five schools in south Varanasi. The methodology used for this research was action research and qualitative in nature. The approach to this research was inductive. From the raw data, themes were identified and analyzed in relationship both to the local context and to global literature. From this analysis, suggestions were made to improve the effectiveness of educating children of oral learners.

Here is an overview of the process of research;

* Observe the school and local context and talk with local experts
* Literature review to identify existing frameworks and research
* School introduction and plan for interviews
* Semi-structured interviews with teachers
* Semi-structured interviews with parents
* Recorded interviews transcription and translation into English
* Data analyzed and key themes/concepts/ideas identified
* Conclusions, including recommendations for change
* Report back and discussion on changes with schools and people involved in the community interviews

## Action Research

The goal of all action research is to see change, and this specific research is also aimed at doing this in such a way that communities can enact change themselves, through the participants. “Action research is not just about fostering change in organizations, it is about generating learning among the action research participants” (Gray, 2014, p. 337). Gray determines that the three qualifications for action research are that participants are involved in a democratic partnership with the researcher, the research is an agent of change and the data is generated from the experience of participants (Gray, 2014). It is important to note that Gray mentions that the goal of action research is not to create finalized answers to problems, but to “reveal the different truths and realities held legitimately by different groups and individuals” (2014, p. 333). All of these reasons make this method an ideal form of research for this study.

The participants in this research are on two different levels. The direct participants that I interviewed are teachers and parents from certain schools. They provided me with experiential data. However, in order to gain access to these participants, I had to negotiate with the principals of the schools. These principals, although not directly my participants, had some control over the direction and decisions of the research, for example, what the interview questions were, how they should be conducted and which teachers and parents I could interview. Additionally, at the findings of the data, action is unlikely to take place in the schools unless the principal is willing for change to be implemented. It is more likely that teachers will implement methods at a school if there is encouragement from the principal. Action research involves a circular process, where the actions are observed and evaluated. Since the duration of this research is limited to three months in Varanasi, this final step of action research will not be completed by the researcher, but rather by the participants (primarily principals) themselves.

## Interviews

The interview process consisted of semi-formal interviews with teachers and parents. The interviews were designed with open ended questions to allow participants to speak freely and thoroughly on the topic and for the researcher to probe when appropriate (see Appendix for interview questions). Active listening skills were employed so probing was relevant and worth posing (Gray, 2014). Interviews with teachers and parents were designed as group interviews with three or four participants being interviewed simultaneously, from the same school. Each participant was given an opportunity to answer each question. The reason for this format was partially to increase validity and also because listening to participant responses may trigger thoughts and responses in other participants that may not have surfaced in a private interview. Each teacher interview was conducted in Hindi.

The format of these interviews was especially important to use in terms of data collection with parents. Since parents come from an oral culture, using any form of written data collection, such as questionnaires, would be inappropriate and ineffective. Parents were often more comfortable conversing in Bhojpuri, the local language, which is infrequently written, so some parent interviews were conducted in Bhojpuri. Semi-structured and semi-formal interviews made this population feel more at ease in the discussion, where they could speak freely in response to an open-ended question.

## Population and Locations

The participants were teachers of the different NGO schools participating in the research. The participating schools were Asha Deep Vidyashram, Anjali School, Jeevan School, Duniya Education, and Little Stars School. Additionally, some of the parents from each of the schools were interviewed for their perspective. There were 17 teachers that were interviewed in five groups of 3-4, divided by school.  The parents were interviewed as individuals, or in a group of two or three, with a total of 13 parents being interviewed.

The principal of Asha Deep Vidyashram, Mrs. Rao, made the initial contact with other schools, as there was a pre-existing relationship with Asha Deep Vidyashram. After this initial contact, the researcher went with Mrs. Rao to each school to meet their director or principal for a further introduction, a detailed explanation of the research, and confirmation of their interest to participate. At this time, dates for the interviews with teachers were set up.

All the interviews were held at the respective schools in an office or classroom. Therefore, there were no problems in the teachers and parents finding the location for the interview.

## Reliability and Validity

A number of measures have been taken to protect the reliability and validity of the data collected during interviews. To ensure consistency in what was measured, the same researcher and translator conducted all the interviews. They tried to make certain that the questions were asked with the same wording and even with the same tone of voice, to avoid inconsistencies. This increases reliability. Attention was given to any prompting to minimize the possibility of unreliability.

Validity in the interview process has also been considered in the research. The interview questions directly correlate to the research question, to provide validity (Gray, 2014). In talking with participants, measures were taken to make them feel at ease and to build trust; they were given enough time to communicate all that they wanted to. Group interviewing is also likely to increase the credibility of the research, as participants are less likely to make up data or respond according to how they feel the researcher desires because of the presence of others in the room. If a participant is embellishing or lying, it could become evident from the reaction of other participants in the room.

The researcher did not have control over the sample group of teachers and parents at each school, but encourage validity, as much as possible, the design of the research was explained to the principals of the schools so they could make an informed decision in recruiting their teachers and students’ parents to participate.

Lastly, the process of triangulation was used to increase the reliability and validity of the data. By interviewing both teachers and parents and comparing the data from these two sources, a process called “data triangulation” was carried out (Gray, 2014, p. 184).

## Translation

Since the data was collected in a language other than the research’s first language, a translator was used during the data collection and transcription process. Although the researcher is conversational in Hindi, using a translator whose first language is Hindi, prevented possible problems such as different dialects, different or context specific vocabulary, and misunderstanding of concepts from occurring. Since many of the parents primarily speak Bhojpuri, it was also necessary that the translator speak fluent Bhojpuri.

Through connections with Asha Deep school, a translator named Anil Rao agreed to work with the researcher. Anil is from a local community and can speak Hindi, Bhojpuri, and conversational English. Anil assisted in conducting informed consent, data collection and transcription of recorded interviews. He was accompanied by the researcher at every interview and did not conduct any research or informed consent independently. Before any interaction began with participants, the researcher explained the importance of research ethics, confidentiality, privacy and informed consent with Anil.

Transcription was done by both Anil and the researcher. Anil listened to and then stopped the recording to translate into English. The researcher would then type the English. If Anil’s grammar was unclear, the researcher would clarify the translation on the spot, e.g. “Did the recording say ‘will’ or ‘might’?” because a small discrepancy can change the meaning and interpretation of the data. Additionally, the researcher was able to use her knowledge of Hindi, especially in cases where there was no direct translation. If the researcher felt that Anil’s translation was unclear, she would ask him to repeat what was recorded in Hindi, so she could work with Anil to determine how it should be translated.

## Ethical Considerations

### Informed Consent

As all the potential participants were either employed by a school or had their children enrolled in the school, it was very important to state that participation in this study was completely voluntary and neither participation nor declining to participate would affect the employment or services received by the schools. This was done through an informed consent form. Participants were informed of the purpose and process of the interview through the consent form, and were asked to sign if they agreed to participate. The form also stated that there was expected to be no risk of any stress or harm caused to the participant, but that if they wished to stop participating at any time they could do so. The informed consent was translated into Hindi so that teachers could easily read and sign it. For parents who could not read or sign their name, the informed consent was read to them and their fingerprint was used as a signature after they had understood and given their consent.

### Confidentiality

The informed consent forms were kept separately and securely from the research data, and there were no identifying facts of the participants in the final research presentation. For protection of documents, all data on software was password protected and hardware data kept in a secure location in the researcher’s possession. The data will not be distributed to any unauthorized persons.

### Conflict of Interest

It is important also to state that there was no conflict of interest in conducting this research. There was no financial interest to the researcher or to Asha Deep Vidyashram in conducting this research.  A Potential Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form was signed though Azusa Pacific University, who has this on record.

### Power Dynamics

Another important ethical consideration is the power dynamics between the researcher and participants. Although the researcher is a foreigner, whose first language is English, she lived in Varanasi for two years in the communities where she conducted this research. She has significant understanding of the language and culture. She is no longer treated as a foreigner by the locals she knows. In interviews, the conversational Hindi she does have, as well as her dress and mannerisms, seemed to help participants feel more at ease and comfortable. Casually chatting before the interview helped participants feel more comfortable with the researcher.

Mrs. Rao, who did the initial recruitment for the research, is a well respected member of the community. Although she is an American, married to an Indian, she is considered to be Indian by the locals, in her lifestyle, dress, and language. In her recruitment of other NGO schools for the research, the other principals she talks to were not engaged in any power dynamics as they are all in a similar position. It is unlikely they would feel pressure to participate because of a power dynamic, because among them there is no perceived power dynamic.

## Data Analysis

My data analysis approach in this research is based on grounded theory, as described by Gray (2014). Grounded theory was chosen because the nature of the research is inductive and qualitative, which fits well with the process grounded theory takes. In grounded theory, the approach to data analysis is systematic. Additionally, the method of analyzing data through triangulation (Gray, 2014) was used to incorporate the perspective and experience of parents into the data, as well as the teachers. This triangulation assisted in interpreting and explaining the data for deeper understanding. The research began with the defined purpose of understanding effective methods in educating children of oral learners, but changed throughout the data analytical process, to focus on parental involvement.

