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An investigation into parental expectations of Primary schooling and the support provided by schools to a single Keralite community in an English county

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Abstract

This paper highlights the process of piloting the first stage of the research; an investigation into Keralite parental expectations of primary schooling. It considers the methodological issues of identifying respondents, suitable and willing to participate in the research. Through the first stage of the development of questionnaires and interviews early indications suggest that Keralite parents have a limited knowledge of Primary education and Curriculum in schools in England, have high academic expectations for their children, and wish to maximize their child’s potential for entry to United Kingdom universities.

Keywords: parents; expectations; Kerala; primary schooling; England;

1. Introduction

This research focuses on a settled community from Kerala state in India who are now resident in a town in the United Kingdom. This community comprises mainly well educated adults who arrived in the United Kingdom to take up professional careers and who have settled in the town in what is recognised to be a well integrated population. Many members of this community are Roman Catholic. Over the past three years contact has been established between this Keralite community and the School of Education at a local university. During discussions with community members it has become apparent that many from this group have strong views about the kind of education which they seek for their children.

An opportunity arose for these expectations to be explored through a small scale research project. There are four stages to the project. Stage One, the pilot phase with parents is reported here, and ran from August 2010 to January 2011. During this phase evidence was gathered in relation to the expectations of Primary education held by the Keralite parents. Three further stages of research are proposed, phase two will be the main data gathering in the community, phases three and four will pilot and interrogate data from Primary Schools. This paper contains basic contextual information, a brief discussion of research methods deployed and a discussion of pilot phase findings.
2. The Context

Presently there are approximately 100 families from Kerala residing in the county under research. Kerala (Keralam) is one of the South Indian states with Malayalam as the local language (one of the 18 official languages of India). The Malayalam-speaking people of Kerala, constitute 96% of the population, and are called Malayalees. The population of Kerala are referred to as Keralites or Keralans. Kerala is considered to be the most socially developed state in India (Sen, 2005) with good indicators in Human Development and Physical Quality of Life Indices, high life expectancy, a low birth rate, low infant mortality, higher than usual (for India) rates of literacy and almost universal school attendance (UNDP Kerala, 2005). In addition, it is the only state in India having a higher female than male population (1000/1058). For these many reasons, the state is often compared to developed countries or Western countries by development researchers.

Though Kerala belongs to the cultural and social tradition of India, it has some unique characteristics. Unlike other parts of India; Kerala is a social welfare state providing free schooling, health care, financial support for unemployed people, and the working poor. Here education is considered as an important factor in ensuring a higher social status and better economic life. Sometimes, education is referred to as ‘a social norm in Kerala’ (National Council for Educational Research and Training, NCERT, 2006). Despite this largely positive approach to development there are some paradoxical and negative elements that should be considered, including unemployment rates (especially graduate unemployment), alcoholism rates, the number of suicides, and road accidents which are the highest in India. Whilst Kerala is perceived to be one of the most socially advanced states of India, it is also important to recognise that some of these more negative factors may be significant in influencing the ideas and attitudes of its citizens.

English is an important language in Kerala’s education system with more parents seeking English media schools. Education is highly valued by most Keralite parents who invest considerable resources and effort in providing their children with the best educational opportunities. Anecdotal evidence indicated that Keralite parents perceive power, wealth, professional rank, religion and seniority of age as possible determinants of social status. For example, informal conversations revealed parents interest in helping their children access professional jobs through academic achievement.

Khan-Panni and Swallow (2003) identify nine main points of difference between Eastern and Western culture; attitude to time, focus on objectives, respect, seniority, politeness, personal space, hospitality, importance to family, and the individual or community. These concerns may influence the behaviour and dispositions of members of communities such as the Keralite group and should therefore inform the structure of the study, the approach to the community concerned and consideration of the findings. To make secure judgements and informed understandings as to the effect of the parents’ cultural and social attitudes, values and beliefs the research goes beyond identifying the parents’ opinions and seeks to elicit an understanding of and explanation for their views. Oppenheim (2009) suggests that opinions are relatively superficial and deeper attitudes shape opinions. It is these that the current project seeks to access.

