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Parental Attitudes toward Schooling in Low-Income Households: A Qualitative Study from Dhading, Nepal**Shreesha Bista****M.Phil Scholar****Kathmandu University**

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Abstract

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) mentions that every person has the right to education. It states that all elementary education shall be compulsory for the overall development of human personality and to strengthen human rights, and has given parents the right to choose the kind of education for children. Yet, rural and low-income communities in Nepal still face significant barriers to education, and those barriers often mar parents' decisions to provide education to their children. This qualitative study examines the attitude of parents towards education in low-income households of Bhumesthan VDC of Dhading district. I have taken a narrative inquiry approach within an interpretivist framework to explore how parents frame their decisions on providing education to their children in relation to economic constraints, traditional gender norms, and systemic challenges. Findings of this study reveal that there is a complex interplay between aspiration towards education and actual constraints faced. On the one hand, parents value education as a potential route to better livelihood, on the other hand, immediate demands towards economic contributions including support to subsistence agriculture, cultural expectations regarding gender norms, and geographical barriers such as long distance travel temper their decision to provide quality education to their children. I have identified "aspirations vs. pragmatism" as a key theme in this study, which refers to the balance that parents create between their hope for their children's futures and the realities of daily survival.

Based on the findings of this study, I recommend context-specific interventions to provide access to education, rather than relying on generic, country-wide policy. One way to do that could be by aligning school calendars with agricultural cycles (which is done in many districts), expanding flexible learning opportunities through infrastructural support to children, and strengthening school–community partnerships. This study centers on the voices of parents from low-income households and offers a human-centered approach towards discussion related to providing access to education.

Keywords: *Educational access, Aspirations for Future, Pragmatic Reality, Barriers to Education*

Introduction

Nepal's educational landscape is shaped by various historical, political, and socio-economic transitions. This has greatly influenced access to schools and the quality of education children receive (Carney & Madsen, 2009). The Government of Nepal has been taking measures to improve access to school with initiatives like Education for All [EFA], School Sector Development Plan [SSDP, 2016–2023], School Education Sector Plan [SESP, 2022-2032], etc. The Constitution of Nepal's (2015) Article 31 guarantees the right to free and compulsory basic education and free secondary education to all its citizens and the state is obligated to ensure access to education to all children, especially those from the marginalized communities (Government of Nepal, 2015). Similarly, section 3 of the Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2075 mandates that every child between the ages of 5 and 12 years has the right to free and compulsory basic education and it emphasizes that no child should be deprived of education on any grounds (MOEST, 2018). As a result, substantial progress has been made in expanding access to primary education. Yet, this progress has been uneven with respect to rural and urban areas, and there are significant disparities along geographic, economic, and social lines (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016). In some rural areas, higher net enrollment rates do not mean consistent attendance or improved learning outcomes (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2019).

Many factors influence students' access to education in rural areas, including economic constraints, gender expectations, family values, geographical restrictions, etc. These challenges are further compounded by the seasonal natural disasters that disrupt regular school operation and impact family livelihoods, leading to students dropping out (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018). While urban schools largely boast of improved infrastructure, access to reliable vehicles to get to school, availability of teachers and regular classes, and proper resource

allocation, schools in rural areas still struggle with a range of constraints that limit equitable access to education (World Bank, 2020).

Dhading is an example of one such rural area. Located in central Nepal, a large part of Dhading has difficult terrain with dispersed settlements making access to school a major challenge (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2021). Children must walk long distances along unsteady roads, sometimes facing seasonal calamities such as landslides or floods just to get to school. There are many low income households where parents prefer to send their children to work instead of going to school. Some need the money, while others are bound by the intersection of environmental, geographical, economic, and logistical constraints.