The transcribed data was printed out, re-read and open coding was implemented throughout the data, with colored highlighters. As the data was being open coded, notes were taken to begin axial coding; recognizing relationships between codes and subcategorizing codes. A second reading of the data amended open and axial coding further. At this stage, selective coding was implemented where a theory was formed from the integration of categories and coding. By this stage, the purpose was redefined to reflect the themes that had emerged from the data. The final step was to present the explanation of the theory in two ways, one for the local, participating community and secondly for the international academic community.

## Limitations

The limited time frame in which this research needed to be completed posed a challenge to the nature of action research. Observing and analyzing the change that was intended was not possible in this study.

An unexpected limitation was that some principals did not coordinate for parent interviews to be done in groups, so individual interviews had to be conducted. Additionally, in 2 cases, teacher participants were instructed by their supervisor to leave the interview in order to attend to a different situation, cutting short the interview. This meant that data from this school was not collected in its entirety as all questions were not asked.

## Action Outcomes and Outputs

There are two primary outputs for this project. The first product of the research was a master’s level write up for Azusa Pacific University on the process and findings of this project. The second output of this research was for the benefit of the local community and NGO schools. A PowerPoint presentation by the researcher, translated into Hindi, of the findings and suggested outcomes was made. All participants, school principals, local community members, and students were invited to the presentation at Asha Deep Vidyashram. Each participating school received a seven page printed report in both English and Hindi.

The final presentation made at Asha Deep for the schools was a critical time to influence change. The report described main themes from the data, with the focus on parental involvement and explained ways to move forward in encouraging more involvement. Ideas for improvement in different methods based on others research was emphasized.

At the end of the presentation, there was a short discussion on the response to possible changes suggested in the report. Although the researcher has studied the context and schools, it is understood that teachers will incorporate only what makes sense and works into their context (Shah, 2016). A discussion on how these ideas can be implemented helped teachers think through ideas together and tweak suggestions for maximum impact.

The community will benefit as a result of the schools implementing suggestions for increased parental involvement. Short term results may be seen in the students over the next school year or the coming school years. Long term results will be of great benefit to the community as more children will grow up educated and stay in school, which should result in some attending higher education and receiving well paying jobs. As wealth increases in these communities and young adults get jobs instead of staying on the streets, life in the community should improve and be transformed. When oral learners become literate, this allows them to function at a higher level in the city.

# 4. Understanding Situations

“A good teacher can change a school and a child” – a passionate teacher

## Overview

As discussed in chapter 1, this research examined the topic of educating children of oral learners through NGO schools in Varanasi, India. This chapter describes the data collected from the interview process involving the participants. It is organized into three overarching sections; NGO school profiles, teacher interview findings and parent interview findings. Within the teacher and parent interview findings sections, data is separated by topic, based on interview questions and then thematically described based on what came out of the data.

## School Profiles

Prior to the teacher interviews, teachers filled out a basic profile of the school to obtain a clearer depiction of the type of school they work in and the kind of student demographic they cater to. The following chart describes each school’s profile.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Asha Deep Vidyashram  | Anjali School | Jeevan School | Little Stars School | Duniya Education |
| Year began | 2004 | 2007 | 2005 | 1996 | 2007 |
| Grades | KG-8th | Nursery-6th | Nursery-10th | Nursery-12th | KG-4th |
| # of students | 250 | 158 | 135 | 900 (600 till class 9) | 85 |
| # of teachers | 14 full time3 part time | 7 | 9 | 60 | 6 |
| Students per class on average | 20-24 | 25-30 | 5-20 (less students in higher grades) | 25-30 | 20 |
| % w/ oral learner parents | 85% | 65% | 90% | 70% | 85% |
| % w/ family income >6000 rp/m | 60% | 80% | 100% | 50% | 100% |
| School fees | KG-1  Rs.360/yr2-8 Rs.540/yr | 100 Rs./month | None | NoneYearly examination fees | None |
| Other free provisions | School lunch, high school students receive full scholarship\* | Poor families are given help they need | School lunch, books, bags, clothes, sweaters, tuition, uniforms, medicine, doctors visits, vaccinations | Books and sweaters for students w/ sponsorship | School lunch, books, bags, clothes 1x/year, sweaters, tuition.Subsidized uniform.  |
| Hostel | no | no | yes | yes | no |
| Target Demographic  | slum | slum and lower income | homeless | slum and lower income | slum |

Figure 3 Participant School Profile Chart

\* *Although Asha Deep only teaches till 8th grade, the school fully sponsors their graduates in high school at another local school, to make it possible for low income families to send their children to high school.*

Two of the five schools were outliers in terms of the data. First, Jeevan School was an outlier because of parental attitudes towards educating their children. The demographic of this student population was primarily homeless. For the safety of the children, Jeevan had opened a hostel, so children could be in a safe environment and not exposed to danger on the street. In terms of this research, this school is only an outlier in parental attitudes. Teachers’ experiences and opinions voiced during teacher interviews correlated with other schools.

The second outlier school was Little Star School (LSS). The number of children at LSS was drastically higher than any of the other schools. There were also significantly more teachers. LSS was also a high school, while none of the other schools included all of high school. Even excluding the high school students, LSS had the same amount of students in elementary and middle school as all the students in the other schools combined. It may also be significant to note that LSS was established at least ten years before any of the other schools. The biggest outlier in the data, however, was with the teacher interviews. Teachers’ answers to questions were significantly different than those of teachers at the other four schools, primarily in terms of their school’s educational system and paying less attention to building caring relationships. Noting this outlying data, the next section describes data collected from teacher interviews.

## Teacher Interviews and Findings

The teacher interviews make up the primary bulk of data for this research project. The school profiles and parent interviews are used to triangulate data. This section has been organized into five topics that were emphasized by the interview questions:

* Challenges in educating children of oral learners
* The NGO schools’ educational system
* Portrait of a government school
* The most important aspect of educating
* Ideas for improvement

Within each topic there are themes that break down each topic according to the five group interviews that were taken. This data represents the thoughts and perspectives of seventeen teachers from five different schools.

### Challenges

Incomplete Homework

The first response in every interview regarding the challenges teachers faced educating children of oral learners was that many children did not and could not complete homework. In each case, teachers discerned that the primary reason for this habit was the parents’ inability to read and write and, therefore, help their children. This led teachers into discussing the effect of the home environment on the child and its impact of the child's ability to complete homework.

*Lack of Parental Supervision:* All teachers interviewed shared a concern over the lack of parental supervision, specifically in regards to the parents’ negligence of their child’s homework responsibilities. Teachers explained that the majority of parents who are oral learners do not make their children do their homework. By this, teachers meant that parents do not inquire if children have homework or encourage them to physically sit down and do their homework. A few teachers stated that parents did not “force” children to do their homework, either. Teachers expressed understanding that oral learner parents would not be able to help their child with homework, but the teachers’ concern was the lack of attention parents paid to the fact that children had homework they needed to do in the first place.

*Home Environment:* Additionally, most teachers mentioned how an unhealthy atmosphere at home affected the ability of the child to do their homework. One teacher described it as a lack of both physical and emotional space. Most of the children in these schools live in one room houses, with an average of four or five other family members sharing that space. Daily “Ladaee-Jhagada” (fighting/ quarreling) in their communities prevent children from having the emotional space they need to do homework. A loss in motivation to study is also a consequence of this unhealthy home environment.

*Effect in Learning:* Teachers described a number of interconnected reasons why incomplete homework creates a challenge in student learning. Teachers in each school expressed that the *majority* of children in their classes did not do their homework *most of the time*. Some teachers said it was 50% of students that did not do the homework. The following challenges were expressed by the teachers;

* Extra time needed in class to complete and help with homework.
* Extra time needed outside of class to complete and help with homework.
* All subject matter has to be taught in class, cannot expect help from parents.
* Children are at different levels in class (those who do homework and those who do not).
* Constant repetition of same material because children forget.
* Not enough time to complete the curriculum.

*Inconsistency in Data:* There was an interesting inconsistency throughout the conversation on the topic of homework. This inconsistency in the interviews was as to how homework was assigned. Even within the same interview, and therefore the same school, teachers said that it was challenging when the students didn't do their homework. They further explained that because children often did not do homework, teachers did not assign homework. Teachers, however, would make contradictory statements like talking about how they would help children with homework in class or after school. This inconsistency was present in most of the interviews, and the teachers were not concerned or challenging each other on these comments.