For members of the Keralite community networking and maintaining their position in the country’s hierarchy is important both socially and in business. To be seen to be an active member of the community is a barometer of parents’ social recognition. India has been described as a collectivist society (Hofstede, 1994). Members of a collectivist society often exhibit strong family connections with an ‘extended family’ that are dependent on each other, with individual members preferring to be part of a group. In accordance with Hofstede’s (1994) description of education in a collectivist society, education is seen in India as a way of obtaining prestige offering the potential to be able to join a higher status group.

3. The Study

In working with this community a cross-cultural research team was established. As suggested by Messerschmidt (1991), someone familiar with the culture and social structure of the respondents supports the research procedure.
One member of the research team is an Indian national, from Kerala, with a background in education and educational research and in addition a native Malayalam speaker.

The whole project sets out to investigate expectations and aspirations of Keralite parents about Primary education and school support. The following key focus questions set the direction of the project:

1. What are the Keralite parents’ expectations of primary education?
2. How are the Keralite parents’ expectations of primary schools influenced by their culture?
3. What is the most important aspect of primary education to Keralite parents?
4. What are the Keralite parents’ aspirations for their children?
5. How can schools help fulfil Keralite parents’ aspirations for their children?
6. How can schools help to meet the Keralite parents’ expectations?

Before the formal aspects of the research progressed it was important to establish good, secure relationships with the Keralite community. As Chawla-Duggan (2004) suggests such relationships are an important factor because the social process will influence the reliability and validity of the research data obtained. In order to begin to establish contact with the community and to allow them to meet the research team an Open Evening event was conducted in August 2010, inviting the Keralite parents to meet the research team in an informal context through a social event. This was followed by the research team attending Keralite festival celebrations and social events. It seemed to the research team that this was valued by the community who were able to ask informal questions about the research and become familiar those working on it.

The first stage, reported here, was a pilot investigation. Data was gathered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with those community members who are parents of Primary aged children. This was done through the medium of English, though the facility to use Malayalam was available though the native speaker on the research team. All questionnaires and interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed following the ethical guidelines of the university and informed by the British Educational Research Association ethical framework (BERA, 2004).

3.1. The Sample

An introductory letter and an index card was distributed to members of the Keralite community via the research team’s ‘gatekeeper’, the Keralite researcher mentioned above. These index cards were used to gather a range of preliminary information; they included parents name, number and age of children, and the school any Primary aged children attended. Through the return of 44 index cards it was possible to identify the following groups (see Table 1).

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<th>Group 1</th>
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<td>Keralite students</td>
<td>members of the Malayalam Associations (Christian and Non Christian)</td>
<td>Members of a Keralite Association (subdivided)</td>
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3.2. Piloting Research Instruments

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used in pilot phase data collection. It was recognised that piloting of research methods and instruments (Oppenheim, 2009) would impact on the success of the data gathering processes and the project overall. The community were approached and two volunteers came forward to trial the questionnaire and to be interviewed. The intentions were to gather preliminary data to provide secure context for further work and to discuss with the participants the suitability of the questionnaire and interview schedule.
Two members of the research team met with the volunteers on the university premises. The Malayalam speaking researcher took a facilitative role, providing explanations or expositions of points which the respondents found unclear. He was also able to provide an ‘insider’ perspective on the responses and to ‘check out’ with the Keralites suggestions for the following phases of the study.

A draft questionnaire was used as an introduction to the wider aspects of the research (Gillham, 2004). This was followed by interviews to obtain more in depth qualitative data (Hall and Hall, 2004) on the parents’ expectations, perceptions and opinions of the role of the school. In creating both of the instruments ‘closed’ questions were selected at the beginning of the schedule in an attempt to reduce any potential cultural discomfort for participants. More specifically personal questions were gradually introduced and respondents were reminded that they had always the right to withdraw or not to respond in line with the research ethics framework (BERA, 2004). In addition, confidentiality was assured. Participants indicated that they valued this, especially with regard to sensitive questions about employment; it was known that some members of the community were employed in what they viewed as lower grade jobs, not matching their higher qualifications.

Two interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed enabling exact working, dialect usage and intonation to be taken into account. This transcribed data was linked to written notes on the interview schedule, enabling accurate amendments to the questionnaire to be made in line with the recorded discussions. The two respondents indicated that they were keen to inform the structure of the questions alongside giving their views about the issues under consideration.