I first visited Bhumesthan VDC of Dhading district in 2015 for a week to conduct classroom evaluation for a project run by an NGO. During the visit, I stayed with a family that hosted my residence, and our dinner conversations inevitably led to their children's education. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the parents, who belonged to a low-income household, mentioned that a large portion of their monthly income is being invested towards the education of their three children, who were studying in a nearby private school. They hoped that their kids would someday go to the capital, or perhaps even some first-world nation, and earn well enough to provide them an easy, early retirement. A very typical parental attitude, I thought. Then I had the chance to engage in a similar conversation with their neighbor, and I found that their kids are not attending the public school they have been enrolled in, and although the parents hope for a bright future for their children, their economic limitations require their children to earn instead of studying. This piqued my interest in how parental attitudes drastically impact children's education and learning outcomes, and became the foundation for this study.

This study, which resulted from an extensive in-depth interview I conducted in 2024, focuses on the lived experiences and perspectives of parents in Bhumesthan, Dhading and it examines how they perceive the value of education, navigate structural barriers, and make decisions about enrolling their children to school and supporting their education at home. By using an interpretivist narrative approach, my main goal was to capture the depth and complexity of parental attitudes, moving beyond statistical measures to explore the cultural, emotional, and contextual dimensions that shape educational decision-making in low-income households. To do this, I raised the following research question: How do parents from low-income households narrate their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward their children's education?

I believe a study of this nature is especially important in rural regions because the parents' attitude is shaped not just by their understanding and outlook towards education and its potential benefits but also by an intricate interplay of local social and cultural dynamics, gender norms, economic boundaries and household necessities (Bajracharya & Bartlett, 2017). These necessities sometimes include child labor in farming, livestock care and domestic duties (Pherali, 2013). This situation is further exacerbated for girls because apart from traditional gender norms, their educational opportunity is also limited by concerns about safety during long commutes (UNICEF, 2022). Clearly, parental attitude plays a significant role in shaping children's educational journey and understanding these dynamics will help policy-makers (and change-makers) make informed decisions in formulating policies to improve equitable access to education.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

For this study, I have taken reference from two interrelated theoretical frameworks to understand parental attitudes toward education in rural Nepal.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1979) talks about how individual behaviour is shaped by the influence of Microsystems (family) through exosystems (local institutions) to macrosystems (policy, culture). When analyzing how parental attitudes are shaped, it is necessary to look at the broader picture and understand how macro-level policies (e.g., Nepal's Free and Compulsory Education Act) interact with local-level realities (e.g., school infrastructure, local norms) and family-level constraints (poverty, labor demands).

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

In exploring the concept of development, Amartya Sen included people's freedom to achieve the kind of life they value and their capability to achieve such a quality of life (Sen, 1999). This formed the base of his capability approach. Access to education, by that definition, is not just formal right but what individuals can actually do and be—their “real freedoms”. In this study, which is focused on parents from low-income households, this theory helps understand how parents may lack the capabilities to provide schooling to their children due to various barriers, even if they understand and appreciate the value of education.

These two theories help identify the internal and external constraints that shape parental attitude towards education.

Thematic Dimensions

Economic and Opportunity Cost Barriers

Hossain (2010) identifies the tension between child labor and school attendance as one of the central barrier to education. This is true even now in Nepal where the dependency ratio is high and many families rely on subsistence farming or manual labor for their daily livelihood making schooling a luxury, even with free tuitions. Most parents' reluctance to send their children to school or support regular attendance stems from economic barriers which range from limited financial means for school supplies to child labor. The World Bank (2022) talks about learning poverty as children's inability to read a simple text, and this is higher among rural children, partly because they prioritize labor over schooling.

Gender Norms and Safety Concerns

Studies show that teenage girls are more susceptible to sexual abuse and so, many parents especially in rural Nepal refrain from sending them to school if the commute is long, lonely and difficult (UNICEF, 2024). Such safety fears, topped with domestic responsibilities and sometimes early marriage, mean that enrollment rate for girls is significantly lower in secondary-level (UNICEF, 2024). In Nepal's rural regions, once daughters are married off any salary they earn after marriage belongs to her husband/ family. Such practices discourage parents from educating their daughters since they are less likely to yield any benefits after marriage (Cameron, 2010). Reports by UNICEF (2021) show that in Dhading district more girls are dropping out of primary schools than the national average.