Although no questions were asked on the specifics of what kind of homework was assigned, a comment was repeated a number of times that is worth noting. In three of the interviews, homework was mentioned in terms of being a review of what was learned in class, not new information. It was work that was to be looked over from that morning and remembered, not new information to be learned independently.

Parental Involvement and Attitude towards Education

*Lack of Parental Support:* Teachers generally agreed that most parents have a genuine desire to send their children to school and for their children to become educated. This is why parents put their children in school. However, even though parents want their children to be educated, oral learners do not understand what being educated entails or why it is important. Teachers mentioned that parents may send their children to school because they see other parents doing this or because it is generally understood to be a path toward obtaining a better job in the future. The teachers’ frustration over parental attitudes was verbalized through these words: “parents think education is all about the school and if they send their child to school, they have no other responsibility in the child’s education.” They continued, “parents think that just by sending their child to school, they are doing enough and they are free from any other responsibility [in the child’s education].” A lack of support from the parents was repeatedly recounted by the teachers.

*No Opportunity to Understand:* One teacher voiced her concern over the fact that oral learner parents did not have a way to understand or figure out if their children were really learning. She described a situation where a parent could be observing a child studying, with their books, but really the child had snuck a comic book between his textbook pages and was reading comics. The parent thought their child was studying for two hours when really they were just reading a comic.

*Money:* As teachers discussed how most parents want their children to get an education, the fact arose that making money was often more important to parents than their child's education. This will be discussed further in the next section.

*Home Environment:* In each interview, the topic of the home environment and parental influence was raised by the teachers because “children are not coming from a background that encourages them to learn.” The situation is that the majority of children come from an unhealthy home environment, with frequent fighting, arguing, alcohol and substance abuse, all happening in front of children. Teachers shared their concern over children learning these unhealthy habits from their parents. One teacher said, “illiterate parents don't understand the effect of their behavior on their children.” Not only do the children learn these behaviors as they are modelled to them, it also affects how they are able to study in school. Teachers said that, being in unhealthy home environments, children “lose motivation” and “cannot progress.”

*Neglect:* Another aspect of the unhealthy home environment was expressed as parental neglect of children. Most commonly, phrased in Hindi as “dhyaan nahin dena,” not paying attention to the child, as described in a number of ways in regards to the child;

* Most parents do not ask children about school or their day.
* Most parents do not ask their children about homework, nor make them do it.
* Sometimes parents don't know if their child is in school or not.
* Parents do not know where children are after school.
* Some parents do not or cannot feed children before school.
* Some parents do not bathe children or wash their clothes.

One teacher summed up his opinion by saying, “Poverty is not the parents’ fault, but not paying attention to a child is the parents’ fault.”

*An Exception:* The interview results from Jeevan School were significantly different from the rest of the data on the topic of parental attitudes. These teachers experienced situations where “family members tell the children there is no benefit to studying.” If the teachers go to the child’s home and try to persuade both the child and parent to send the child to school, if the child does not want to go to school, then the parents will not make the child go to school. Teachers mentioned that when they first started working with these homeless families, parents did not make their children come to school. It has taken years for just a few of the parents to understand the importance of educating their children and making them attend school. The primary difference between this school and the rest is that the family demographic of this school is homeless families.

Money

*Money over Education:* In three of the interviews there was discussion about how a lack of money has a negative effect on the education of the child. In each case the interview revealed how money would trump education or going to school. The idea was clear that “the most important thing for parents is money.” This affected the child by either the child needing to drop out of school in order to work or beg, or the child needing to drop out of school and return to the village because the parents did not have work and could not afford to live in the city.

*Income to Live:* One teacher described a parent's reply when he asked why they don't send their children to school; “when we send children to beg for money they bring back money. We can eat for one day from that money. Is food important or is education important? If our children don't work, how will we eat?” Another teacher said that parents will send their children to school until an opportunity arises for him or her to work, then the child will be taken out of school and made to work.

*Greed:* In two interviews it was revealed that teachers saw children in their early teens wanting to leave school and make money for themselves. In both interviews, the children were described as greedy for money. It was said that these children want to work so they have some money to buy a mobile phone or shoes, and these desires draw them away from school. These children also see other children their age working and think that they could also be earning money instead of going to school.

### The NGO schools

In order to understand what is effective in teaching children of oral learners, teachers were asked what the school does specifically to teach children of oral learners and then what they thought was most important. The main points that came out from each of the schools were the importance of personal relationships between teachers and children, the kind of attitude and behavior teachers had towards children and the school’s approach to educating children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Personal Relationships

In all of the interviews, the importance of personal relationships was emphasized. This was described as having “attachment” with children, where “children begin to feel that school is their second home” and “they consider us to be like their parents.” Most of the schools described the school setting in terms of a family. The Hindi words “pyaar se,” lovingly, were also used to describe how teachers interact with the children, especially in situations where the child has done something wrong. There was an emphasis on seeking to understand the child’s reasoning behind why he did something and also the child's background, then to respond in a loving way. Some teachers made a direct correlation between loving the children and the children’s desire to come to school. Teachers noted these relationships were especially important for children who did not come from loving families. They want the children to know they are loved.

Emphasis was placed on understanding how a child was doing, in visually reading them at the beginning of class and asking how things were with them and at home. One teacher described it like this;

A good teacher will initially look into the eyes of all the students, to see how the children are doing, whether they are sad or happy. Teachers should first observe this and then have a five minute talk with the children about their lives, what they ate that day, because there might be some children who have not eaten that day. If you tell a child to repeat times tables and he has not eaten, he cannot do it. It's bad then, if a teacher beats or punishes him because the reason he could not do it is because he hasn't eaten. If the teacher doesn't initially observe how the children are doing it is a bad sign.

*Caring Relationships:* At one school in particular, teachers explained that they felt children enjoyed coming to that school because of the relationships they had with teachers. They described how teachers could tell immediately how children were feeling because of their personal relationships. Children felt free to share how they were doing because they felt a connection with the teacher. There was sometimes a “mother-child relationship” between teachers and children and children feel a special bond towards the school. Children had close relationships with many of the teachers, not just the teachers that taught them. It was also mentioned that in this school every teacher knew every student’s name in the whole school.

*Understanding Home Life:* Understanding where the child comes from was a significant part of the relationship teachers had with children. This was discussed in every interview. An understanding of the child’s background, family and home life informed teachers how to respond to situations that arose with a child. Even listening to how a child was feeling and why they were feeling a certain way gave insight into the child. Since teachers understood that children generally come from unhealthy home environments, they were not surprised or took it personally when children would swear at them. They do not expect the child to come to school disciplined, but rather to learn discipline at school. Another aspect of understanding the child’s life situation was discussed in not giving homework to children of oral learners because they would not be able to get any help.

In concluding this theme of personal relationships, one teacher expressed that if a school and its teachers worked on loving a child, even if the child does not break out of the cycle of poverty or get a higher education, he will be a better person for being treated with love.

Teachers’ Attitudes and Behavior

*Loving Behavior:* When discussing how teachers specifically taught children of oral learners, all schools discussed the importance of their behavior towards children. They do not make the children do “murga ban jao” (literally, act like a chicken, which is a humiliating punishment), or “demoralize” him or her for not doing their homework or not understanding class work. They don't make children feel bad for not being able to do homework if they could not get help at home because this only makes the child lose interest in school. They do not compare children of oral learners to other children, as this will also make them feel inferior. One teacher said that they do not call children bad names or use bad language, which is prohibited, or “say things that are wrong” which will hurt them. They are forbidden to hit or shout at children. Two teachers recognized their influence over the child as a role model, and said we *should* be role models.

*Encouragement:* Encouragement was also a common point raised during the interviews. Children should be encouraged to go to school, but also to play and enjoy being at school. When children struggle to understand subject matter, teachers said they tell them, “if you don't understand, we will explain it again;” or “it's, OK, don't worry, you can do better next time.” Teachers should also encourage children in the interests they have, and suggest that they pursue them.

*Non Discrimination:* The interviews also revealed that many teachers did not discriminate against the children and even tried to minimize the social gap. One teacher directly said, “we are not concerned with their ‘jati/jat-biraadar’ (their caste), and everyone here talks to each other…here everyone is equal. That is why children enjoy coming to school.” In another school even the way the classroom is set up is designed to decrease physical levels and space between students and teachers, as explained here;

The children sit on the floor and the teacher will also sit on the floor. So this decreases the physical gap between the teacher and student. If the child is sitting on the floor and the teacher is sitting on a chair, there is a lot of space between them. The teacher is up and the child is down, but we do not have this space. Teachers and students are near to each other and distance is decreased. The child thinks, the teacher is sitting with me so we are equal and now I can share all my thoughts with the teacher. In our school, this is what is best. We bring the feeling of equality so the children can share what is inside of them. Only if the child talks to us openly will we be able to support them. If children are not able to tell us how they are doing then how will we be able to support them?