3.3. Initial Findings and Early Stage Analysis

The interview data and the annotations on the pilot version of the questionnaire revealed interesting themes, which will be investigated further in later stages of the project. Thematic analysis of the oral and written data highlighted knowledge of Primary education and curriculum; parents’ expectations and aspirations; and communication and home-school links as areas for consideration and exploration through later stages of the study.

Considering parents knowledge of primary education and curriculum, it seemed there was little detailed knowledge of the system children would enter:

“We came primarily to England because we expect that we would get good education, during my past years, I happen to hear that British education is the best education system in the world. Contrary to that, when I reached here, I could not stick on that point...”

Parents showed knowledge of the phases of Primary education in England but anticipated that it would be more similar in practice to their own experiences in Kerala. They had not anticipated or accessed information about contemporary Primary education in England. The interviews also revealed that the nature and content of the Primary curriculum was not well understood. Interviewees noted that academic excellence did not, in their experience, feature as highly in Primary education as they had expected.

“She should be given more academically challenging tasks or situations to keep her engaged in academic tasks, give more challenging tasks to keep her engage her brain...”

“I feel very disappointed when my child was not recognised her academic excellence during her primary education, the academic excellence will be a boost and encouragement for the child to excel in academic matters......”

“If they are not given enough challenges, they would become complacent, if we look at the people here; they are complacent with what they have...it’s all about keep them focussed”

This seemed to demonstrated very clear expectations and aspirations with regard to Primary (and Secondary) education that these Keralite parents held. Pilot interviewees also equated a better education with career potential and children obtaining a higher level United Kingdom qualification was an ambition that was clearly expressed.
These parents went on to highlight other expectations they held of Primary education, in particular character formation.

One father said:

“The school should give much importance to the character formation. Our culture respects teachers as an important person—but the children in this country not respecting teachers”.

Home school communication was one of the areas explored in some detail during the interviews. Intereviewees indicated that there was information which parents wanted and which was not shared with them by schools. For example, one father said:

“Good feedback, that’s what is happening when they want rather when we want”

Responses indicated that communication between school and home was not clear and purposeful. Both respondents mention experience in Kerala, where text books and homework were used to increase shared values between home and school and they noted that they did not feel this happened in relation to their children’s schooling in England.

In considering the data from the index cards, interviews and questionnaire review a range of valuable information was available. Some of this was contextual, for example the index cards showed that families were 2 generational without grandparents, which was different from the situation in Kerala. Most families had 2 or 3 children and this too was unlike the norms in Kerala where families might have 1 or perhaps 2 with the overall population growth being negative in the state.

Early indications suggested parents in the Keralite community favoured faith schools, had high academic expectations and aspirations for their children, and wished to maximise their child’s potential entry to UK universities. This perception of the benefits of education is expressed by Shah as follows:

‘A way forward in the emerging societal structures is to engage in cross-cultural research to enhance understanding of multiethnic and cross-cultural educational sites in national and international contexts.’ (Shah, 2004, p.551)

In the pilot interviews members of the community indicated that they thought better education would ultimately leads towards better jobs and increased economic capital for their children. In addition obtaining a United Kingdom qualification was seen as an enhancement to social capital. Parents anticipated that children might have greater social mobility either in Keralite society in the United Kingdom or back in India. According to interviewees even more advantageous was having their child attend a prestigious institution, such as an internationally known United Kingdom university. In considering parents’ perceptions of advantage through education Bourdieu (2001) suggests that cultural capital does include educational experiences and qualifications. In accepting Bourdieu’s interpretation, cultural capital accumulates for members of collectivist societies with the gaining of particular valued educational experience and qualifications, as indicated by these Keralite parents hopes for their children. Within India, and for the current generation of the Indian diaspora, the cultural capital of qualifications may become more influential than social capital. Further stages of the project may enable this to be explored with community members.

Conclusion

The first stage of this four part study has provided a clearer understanding of the community in question. In particular the research team now has a working knowledge of family sizes and structure, educational preference for faith education, employment experiences in families and some of the aspirations and expectations that families have for their children. Interview data was successful in highlighting issues for the questionnaires for phase two, appropriate lines of enquiry have been established and communication strategies evolved. Taking this study forward it is hoped that through phases three and four the research team will be able to inquire into the ways in which staff in schools make adjustments to accommodate specific parent and pupil needs of the Keralite community.
References