Accessibility and Infrastructure

A major factor that concerns parents perception of education is accessibility to schools. This is especially true in hilly regions where students must walk long distances, and are further affected during the monsoon season through difficult terrain (CBS, 2021). Many schools lack adequate infrastructure and have poor classrooms, either absent or unhygienic toilets, and water shortages, which deters parents from encouraging their children, especially girls, from attending regular classes. Mid-day meals also lack quality and quantity, so many parents don't see that as a compelling factor either (Frontiers in Education, 2022).

Migration and Educational Investment

Parents' migration to foreign countries for labor purposes shapes their decisions on providing education in conflicting ways. On the one hand, remittances can fund schooling; on the other, parental absence or reduced supervision due to migration can result in increase dropout risks or shift children into domestic roles (Adhikari & Hobley, 2011).

Policy Context and Empirical Reality

Nepal has introduced and implemented many policies and frameworks to ensure that all children have access to education. The Constitution of Nepal has made education at basic level compulsory and given parents the right to choose the type of education for their children. The School Education Sector Plan [SESP] (MoEST, 2022) is promoting universal access to education, multi-lingual instruction in classrooms, and school improvement grants. Post COVID-19 pandemic, the ReAL Plan (MoEST/IIEP, 2023) emphasized learning recovery with flexible learning calendars, and community schooling—particularly relevant to contexts with seasonal agricultural peaks. Nepal's Country Programme (2023–2027) also emphasizes equity, foundational skills, and community engagement.

Despite these frameworks, district-level reports (e.g., CEHRD FLASH 2080, 2024) show that many remote regions still lack basic WASH facilities. There are neither backup classrooms nor standardised transportation facilities. Clearly, without local alignment (which could include respecting parental values, seasonal rhythms, and trust dynamics within the community), center led reforms risk failing to address the realities of rural parents.

In an exploratory and innovative parent-school action learning cycle implemented by Khanal (2024) in Western Nepal, he found that involving parents in intervention mechanisms led to the re-enrollment of 40% more out-of-school children. These interventions included mid-day meals and managing teacher's accountability. Similarly, a qualitative study conducted by Edutrend Nepal (2024) shows that children whose parents had at least secondary education were able to perform significantly better in English literacy.

Slightly conflicting data from National surveys (UNICEF COAR 2022; UNICEF Data, 2023) shows that while enrolment rates are more than 90% for primary levels, the effective learning and transition metrics lag in remote communities. This could mean that parental enrollment decisions may not always align with hopes of meaningful education.

Clearly, there seems to be a paradox that is also central to this study and connects with my previous dilemma regarding parental attitude: parents from rural, low-income households value education but are often unable to act on that value due to intersecting economic, geographic, institutional, and cultural constraints. While national policy frameworks talk about inclusion and quality goals, parent-level perspectives and voices remain under-represented in shaping those frameworks into action. It is necessary to study parental attitude in more detail to inform context-sensitive interventions.

Methodology

To conduct this qualitative study, I used an interpretivist narrative paradigm. According to Schwandt (2015), such a paradigm believes that reality is socially constructed and can be understood through the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences. I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to record my participants' detailed stories and perspectives.

For my study, I selected Bhumesthan VDC of Dhading district not just because of my prior experience of visiting and conducting a study there, but also because of its geographic limitations and limited road access that made me wonder how students there get to their school every day. Most people there still have traditional ways of living and rely on agricultural livelihood, with some support from remittances from labor migration. Such intersection of geographic, infrastructural, economic and cultural limitations and my familiarity with the region made it an excellent location to conduct this study.

My research participants were six parents (three mothers and three fathers) who I selected purposively from low-income households with at least one school-aged child (between 6 to 16 years) based on the ward office's recommendation.

I conducted multiple rounds of interviews with each participant individually, and each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes. I prepared a brief interview guide in advance, and this guided my questions about the parents' own educational experiences, their aspirations for the education and future of their children, the barriers to education they were facing (including attending regular classes), and their views of government and I/NGO support.