*Focus on Comprehension:* In every interview teachers expressed a focus on understanding the level of the child’s comprehension of lessons. Teachers described how their goal was not for children to get good marks on tests but rather to understand what they were being taught. One teacher expressed how she didn't feel test scores accurately reflected how well the student had learned. She explained that some children knew the information and had understood it, but struggled with written work. This is why they do not solely depend on written test scores to evaluate a student’s ability. One interviewee said, “We tell children that if they do not understand, don't just memorize it, otherwise you will forget it.” The schools were clear that they do not just move children up a grade at the end of the year if they are not truly ready to be moved up.

*Teaching at Child’s Learning Level:* Another way in which teachers tried to help children comprehend was by “going down to the level of the children,” and by working from the beginning using concepts that children already were familiar with in their everyday life. Teachers did not expect children to be able to achieve unrealistic heights, but rather realistically taught at the level the children were at. One teacher explained this by saying, “we have to keep in mind the level of work we are giving them and only give what they can do.” Comprehension of subject matter required much repetition in class.

School’s approaches

All of the schools approached educating children with a more holistic view of the child than just their academic needs. This was present in the data in a number of different ways. Understanding the need to discipline children was prominent in all interviews, especially given the understanding the teachers had of the home environments where there was minimal to no discipline. Some of the main ways this happened was by paying attention to the child throughout the day, explaining to them what they should and should not do, teaching them how they need to behave in the outside world, to be respectful towards people and “sanskars” (values) they need to develop to make them a “good person.”

*Life Skills:* Teaching different social aspects of life was also a priority for the schools. Topics like hygiene were considered important, as often children did not learn about hygiene at home. Teachers described having to go to student's homes or discuss in meetings with parents the importance of bathing children before they came to school. One school also expressed the importance of teaching social awareness, which they described as getting children to learn child help line numbers and explain what they can do if they get kidnapped, and how to relate to policemen.

*Spiritual Knowledge:* One school in particular had a heavy emphasis on spiritual knowledge. Every morning the children meditated. Yoga was also part of the curriculum and seen as essential for the growth of the child. Spiritual knowledge, described as “our traditions, ancient culture and way of life, relating to elders and ways to treat a guest” were considered necessary knowledge. A teacher at this school said, “A child needs to learn all the subjects taught in school but at the end of their life a person will not remember these things. A person will only remember the good and bad that he did in his life.”

*Individuality:* Viewing each child as an individual with their own skills and talents was also expressed. Teachers encouraged children to have goals and helped them dream of what they wanted to become, guiding them by helping them see what they were good at and might enjoy in a future job. Most children did not have life goals when they began school. A teacher described it this way, “here we do not think that every child is the same [has the same talent or gifting] and has to go into the same field. The principal is aware of what the child's interests are and tries to help them get into that area of study.”

*Character Building:* This way of viewing a child is through a holistic lens, alongside their education focusing on molding a child into a person with good character that will last their whole life, however well (or otherwise) they did in school.

*Second Chances:* Most of the interviews also indicated that there was an attitude of second chances toward the children. In not doing homework, failing tests, coming late to school, missing multiple days of school, bad behavior and even not paying school fees on time, the school’s policy was to give students another chance. Teachers understood that with the struggles most of the children face, without second chances in all areas related to school, children would not be in school.

*Supporting Struggling Students:* All the schools had also created ways to give extra support to children that struggled in school or needed extra help that they could not receive at home or through expensive tuitions. These were implemented through after school classes, taking time to do homework during class, paying more attention to the needs of academically slower children during class and frequent repetition of subject matter if it was not understood in class. One teacher felt that, “if a student is mentally weaker, the teacher should be passionate about teaching him and consider him as their best student and think, I should take him forward. This should be a teacher's passion.”

*Creative Teaching Methods:* All schools said that the teachers used creative teaching methods in class and paid attention to the children and their learning and struggles. If children did not understand a topic, it would be repeated in a different way with different examples until they could understand. Teachers expressed their desire to use alternative ways to teach besides the standard blackboard and textbooks. The most common answer in how they teach in alternative ways was the use of visual aids. Visuals included posters, charts, and drawings. The teachers also involved children in making these visuals for their classroom. Most teachers mentioned that using visuals helped children remember what they had been taught. Other techniques used included

* Having separate classrooms for different topics, like math and science.
* Playing games and using flashcards.
* Showing videos and singing songs.
* Doing activities and worksheets.
* Developing imagination through drawing and molding clay.

A number of teachers recognized what one explained; “Until the child enjoys learning he won’t put effort into studying.”

### Portrait of a Government School

If it weren't for NGO schools in south Varanasi, poor families who wanted to send their children to school would only have government schools to choose from. The data collected through the interviews described many different aspects of a government school, which I will describe in one portrait below, as a contrast to the NGO schools described above.

Teachers at government schools have a large fixed salary, not dependent on how they teach. Some schools may require that the teachers sign in in the morning to mark their attendance, but it is possible for them to go home at any time after they have signed in. It does not seem that teachers in government schools really care about teaching children.

Even when teachers are in class, they don't pay much attention to the children and what children are doing or learning. They typically just come to class and use the blackboard and chalk to teach material without using any other creative teaching materials. There are so many children in a class that the teacher may not even know the names of the students, let alone if a child is sick.

The teacher's behavior towards children is not a concern for the school. Sometimes the teacher may discriminate based on a student’s caste. Teachers may also insult or demoralize children in front of the whole class if they cannot do assignments or their homework. It is also common for teachers to hit students as a punishment for bad behavior or work that isn't up to their standard. This kind of behavior makes children afraid to go to school and quickly drop out.

Government schools focus on teaching the curriculum and moving students along, without attention to the child’s comprehension level. In class, if there are students falling behind in their academics, the teachers may ignore them and move on. Up until grade five, teachers will move children to the next grade no matter how poorly they did on their tests and even if they don't understand the material. Then in the higher grades, if a student fails, they do not offer a second chance and the student has to drop out of school. A good student is defined as one who gets good marks, and this is the only thing government schools seem to care about, good exam results. Due to the curriculum being based on memorization, the child may be able to get good exam results but still have low comprehension of the subject matter.

Consequently, when children get admitted from government schools to schools that care about the level of comprehension, it is common for the child to move down either one or multiple grades. Children coming from government schools were described as “not knowing anything” by teachers at various of the schools where I did interviews.

### Most Important Aspect of Education

Every teacher was asked for their opinion on what was most important in educating children of oral learners. A range of answers were given, and some teachers even verbally disagreed with each other during the interview.

*Parental Involvement:* The most common answer to what was most important was the involvement of the parents, both in their role and in their understanding of the child’s education. Multiple teachers said that if the parents spent some time with their children it would make a difference. Teachers mentioned as little as 10 minutes, while others said up to one hour, of parents’ time should be focused on their children daily at home. During this time, teachers mentioned that parents could ask children about their day, sit with them while they do their homework, or get children to teach them something they are learning at school. One participant said, “If they care about the children's education in ways like making their children do their homework and making sure they are studying, there will be a positive effect on the student.”

*Parental Understanding:* For the parent to be involved in the child's education at all, teachers recognized that the parents needed to have an understanding of the importance of education. A number of teachers expressed the need to help parents understand the reasons behind sending their children to school when they themselves have never been to school. Explaining how life circumstances can change with being educated and getting certain kinds of jobs is part of this process. It is also important to tell parents how children are doing in school, what they are doing in school and even comment about how children steadily improve in school and do not develop all at once. Some of the schools have seen children graduate from middle school and go to different high schools and this has been an important aspect in parental understanding of the reality of what can happen when they put their children in school.

*Make School Enjoyable:* At one school, a teacher directly disagreed with her co-worker and argued that no matter how much time you spend explaining things to the parents, if the teacher does not create a fun and enjoyable environment at school where the child wants to come to school, he or she will not want to come to school or learn. This includes helping children to focus when they are in school and not focus on their situation at home, which has likely had a negative impact on them. So this teacher felt that helping the child have a positive attitude in school and towards education was most important.

*Understanding the Student:* Another response to what was most important was understanding the student. Every day the teacher should be in tune with how students are feeling and doing, being able to read where the child’s mind is at that day. Along with this, creating a loving environment was described, where “we create an atmosphere where we can lovingly help the children understand, because then they will be able to understand.” Teachers discussed how “what is inside the child” is most important, and how creating a loving environment where equality is fostered allows the child to open up and share who they are. Once children opened up and were understood, teachers felt they could really help the child the most.

*Building Student’s Character:* Some other teachers described how the most important thing in educating children of oral learners was molding positive character and values in the child. One participant expressed her view that parents cannot be changed because they have been the same for a very long time already. But there is hope for the next generation if we train them well, and pay attention to their behavior and character. In this way, even if they do not make it very far in school, they will become a good person in society.