After collecting the information, I transcribed it and translated it into English. I transcribed the information while I was at Dhading, so I was able to member-check the information with the participants to ensure correct interpretation, and cross-reference with the school officials on some information regarding their children's performance that they mentioned

during the interview. I then coded the information thematically and used narrative excerpts to illustrate each theme in order to preserve the participants' voices.

I collected verbal consent from each participant, and they were informed about their right to withdraw from the interview if they wanted to do so. Anonymity was maintained at all stages, and I have used pseudonyms for all participants.

Results

Following the analysis of the interview data, I identified four interrelated themes that, despite their distinct nature, overlap in ways that shaped the parents' decisions regarding their children's schooling. In this section, I discuss these themes in detail.

Theme 1: Aspirations and the Perceived Value of Education

All six parents expressed that they did not get adequate support from their own parents to complete their formal education, and their quality of life is due to their inability to explore the formal job market, being limited to manual labor and agricultural sustenance. Therefore, they expressed a desire for their children to have a "better life" than they themselves had experienced. They saw education as a bridge from agricultural and labor-based livelihood to formal employment and migration opportunities. A father (Ram) of a 9-year-old who recently dropped out of school reflected:

"I spent my entire childhood working hard in these fields that don't even belong to my family. As an adult, I am still tilling these fields, and I have nothing to show for my years of hard work except a bad back and poverty. I wanted to go to Dubai or Arab to earn some money, but even that takes investments and I don't have anything to register as collateral to apply for loans. I had enrolled my son into a public school with the hope and expectation that he would uplift my family from this dark web of poverty. But now, after his mother's surgery last year, even he has to drop out and help us in the fields. My daughter dropped out last year to help with domestic work and to care for her mother. Education was our only way out of poverty, but now that way is permanently blocked for us. Once we come out of this difficult period, I can only hope to re-enroll my boy back to public school, even if he loses out of a year or two."

Ram, and many parents like him, see education as a means of liberation from poverty. Some parents even tie a symbolic value to education as a marker of class and dignity. For them, education is not only a way towards a better quality of life and a current means of pride. These

parents reflected on how proud they would feel if their children worked in offices, wore “clean clothes,” and used “pens instead of sickles.” Yet, others were skeptical about whether education leads to secure employment. They talked about educated youth returning home to do farm work or migrating abroad for low-paid labor. One mother (Parvati) of a 13 year old daughter and 10 year old son noted:

“Even if they finish grade twelve, there is no guarantee of employment. I see boys with certificates but no jobs. I am investing so much money into my children’s education that I can’t help but wonder if they will just end up working in the fields like me or doing manual labor like their father. If that is the case, isn’t my money completely wasted? I would much rather feed my family meat and rice with the money I am spending on their notebooks and pens.”

There is a very apparent tension between hope for a brighter future and doubt regarding the capability of education to bring them the future economic security. That is why even though education is seen as desirable, parents don’t seem to prioritize it when resources are scarce.

Theme 2: Economic Hardship and Livelihood Demands

One recurring theme in all parents’ narratives was poverty. This was the most immediate and pervasive barrier to continuing schooling for all families. Parents frequently talked about having to decide between sending children to school and ensuring their households ran smoothly and everyone got to eat three meals a day. In many cases, the obvious choice was the latter. Parents chose to include their children in labor (most commonly agricultural and domestic, sometimes manual labor where either of their parents worked). Agricultural labor was seen to be essential during planting and harvest seasons.

Radha, who has three children, two of whom attend school, explained, “When the maize is ready for harvest, my daughter must help. If she misses classes, the teacher scolds her, but what can we do? Without food, there is no point in studying.”

Even with Nepal’s free education policy, parents must bear indirect costs such as uniforms, stationery, exam fees, and travel expenses. Several families described borrowing money or selling small livestock to cover school-related costs. Some parents spoke of the emotional strain of choosing which child to keep in school when resources were limited.

Economic hardship also intersected with uncertainty about returns on education, reinforcing a utilitarian approach: education was supported only when it did not significantly disrupt the household's immediate livelihood needs.

Theme 3: Gendered Expectations and Cultural Norms

Literature review on the role of gender expectations on education shows that girls are more likely to be taken out of school compared to boys to support household responsibilities, for early marriage, or during parents' economic hardships. In this study, it was evident that during such hardships, gender norms strongly influence parents' decisions about who attended school and for how long. While both boys and girls were enrolled in early grades, several fathers admitted that they would be more likely to continue paying for their sons' education beyond primary school compared to their daughters', if they could only afford to educate one of them.

Mahesh, who is the father of three girls and one boy, said:

“My wish was for all my children to be educated, but I neither have the means nor the money to do that. I have only one boy, and I must take responsibility for his good future. As for my girls, they are literate and they do their housework exceptionally well. I am sure I can find them good husbands once they are of age. Then they can rely on their husbands to live a good life. They won't be my responsibility after that. But my son is different. I have to be responsible for him. He must be educated enough to land a decent job. Only then will he marry a girl from a good family. He is the one who will look after me and my wife Uma in our old age. He is our only support. I can't possibly choose to educate one of the girls and let him rot at home.”

His wife Uma added:

“Of course we will educate our boy. What my husband said make sense. Besides, the school is so far from home, we can't take the girls back and forth to school everyday. We have to work. If we send our daughters all alone, people will talk. They will say our girls have gone astray, and what good family will come to marry our daughter then? We can't take such a risk; it's better for them to learn housework. At least then people will say Uma has raised her girls well.”

For girls, domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings are seen to be more important and useful than schooling.

Theme 4: Infrastructural and Systemic Barriers

Some parents highlighted physical and institutional barriers as factors limiting access to education, which also significantly impacted their attitude regarding sending children to school. For one set of parents, their children had to wake up early every day and walk almost two hours each way to reach their school, and this was even more dangerous in the rainy season due to the risk of landslides. After undergoing such perilous journey, sometimes the teachers wouldn't be present, other times there wouldn't be enough desks and chairs in the classroom so they would have to sit on a mat on the floor to study. One father noted:

“Seeing my little boys and girls walk for so long to get to school, and not learn anything because the teacher did not show up, or the classroom was too overcrowded and noisy to concentrate, makes my blood boil. There is no access to clean drinking water or proper toilets. My children carry large bottles of water on top of their already heavy backpack. I don't think the education they are receiving is worth so much trouble and pain. I would much rather they stay home and maybe learn some life skill later on, such as plumbing or carpentry.”

Lack of good performance in school as a result of all of these collective factors also discourages parents from supporting school education.

A mother raised concerns regarding lack of proper sanitation for girls. She said:

“Just few months back, my daughter got her first period and she was terrified. She didn't know what was happening, and the school had no proper support. Her female teacher wanted to help, but she didn't have any pads on her. So she sent my daughter home. By the time she reached home on foot, she had severe period cramps and she was in tears from the pain. Periods are such normal, monthly thing, but not a single person knew how to handle such a situation. The entire thing was so pathetic. Now, I make sure my daughter carries either a pad or a clean cloth every month in her backpack in case of an emergency. Once she gets her periods, I just make her stay home to rest and deal with her cramps.”

Parents' frustrations also stemmed from their perceptions of slow and inadequate responses from local government bodies to requests for infrastructure improvements, such as repairing roofs, building toilets, or providing safe drinking water. Although seemingly insignificant, these factors shape parents' attitudes towards education in many ways.

Theme 5: Navigating Choices in Context

Despite facing the intersecting hurdles of economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers, parents' attitude to education is not passive. Instead, parents regularly choose between their perceived value of continued schooling and their immediate livelihood needs, while also considering gender norms, the child's academic performance, and the accessibility of available schools.

To deal with this dilemma, some families adapted by enrolling their children in schools closer to home, even if the school does not meet their quality expectations, only to reduce travel time. Some parents alternated their children's attendance during peak agricultural seasons while others looked for informal tuition from neighbors to help their children keep up with their classes. Some parents also prioritized one child's education, often a son, in the hope that his eventual earnings could support siblings. As one father summarized:

“We want our children to study, but we must be practical. We see the road ahead, and we choose the path we can walk.”