*Classroom Teaching:* Lastly, the teachers at the largest of the NGO schools in this study said that the most important thing was to explain everything in class and make sure they understood the lesson in class. Additionally, giving children time in class to do their homework so that teachers can help them with it was important as it was supporting the students in their needs.

This section describes the teachers’ opinions of what they feel is most important in educating a child. Three out of the five answers describe some kind of interaction between people; parents being more relationally involved, personal understanding of who the child is and teachers shaping the child’s character or values by paying attention to them. The other two answers related to teaching methods in the classroom. Not only were there more answers focused on relationships between teachers, parents and children, the majority of the 17 teachers gave these responses.

### Ideas for Improvement

The opportunity was given for each teacher to share ideas they had for being more effective in educating children. In every interview, one specific point was raised; more parental involvement in the lives of their children. In addition to involvement, the teachers also expressed the continual need to work on explaining to parents the benefits of educating children and being involved in supporting their learning. Teachers recognized that children attending school primarily depended on the worldview of the parents. If their parents valued education, the parent put more effort into seeing their child receive an education. While some schools felt they needed to continue to help the parents understand the importance of educating their children and motivate them to send children to school, other schools were more concerned with parents’ daily involvement with their children.

*Parental Involvement:* Teachers from three schools mentioned that they already go to children's homes to meet their parents and discuss issues with them, while other schools require parents to come to the school facility. Finding ways to creatively discuss topics with parents, such as dramas in meetings, was an idea a participant had. Many of the teachers mentioned the necessity of explaining to parents that they need to sit with their children, give them attention, supervise and encourage them in their homework. Teachers felt that when parents paid attention to their children in this way, the child feels more supported as a student and more motivated to study. Teachers believe that parental attitudes towards education affect the children’s attitude towards education.

*Teach Life Skills:* Another idea teachers from multiple schools had was to provide children with what they termed “counseling.” On probing as to what they meant by counseling, the following list of topics emerged;

* Sex education
* Making life goals/ having aspirations
* Personality development
* Conflict management
* Problem solving
* Further education
* Substance abuse education

Teachers also discussed how they would want a different teacher to do this “counseling” instead of current teachers being trained to teach this.

*Vocational Training:* One group of teachers, from the same school, had some conflicting ideas on whether or not providing vocational training would be helpful to some of the children. Teachers A and B thought that because some children drop out of school to earn money, the school could provide a vocational training program that paid them, so they could learn a skill, earn money and go to school part time. Teacher C strongly disagreed with this idea, saying that the reason children want to earn money was to buy “fancy” things and the school should not feed their greed for these things. Children who were happy studying would start to also want vocational training so that they could buy what they want. She argued that this income would not be benefiting their families, so she was against vocational training.

## Parent Interviews

Parents were interviewed in both group and individual settings, depending on the circumstances and whether they could come to a group interview. Many of the parents seemed nervous initially, but were assured that only their opinions and personal viewpoints would be asked for and there were no right or wrong answers. The themes that emerged from this interview data were parents’ self identity, their attitude towards education, problems they face, their view of the NGO schools and their hope for their children.

### Self Identity and Worldview

The overwhelming theme that came out of the parental interviews was the view they had of themselves and their own ability to understand or think critically. They viewed their own ability to understand the school setting as impossible and could not think critically about a school. Here are some examples of the plethora of comments parents made;

“We are illiterate and don't have brains so how would we know?”

“I don't have a way to find out about the teaching and then have an opinion.”

“I don't know what I like about the school; I don't have a chance to think about it.”

“We are illiterate so what do we really know?”

“I didn't bother to understand if the school was teaching well.”

“I don't know why I should send my children to this school or another school.”

“I cannot understand if my children are learning or not.”

“What can I tell you about this school?”

Parents seem to feel that because they have not received formal education they are not able to evaluate the schools. The way parents talked about this in the interviews was not in a way that they didn't know but wanted to learn, but rather this was a reality that they had come to accept and were not trying to change. In the way some of the parents expressed this view, they did not seem to think approaching the school and asking questions to learn more was even an option. For example, the parent who said that “I don't have a way to find out about the teaching and then have an opinion” did not seem to think there was any way she could find out about the teaching at the school, and had resigned herself to this.

### Attitudes toward Education

Every single parent expressed their desire for their children to get an education and get a good job. The general desire was expressed by this father: “We are illiterate but we do not want our children to be illiterate, they should learn.” Another father mentioned that “In today's world, education is everything.” Some parents mentioned that their children wanted to go to school so they made that possible even though they had financial struggles.

Beyond this desire for children to be educated, most parents did not have much to say on educating their children. One very vocal father did, however, describe his thoughts about education is some detail. Although this is only one parent's comments, it is an interesting case to examine;

In school even if children are not studying they will be calm for 2 hours. They will be civilized. What do they learn at home? If they are with bad children, they will learn bad habits. Whatever atmosphere the children are around, they are molded by their surroundings. What matters are my values and my upbringing. It doesn't matter what caste children belong to, the values they have will be seen. Children and adults should have good values.

When parents listen to their children who do not want to go to school and let them stay home, they are actually ruining their children. We are the ones who are responsible for the future of our children. But it is up to the child to pay attention to the teacher and learn. If the child does not pay attention it is their own fault.

This was the worldview of one of the parents.

### Problems

In most of the interviews, when parents were initially asked what problems they faced in sending their children to school their response was that they did not have any problems. Some parents mentioned their struggles were having to get their children up early in the morning to go to school or that their children had to walk to school. Another father mentioned that because of his life situation he was not able to afford tuition for his children, but he was the only parent to mention tuition. Additionally, he mentioned that if he got sick for an extended period of time, even 15 days, he would not be able to earn money.

*Money as Decision Maker:* Throughout the parental interviews, however, their struggles because of money arose. Most of the parents mentioned that the reason they put their child in the NGO school was because of financial difficulties. Either they could not afford any school before their child was in the NGO school or the child previously attended a more expensive school. Some families had managed to have their child in a private school, but monthly school fees ranged between 500-1,000 rupees per child and this was not sustainable for them. These parents described how the school fees kept increasing until it reached a point where they could not pay and that is why their child is now in the NGO school. Most parents felt that for the kind of education their children received for the money they paid, the NGO school was the best option.

*Lack of Money:* Every interviewee mentioned money and finances in their interview and the financial struggles they face. Parents whose children were in free schools mentioned the problems they had at home because of the lack of money. Other parents talked about how it was a struggle to pay for uniforms and books. Working mothers, who had once sent their children to other more expensive schools, explained that they worked really hard at their jobs to pay for their children's education. They all worked as house maids. They put all of their income into their children's education and could not save any money. Many parents expressed that they were in a difficult financial position.

### The NGO Schools

When parents were asked what specifically they liked about their child's school, most parents began with “everything is good, the teaching is good and the children are studying.” Even after probing, the most common response was that the teaching was good. However, parents were not able to describe *how* the teaching was good or even how teachers taught in the classroom.

*Positives:* Throughout the interviews, parents mentioned different aspects of the schools that they liked, including the nice principal, the school’s short distance from home, the school’s understanding of their problems and low fees. Parents from every school described how the director or principal of the school treated them nicely and was a good person. Two parents from different schools mentioned that the teachers treated their children lovingly. Parents from all schools mentioned that the close proximity of the school to their house was a big factor in why they sent their children there. Many parents also described how the schools were understanding of their life situation. They mentioned that when they could not pay school fees on time, the school would work with them to pay later, decrease the payment or cancel the fee. Another mother described how even though the children that went to school there were misfortunate, the teachers did not shout at them or beat them.

*Financial Factor:* As mentioned above, the primary reason parents sent children to these schools was because it was free or very inexpensive. All the parents heard of the current school their child attended through word of mouth when they started to look for a financially feasible school. Money was the deciding pull factor to admit their children in these schools. Parents said, “I am sending my children to this school because of money,” and “My financial status is not good right now so I am not able to send them anywhere else.”

### Future Hopes

To understand more of parents’ ideas of educating their children, they were asked how far they wanted their children to study. Almost every parent's answer was the same, “however far they are able to study, that is how far they will study.” A follow up question to this was whether they had any dream of what they wanted their child to become. Almost all the parents had a similar response again, that it was not up to them but what the child wanted and how far he or she could study. There were two exceptions to this response. These parents response was that they wanted their child to study far and become something like an engineer. Both of these parents mentioned that they had older children who were studying in college already.

### Researcher’s Observations

Parents that had very strong feelings towards a school tended to have these feelings because of a specific situation they were in, and not because of the school. One father that highly praised a school kept describing how bright all three of his children were, how the teachers always told him how smart they were and that they were front and center on stage at every program. It seems natural that with the school praising his daughters frequently, he would have a positive view of the school. On the other hand, one mother described how she really didn't like a school because her sons were always fighting with the neighbor children who also went to the same school. She said that since she put her sons in the school they fight more with other children. Her daughter was also previously bullied at that school and dropped out of school. She began to cry as she told this story.