These narratives show that an intersection of many factors shapes parental attitude towards education. One common theme across all participants was an interplay between aspirations for a better future versus the pragmatism of their current lived reality. This directly influenced parents' attitudes towards education highlighting the importance of studying parental perspectives within their broader socio-economic and cultural realities.

Discussions

The findings of this study strongly support previous literature that positioned parental attitude as an intersection of aspiration and pragmatism (Bhatta, 2011; Pherali, 2013; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). In rural Dhading, parents clearly narrate their hope for their children's education and bright future. Still, their decision to provide schooling is based on their perception of the long-term economic and social benefits of education and their immediate constraints. For me, this tension seems similar to Walker's (2012) “cycle of low aspiration,” with a clear difference that parents in rural Dhading don't lack ambition for their children, instead, they regularly make tough, calculated decisions to choose either their aspiration for long term benefit or an immediate solution to current constraints.

One of the major constraints they face was economic. This was especially true for households that depended on subsistence agriculture during peak season, and manual labor during off season. Parents' choices were often framed as a zero-sum calculation between a child's immediate contribution to household survival and their future earning potential. Often, parents ended up choosing immediate relief from economic hardships over their child's future despite their evident guilt.

Gendered cultural norms only add to the complications parents face. Similar to findings by Cameron (2010) and UNESCO (2020), this study shows parents' willingness to prioritize their sons' education over their daughters' due to its evident long term benefit and societal expectations.

When they are so evidently entangled, interventions cannot treat economic and culture barriers as separate entities. Instead, such programs must integrate economic incentives (such as scholarships, conditional cash transfers as rewards) with gender-sensitive community engagement.

These interventions must also be based on the context of the location. In geographically remote locations like Dhading, as highlighted by the World Bank's (2020) characterization of Nepal's rural education challenges, context-specific interventions such as community-based satellite schools, seasonal or flexible timetables, and mobile teacher units could be introduced. However, such models require sustained funding, community involvement, and integration into the formal education system. Throughout the process, one important element is proper communication channels between parents and schools. Parents' distrust towards the education system was also because of lack of communication channels in schools, so they could not voice their concerns or register their grievances. An easy way to mitigate this would be to create parent-teacher forums and school accountability committees to improve transparency.

Based on these observations, I believe policy frameworks addressing students' learning outcomes must go beyond enrollment rates and engage directly with the lived decision-making contexts of parents. Policy-makers must stop viewing parents as passive beneficiaries of their policies and start taking them as active agents navigating social, economic, cultural and structural constraints. Only then can children's access and parents' value of schooling be increased.

Conclusion

In this study, I examined how parents from low-income households in Bhumesthan VDC of Dhading perceive education and narrate their experiences and attitude towards their children's schooling. I was able to find a much nuanced interplay between aspiration and pragmatism. On the one hand, parents believe that education can uplift them from poverty and improve their livelihoods, and on the other hand, they are forced to choose immediate sustenance at the face of economic constraints, and cultural and structural hurdles. The findings of this study show that educational access cannot be fully understood through structural yardsticks only; it must be grounded in the lived realities of families.

By using a narrative inquiry approach within an interpretivist paradigm, I call attention to the need to add a human element to research on education, which, in this case, has helped identify the need for context-specific interventions that address economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers. This study clearly shows that policies must position parents as active partners in shaping educational futures.

The implications of this study are threefold. For policy, the interventions must be context specific and the support provided must match the need of the area. In case of Bhumesthan VDC, matching school calendar with agricultural cycles and providing targeted economic support to low-income households might be a good idea. For practice, there must be strong communication mechanism between school and families to build trust and increase transparency. This will motivate parents to continue their children's schooling and give them the assurance that their voices, in case of any grievances, will be heard and addressed. Parents and the community must also be involved in school governance during important decision making processes to increase transparency. Finally, further study must be conducted to explore the perspectives of teachers and students and assess the long-term impact of community-driven education models in remote regions. It is necessary to recognize and respond to the complexities of parental attitudes for Nepal to move beyond enrollment statistics towards equitable and sustainable education.

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