There were some inconsistencies between what teachers and parents said. This could either have been because of a misunderstanding or purposefully altering the truth to change how the school was viewed. An example of a possible misunderstanding could be when one parent mentioned that she appreciated how the school her son went to was English medium; however, the school is not English medium. Another parent discussed how her child was hit by the teachers at school, even though all the schools indicated that they did not hit students.

It is very possible the parents did not express their full feelings about the schools in the interviews because it is culturally unacceptable to talk negatively about someone or something in public. There may have also been fear that what was said would get back to the school despite the fact the researcher assured them that this would not happen. They may have been fearful that something negative they said would affect their child's education or the benefits they were receiving.

## Conclusion

This chapter described the data collected from interviews and originated by themes. Looking at this chapter as a whole, the umbrella theme is relationships. For the teachers interviewed, many of the challenges, how the schools run and what teachers think is most important all revolve around relationships. For parents, although lack of money was their biggest challenge in life and the primary factor in decision making, much of their lack of understanding about education can be understood from a lack of relationship with the schools. In the next chapter we will look deeper at this theme of relationships and how global literature relates to this data. The framework for this paper will be reconsidered, as well as implications for the schools’ ideas for change, and conclusions will be made.

# 5. Changing Worldviews through Relationships

“Just as a tree needs water, soil and manure to grow, a child needs the cooperation of his parents to grow” – a caring teacher

## Overview

This chapter will analyze the data described in the previous chapter and present contextual solutions to the problems identified in the data analysis. The overarching theme of the data can be described in the word, relationships. Each school is intentionally striving to build healthy relationships between teachers and students. Teachers have seen the positive effect of these relationships with students. This supports Epstein et al. theory of caring relationships impacting student success. However, the data revealed a large gap between school and family relationships. The researcher found that parental involvement was by far the most significant theme that emerged from the data. This chapter discusses the discrepancies between what teacher’s desire of parents and parents’ worldview of their child’s education, and suggestions for future parental involvement.

## Worldview Paradigms

One of the main reasons teachers and parents were both interviewed was to be able to consider their responses together and to see if what one group said was also true for the other. Data showed that teachers and parents had different expectations regarding parental involvement, which stemmed from their different worldviews. Since expectations were different, the researcher perceived a lack of communication between teachers and parents. Teachers have, however, made a significant effort to understand the community and families their students come from.

Two of the strongest opinions teachers had towards parents were, first, the parents mostly want their child to be educated and second, that teachers felt a lack of support from parents because they are not involved with their child's education or often even their lives. From the data collected from parents, it is clear that parents do want their children to be educated, as the teachers believed, but for parents this meant just sending them to school. They viewed themselves as unable to understand the school context or be more involved, because they are not literate. Parents also seemed to be unaware of ways in which they could figure out more about their child’s education and school and make more informed decisions. Therefore, teacher’s desired involvement from parents, that parents felt they are unable to give because of their lack of formal education. Figure 4 compares comment made by teachers and parents during interviews, that reflect their worldviews.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Teachers’ desire for parents | Parents view of themselves |
| “Even if a parent only spends one hour on their child, it makes a difference.”“If they make children do their homework and make sure they are studying, there will be a positive effect on the student.”“After work, parents can sit with children and that would really help children move ahead and improve.”“Even if the parents just make the child sit and do their homework, they are cooperating with the school for the sake of the child.”“Spending even 10-15 minutes with the child is crucial for their success.”“Teachers get a lot of support from parents who make their children come to school.” | “We are illiterate and don't have brains, so how would we know?”“I don't have a way to find out about the teaching and then have an opinion.”“I don't know what I like about the school, I don't have a chance to think about it.”“We are illiterate so what do we really know?”“I didn't bother to understand if the school was teaching well.”“I don't know why I should send my children to this school or another school.”“I cannot understand if my children are learning or not.”“What can I tell you about this school?” |

Figure 4 Teachers and Parents Comments Comparison

Triangulated data reveals the current paradigm that is persisting between teachers and parents, and exposes the lack of necessary communication between the two groups for each to be understood. Teachers desire a behavioral pattern from parents which does not make sense to the parent’s worldview. Since parents believe they are unable to understand formal education, their worldview does not give them a framework in which they could even begin to participate in their child’s education. Considering this, teachers do not have a basis from which expecting parental involvement is realistic. Although parents want a better future for their children, they are unaware of what is actually best for their child to learn. This has contributed to a large disconnect between how children are treated at home and at school.

The worldview the parents expressed has been studied and explained by Lewis (1966). Lewis found that there were certain psychological characteristics among poor communities that he called a “culture of poverty.” Some of these characteristics include living only in the present, fatalism, helplessness, dependency, inferiority, and little disposition to plan for the future, among other traits. These traits can clearly be seen in the responses of parents to their child's education in this research. Additionally, Lewis discussed how people living in a culture of poverty do not integrate into major institutions, such as schools, and may even be hostile to basic government institutions (1966). This again, seems to be how parents felt in this study, as they described how they did not feel like they had access or connection to the school. Figure 5 shows how the teachers’ worldview is inside the framework of the educational system, while the parents’ worldview is outside of an understanding of the educational system. This idea of a culture of poverty is descriptive of the worldview of the oral learner parents who were interviewed for this study.



Figure 5 Disconnect between teachers’ and parents’ worldviews

Another significant difference between teacher and parent perspectives was in their challenges in education. The primary challenge teachers faced with children is the lack of formal education their parents have had and its effect on students. Since each of the NGO schools genuinely care about the education of their students, their teaching philosophy is shaped by the reality that the students’ parents were from an oral culture. However, the parents’ clear concern and their primary basis for decision making is their lack of money. This constant financial concern drastically shapes their worldview and the choices they make.

## Caring Relationships

The teachers made it clear in their interviews that they are trying to create a healthy, relationship-centered school environment. They felt that this kind of school was crucial for the children of oral learners to be able to succeed in their education. Teachers strongly believed that personal relationships, healthy environments and personal attention given to each child positively affect their ability to learn, despite the disadvantaged learning environment they had at home.

During the data collection, teachers made direct connections between what the teachers did and how it affected a child. A direct cause and effect connection between relationships and children’s education was made. Figure 6 describes these connections, using the words of the teachers.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Teachers’ positive attitudes  |  | Increases ability to learn  |
| Teachers being loving |  | Children become better people |
| Healthy atmosphere (relationally) |  | Child development/ progression |
| Motivate parents |  | Children come to school |
| Visit children's homes |  | Children come to school |
| Children treated as equals |  | Children open up about themselves |
| No discrimination |  | Children enjoy coming to school |

Figure 6 Connections between teachers’ behavior and children’s education

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |

Considering what has been discussed in this paper about government schools in both the literature review and primary data, these caring relationships seem even more critical for the success of children of oral learners. Without teachers caring about the child’s actual learning and how to accomplish that, it would seem unlikely that they would learn much at all. One study referenced in chapter two indicated that teachers’ attitudes towards the school had a significant impact on student outcome (Singh and Sarkar, 2015). Note that this is slightly different from teachers’ attitudes towards children. However, teachers from the NGO schools mentioned that their motivation to teach in these schools was the difference they made in children's lives, and especially the pride and rewarding feeling of seeing children of oral learner parents graduating 10th or 12th class.

Many teachers described how they strived to teach at the child's level and for the purpose of the child’s comprehension of the subject. As this was described by teachers during the interview, the researcher observed that teachers viewed this as a negative aspect of teaching, and noticed that teachers felt like they should work at a faster pace to complete the curriculum. However, they strongly believed in helping even the weakest student in class, so they focused on every child’s comprehension at the expense of the curriculum.

Pritchett and Beatty's research explained that this shift in focus is really what developing nations need in order to develop (2014). A country has more potential for growth and development when children in schools are actually learning instead of just completing years in school and following curricula. As the focus of his research is on how curricula should match student learning, this is the reality on the ground in the NGO schools that were interviewed. While many children in India who have studied till class 5 are functionally illiterate even after more than 5 years of school (Pritchett and Beatty, 2014), children at these NGO schools are evaluated yearly and their learning level correlates with their grade level.

Even though the NGOs in this study may feel that they are behind the national level of curricula, by focusing on children's learning ability and matching the curricula to the child’s ability they are in fact building students who will have learned much more than other students from government schools. Pritchett and Beatty say “there is greater learning potential if curricula and teachers slow down” (Pritchett and Beatty, 2014, p. 276). In this way, teachers are truly caring about the child, not just in the present situation but also helping them learn in a way that will impact the rest of their lives.

## Epstein’s Framework

The caring relationships teachers have with students can be further understood through Epstein et al. theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence. This theory discusses how the school, family and community, when all working in partnership, create caring communities that produce the greatest potential for students to thrive. The NGO schools in the research are working to build a caring community within their school, but feel disconnected from the student’s parents. This seems to be because the parents’ worldview falls outside of the educational system framework, as has been shown in Figure 4. However, this study has already examined the research proving that parental involvement benefits a child's learning, and Epstein et al. theory of caring communities is likely to work in this context as well, if implemented.

Having analyzed the data and found these conclusions, suggestions for change need to be considered. The most obvious question that is raised from this research is, then, how do you help teachers involve oral learner parents in their children’s formal education? This question is specifically asked in the context of parental worldviews being outside of the educational institution, while teachers’ worldviews are shaped from within the educational institution. The next section will look at some of the possible answers to this question.

## Considering Change

This section will begin a conversation around how teachers (and schools) can engage oral learner parents in Varanasi in their children’s education. Since parental worldviews do not even fit inside the framework of educational systems, before teachers can encourage them to be more engaged they have to help parents understand the educational system, their potential role in it and how it benefits their family. In other words, the goal is worldview change, away from parental beliefs that they are of little to no significance because of their oral background, to a worldview where they have a significant role to play in their children’s education despite the absence of formal education in their own lives. This is easier said than done, and teachers are aware of this. One teacher described how “parents have been the same way for a long time and do things their way. We can’t change parents.” But change needs to begin somewhere. Since most teachers feel the need for parents to be more involved, we will begin there.

This paper has used the terms “involve” and “engage” interchangeably up to this point, but Emerson et al. makes an interesting distinction between these terms (2012). In his work, he discussed two levels of parental interaction with schools, which he described as “involving parents in schooling and engaging parents in learning” (2012, p. 8). He explained that engaging parents in learning, primarily at home, has a much greater impact, although involving parents in school still has important community and social functions. Having analyzed parental worldviews in relationship to educational institutions, and given this distinction, it is my recommendation that schools being to involve parents in school activities before trying to engage parents in learning at home. Involving parents at school is a first step in beginning the process of shaping their understanding of their role in their children’s education, and could build confidence towards participating in learning at home. However, it is possible that encouraging learning at home could happen before parents become involved in schools.

Epstein et al. theory of overlapping spheres of influence has been helpful for this research, in that the theory crosses cultural boundaries and even holds up when parents are from an oral culture, as in the context of this study. However, the vast majority of ideas Epstein et al. describes for family involvement are only possible for literate parents and parents whose worldview fits within the educational system. The suggestions made below are ideas that began by looking at research ideas for literate parental involvement in schools and then contextualizing them for Indian, oral culture communities.

Before specific suggestions are made, I want to present some broader ideas that can be implemented along with the more focused suggestions. This set of ideas focuses on affirming the value parents have in their interactions with children, and encourages such interaction. The following is just a few ideas that can and should be communicated to parents, whenever there are parent/teacher interactions;

* Use positive and encouraging language. As with their children, this is not modeled for them in their community.
* Explain that even without formal education parents have valuable knowledge that they can teach not only to their children but even to the teachers.
* Explain that teachers want parents to be more involved.
* Explain that when parents support their child’s education, they are supporting their child’s future.

The goal of the teachers shouldn't just be communicating information, but developing a relationship with parents. The deeper the relationship, the more trust there is, and the more likely it will be that parents and teachers will listen to each other. In the long run, this will benefit the student the most.

Epstein et al. presents six types of parental involvement in western countries, but only three are relevant to consider for this study and in this context (2002). The three types of involvement are communicating, learning at home and decision making. Given my familiarity with the local context over a number of years, including previously working in one of the NGO schools, the following ideas are suggested. I decided to categorize the ideas under two main themes; home visits and parents’ experiences of school. Due to the fact that there is little to no involvement of parents in the current situation, at home and at school, the following ideas are preliminary towards beginning this process. Most of the researched ideas I found went beyond these ideas. I felt that because of what the data revealed about the context, this proposal needed to consider ideas that would cause parents to even pay attention to their children at home and get parents though the school doors, to initiate worldview change.

### Home Visits

Since parents do not generally come to school, the primary way teachers can interact with parents is by visiting them in their homes. Farris and Denner say, “such parents often avoid the classroom and parent meetings so the teacher must reach out to them via home visitation” (1991, p. 68). This may begin to open up communication between parents and teachers and develop relationships and trust. Teachers visiting parents in their home allows the parents to be in a space where they feel safe and comfortable. Teachers also begin to understand the reality of the student's home life. This is a time where teachers can communicate crucial information to parents about their child and school activities, but also casually transmit information and ideas. The following is a number of suggestions on what teachers can do on home visits:

Focus on understanding

* Encourage parents to ask their children questions. Their children can help them understand what is happening at school.
* Ask parents what questions or comments they may have. Encourage them to talk.

   Homework

* Explain to parents that children need parents to make them do their homework; otherwise they will not do it or just forget. Parental involvement here is crucial.
* Be present with the child even if you are busy. They can sit beside you while you are cooking. Or you can talk to them while you are working at home.
* Explain to parents that when they encourage their children to do homework and talk to children about school, teachers feel supported and the children feel supported and learn better.
* Explain to parents the kind of environment students need to study. Describe what a healthy home environment looks like and how it helps a child develop (e.g. no television, quiet time to study, enough sleep).
* Explain that the purpose of homework is to build initiative, motivation, self discipline and responsibility.
* Teachers can assign homework that involves communicating with parents, such as “tell your parents one thing you learned in school today and write it down in the back of your notebook, which will be checked in school tomorrow.”
* Teachers can give students assignments to collect information, ideas or opinions from their parents. The student can either remember answers or write down answers. This can be anything from family history, to oral stories, to personal experiences or preferences.
* Explain that when parents encourage and force children to do homework the children are more likely to do well in school and in the future.

Ideas for Learning

* Teachers can model for parents play and other activities with children.
* Discuss with parents how including children in buying things in the market can help children with math. Counting small amounts of money can teach and practice math and show how it is practical.
* Encourage families to tell stories on holidays and recite oral histories.
* Parents can teach children about other ways of life, for example, how it is in the village.
* Grow plants at home, or send plants home from school (give incentives to care for the plants).
* Ask the child what they are learning/ doing for their homework. If they are learning spelling words, ask what words they are learning to write, not necessarily the spelling. If it is English, try orally learning one of the words they are learning to spell. If they are answering questions about a story, ask them to tell you the story. If you are willing to learn new things with your child, they may be more enthusiastic about learning as well.

Visiting homes gives families information on how to help children with homework and what children are doing in class. Given the data found, this aspect was considered crucial by teachers. From every participant school, teachers felt that parents needed to be more involved in helping their child with homework, even just asking them if they had any and making them sit down and do it. Helping families understand how to support children in their homework is therefore an important conclusion to this research.

### Parents Experience School

Although parents of oral learners feel unable to enter into the formal educational system, there may be more creative ways of inviting them into the school environment that could increase their involvement. I have observed in India how schools keep parents out of the classrooms and even the school grounds. Parents are not allowed inside the school gates, even in upper class private schools. This may be a contributing factor for why parents don't come to schools, even for parent meetings, they are usually not welcome. Especially in the case of these parents, whose worldview can't even comprehend the educational system, parents should be invited into the school, even if parents are just curious.

If parents feel threatened and unable to enter schools, the focus of inviting parents to school should be informal, without pressure to participate, fun and enticing. Parent meetings may seem threatening, and likely do not make sense to a parent whose worldview is outside the school system. Below are ideas on how to encourage parents to come to the school and begin to understand what happens at their child’s school:

Events for parents (not regular meetings)

* Parental training sessions, but not in a lecture style. Tell parents it is a function they are invited to. Include student performances and teacher performances on relevant issues, interaction sessions, and humor. Also, serving some snacks would possibly be an incentive. The goal is fun and enjoyment with no pressure.
* Allow and encourage parents to observe teaching in the classroom. This will require some system to be created, as classrooms in these schools are small.
* Saturday class presentations; on a Saturday morning one class in school can do a presentation for their parents. They present what they have learned over the last two or three months to their parents in the form of charts, songs, dance, poetry, art, lectures, speeches, drama. It is creative but primarily educational. In this way, children learn to present what they know in front of their classmates, and parents have the opportunity to see what their children are learning. Children may be able to persuade their parents to come to school to attend this type of mini-function which they are putting on. Every Saturday a different grade could present. Teachers could even play a math game with the students, in front of the parents, to show how class activities are implemented.
* Eventually, create a parent committee that functions as the voice of the parents and can weigh in on decisions. This makes parents feel like they have more ownership of the school. This kind of committee may take a while to form and function well.

During these event, teachers can;

* Encourage parents to ask questions and answer in anticipation some questions teachers think they may have.
* Encourage parents to come to the school if they want to know any information; don’t tell them they have to stay outside the gate all the time.
* Build parental self-worth. Show them they are valuable members of society, of their families, and particularly to their children.
* Make it enjoyable so parents want to come back to more events at the schools and not be put off. Start with lighter topics and move to more difficult issues after they become comfortable with the school.
* Explain that children develop and learn slowly over years, not all at once and learning takes time.

Note that parental involvement decreases as students get older (Stouffer, 1992), so the suggestions above are primarily for parents with children at the elementary level.

If parents do not feel like they can come to the schools, whatever the reasons may be, it will be difficult for them to begin coming. Inviting them to be involved may take a long time, so teachers should try not to get discouraged if parents do not initially come to events designed for parents. It is not easy to change someone's worldview. However for the sake of the child’s education and future, educators should at least try what has proven to be effective in the past.

# 6. Concluding Thoughts

## Researcher’s Reflections

This study began with the desire to find more effective methods in educating children of oral learners. Although this was an inductive study, my perceptions of the interviews, was that they would primarily focus on in-classroom teaching methods. Semi-structured interviews allowed for teachers to discuss what they felt was most relevant, and in each school the focus of what they said was on relationships.

Relationships between students and teachers were being fostered in each school, as Epstein et al. explains is crucial for students to succeed. Unfortunately, the lack of parental involvement in student’s education and life was a concern for teachers, as they felt that more parental involvement would have the most significant impact on the child’s education. However, the data concluded that parents’ worldview was so far removed from formal education, they felt as though they did not have any way of understanding it, let alone being involved with their child’s education.

Impact of study on staff: It was encouraging that teachers described healthy relationships between teachers and students as a key to student success. Additionally, they realized that parental involvement is crucial for students to progress. These teachers have very little training and had not learnt that these two concepts have been researched internationally and are proven true. In my presentation to them, I tried to encourage them by explaining that what they have discovered in their schools is true internationally.

Practical Outcomes of the Action-Refection research: After my presentation to teachers on the implications of the research, there was a short discussion. Teachers were excited about the suggestions to engage parents in homework assignments, specifically the idea of assigning homework to children that required them to interact with their parents or ask their parents questions. Some teachers came up to me afterwards and thanked me and said they would implement this idea in class. Teachers also thought the idea of having a class presentation every few months where parents could be invited to see students presenting what they have learned in front of their class would be relatively easy to implement and parents were likely to come to see their children perform. This idea is also likely to be implemented.

Most of NGO schools in this study are making strides to improve their schools. The easiest way and therefore most frequent is in upgrading facilities and teacher training. In chapter 2, Masino and Zarazua’s study was discussed, where they found that coupling different types of interventions together had the most impact on schools (2015). If schools continued to work on upgrading school and teacher training and simultaneously worked on involving parents in the child’s education, this should have a greater effect than implementing these initiatives on their own.

## Limitations

There are a number of limitations that must be mentioned when considering the results and implications of this study. Firstly, this study was done as an internal project and the implications are designed specifically for the participant schools. The data collected represents a very limited perspective from teachers and parents from NGO schools. Additionally although suggestions were made, implementation was not seen or tested at the time this was written. It also seems unlikely that government schools could implement the ideas presented in this paper, unless parental involvement was to become part of the policy of government schools.

A significant limitation to schools applying any of the suggestions is that only two schools were present for the final presentation and discussion on implementation of ideas. Teachers from these two schools discussed how they could implement some of the suggestions and what was realistic and were willing to try in their school. The three other schools received the Hindi and English written report but it seems less likely that they will implement change without discussion and the research being explained.

## Importance of this Study

This study shows the importance of understanding worldview and expectation because this research revealed that teachers and parents had different worldviews and therefore expectations of parental involvement. Through understanding what parents thought about how to relate to schools and educational systems, teachers realized that they need to focus on helping parents understand the system and include them in the life of the school instead of just expecting them to be more involved. This realization is the first step to changing how teachers interact with parents and how parents think about education.

Although this data collection was limited for this study, the results and implications of this study could be relevant to schools in similar contexts. It is likely that other NGO schools in North India that cater to children of oral learners would find these results similar and implications helpful. Additionally any school working to increase parental participation of parents from an oral culture, may find the implications helpful.

This research contributes to Epstein et al. work on the impact of parental involvement on a student. Data and conclusions from this study show that Epstein et al. theory works in this cross cultural setting and even when parents are from an oral culture. This paper contributes to the international research that already proves the importance of parental involvement in a child’s education and with the additional aspect of parents being from oral cultures.

## Further Research

This study began with the notion that the data would reveal effective methods of teaching in the classroom and at school. As the research was inductive, the themes that emerged from the data had more to do with personal relationships and parental involvement. This changed the focus of the research. Given what has been learned about how these NGO schools can be more effective in educating the children of oral learner parents, this study presents further questions for future research.

First, it would be useful for another research study to build on this exploratory study an in-depth look at the current interaction between parents and teachers/ school administrators at these NGO schools. The researcher has made suggestions to develop parental involvement with the schools, but these suggestions would be more informed with further research on what is already happening, in terms of both communication and involvement with parents. Parents could also be interviewed again and asked if the suggestions made in this study would be practical and helpful to them in being more involved. Further research may also look in whether parents would even be willing to become more involved and how they for see that being possible.

A subsequent researcher may want to test the results of this study by doing a similar study with a different set of NGO schools at a different location in India, to examine if current parental involvement and attitudes towards parental involvement are comparable in a different geographical location. I would recommend keeping some of the key variables the same such as schools in an urban setting and children of oral learners.

If these NGO schools implement different ways to involve parents, another researcher, five to ten years later, could study the effects of parental involvement on the child’s ability to learn. That research would give a better perspective on whether parental involvement is possible and effective within oral cultures. This research could potentially carry much weight in the future of other NGO schools, and even inform policy makers. Epstein et al. theory has begun to be implemented in schools, from a policy level, across the USA (Parents Reaching Out, 2009) and in Australia (Emerson et al, 2012) but could be extremely impactful if it was realized by developing countries’ education policy makers.

## Final thoughts

This study reflects the thoughts and opinions of local teachers, who are the true hero’s striving to make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children in Varanasi. These teachers and educators are the stars of my research, they are the ones we need to listen to, whether we are policy makers, development specialists, or intellectual researcher. Our job, as outsiders, should be to support these transformation seekers, in whatever way, they want us to. As westerners, we may have more degrees, credentials and training but we are still outsiders. Let our goal be, to support those who do the ground work day in and day out seeking transformation of their own communities.

As teachers are convinced that more parental involvement is in the best interest of the child, this needs to be the next step taken. This requires principals to implement change and teachers to be willing and encouraged to make changes. In the United States, schools are creating specific jobs in school for coordinators of parental involvement, so there is a staff member whose sole responsibility is focused on building relationship with parents. Could this be the next step for these NGO schools?

It is a great injustice if migrant children in cities are excluded from the educational system because their families are from oral traditions. God is not pleased when we ignore the poor and oppressed. Different people with different roles can work together, at the grass roots level, as the teachers are doing but also at policy and national development levels to change the injustice towards disadvantaged children. Children are the future of the world. As the poem at the start of this book concludes, “if children are healthy, the world will survive”.

# Appendix

**Research Tools**

For this research project the only survey instrument being used was interview questions. The following are the semi-structured interview questions. Probe questions may also be used.

**Introduction before interview begins:**

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview with me. I am a master student from the US and my focus is on education. I will be asking you about your experience educating children of oral learners at your school or sending your children to school. I am visiting five schools in this area and asking the same questions at each school. Then I will compile a final report and present the information I have found. You are invited to come to that presentation in July, which I will give you more information about.

**Interview with Teachers**

1. What are the problems in educating children whose parents are oral learners? At home and at school.
2. What does your school do specifically in order to teach children of oral learners? In classroom and out of the classroom, including discipline? Of these things, what do you think is the most important? (top 3)
3. What positive results have you seen from your work? Specific stories?
4. What could you have done better to help children that have dropped out of your school/not been successful?
5. Can you think of other ideas or better methods to help children of oral learners learn better?
6. Can  you think of anything else that makes this school different from other mainstream schools?
7. Do you have anything else you would like to tell us?

**Interview with Parents**

1. How many children do you have?  How old are they?  What schools have they attended?
2. What challenges do you and your children face in any school?
3. As far as you know, which school helped your child learn better?  Why do you think that is?
4. Were there any advantages of the other school?
5. What do you like about your child's current school?  What are the 3 best things they are doing at the school?
6. What don't you like about your child's current school?  What do you wish you could change about the school?
7. Can you tell me about any other differences between the other school and the current school?
8. Has your child changed over the time he/she has been in his/her current school? Have you seen any improvement in any area; academic, social, behavioral, emotional? Why do you think this is?
9. How far would you like your child to study? What would your child like to become?  Do you think they can succeed?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

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