FWU Journal of Social Sciences, Winter 2016, Vol.10, No.2, 1-14

'Education is light; it takes you towards the path of light': Parental Perceptions about Education and Their Children's Schooling in Northern Pakistan

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This qualitative paper draws on the notions of capital, *habitus* and *field* to explore parental perceptions about education and their children's secondary schooling in Peshawar, Pakistan. The setting for the study is two contrasting but mutually reciprocating urban and rural contexts; using purposive sampling, the data were gathered from parents through interviews and focus group discussions. The paper demonstrates that culture informs and perpetuates parental perceptions about instilling norms and values in children through education. Moreover, it decodes and explicates the common and ordinary language of parents that underpins the metaphorical dimensions of seeing the world and education from a number of visual and physical characteristics and within which education's role as capital, potential and propensity for making a difference to one's life is deeply intertwined and culturally embedded. The gendered dimensions and perspectives have emerged as important predictors in which patriarchal norms and masculinity obscure, curtail and constrain girls and women's education.

***Keywords*:** parental perceptions; girls; education; capital; *habitus*; *field*; culture; class; Pakistan

In developed countries, such as the United Kingdom, parent-teacher, home-school, home-school-community relations, parental involvement in school and with children and similar terms have had an established presence and influence since at least the influential reports of Plowden (1967) and Coleman (1966). These areas have not only been established as important fields of knowledge, research and expertise but have also been of immense influence on school policy and practice. The resultant scholarship has greatly enhanced awareness and understanding into children's worlds and learning and has thoroughly enriched the lives of both parents and teachers. This has resulted in greater understanding, coherence and collaboration between parents and teachers and in sharing the responsibilities of children's education as a mutual undertaking. In all this, the role of parents has been highly valued and is therefore an important one, which has implications for the academic progress and development of children as well as the general school improvement and efficiency.

However, in Pakistan and most other developing countries, parents, especially those with less education and living in rural areas, do not see themselves in roles supporting children's education and socialization and they are deferential to teacher and school authority (Ahmad, 2010). Underpinning such parental perceptions may be a host of factors, from deeply embedded cultural norms, social practices, poverty and parental education to aspects that are grounded in class, status, social stratification and political conflict. As a consequence of all this, while the rest of the developing world is catching up with UNESCO's millennium development goals (MDGs) of universal primary education (UPE), Pakistan has lagged behind in many of its milestones. In this regard, a report from UNESCO (2012, p. 9) states, "Pakistan has the second largest number of children out of school – 5.1 million – yet reduced its spending on education from 2.6% to 2.3% of GNP over the decade." Understandably, when primary education is in disarray, secondary education is not likely to receive much attention either.

Due to its geopolitical and strategic location, Pakistan, and especially the Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) (formerly NWFP) and the region bordering Afghanistan – known as federally administered tribal areas (FATA) – has always bore the brunt of aggression and conflict, leaving the region into a quagmire of

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instability, disaster and lack of steady progress. Lack of peace and the prevailing instability has had far-reaching consequences. This has created a vicious cycle of poverty embodied both in intellectual terms and through a sense of deprivation amongst the masses. Therefore, the education of girls and boys of both primary and secondary levels has suffered. Identifying Pakistan as a conflict-affected country, a UNESCO (2013, p. 1) policy paper states, "Of the 69 million adolescents of lower secondary school age who were not in school, 20 million lived in conflict-affected countries in 2011, of whom 11 million were female." Therefore, children, especially girls, not only have to suffer the consequences of human and political conflict, but they are also at the mercy of adult and patriarchal norms, grounded in social and cultural practices, that decide much about their future life.

Therefore, knowing about parents and exploring their perceptions towards children and education is important. Through such studies measures for aligning parents in supporting children and their education may be explored and identified.

Literature Review

Home-school relations: looking at the larger picture

The literature on home-school relations provides a rich, diverse and eclectic range of conceptual and analytical frames for parental involvement in children's academic and personal lives as well as charts the trajectories of parent-teacher relations. These include the conceptual and empirical works of a number of scholars (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Dimmock, O'Donoghue, & Robb, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997). Research has consistently proved the importance and efficacy of home-school and parent-teacher relations and parental inputs on various aspects of student achievement and outcomes, performance and related determinants (e.g. Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Zhao & Akiba, 2009). The interplay of parental involvement and student achievement has also been looked into with the lenses of class, gender, race and related perspectives (e.g. Lee, Kushner, & Cho, 2007). The significance of parental involvement on the measures of student literacy and learning (e.g. Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006), student motivation (e.g. Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007) and patterns of student adjustment in school (e.g. Brown & Beckett, 2007) have also been of help to practitioners and interest to researchers. Student attendance (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Sheldon, 2007), student behaviour and discipline (e.g. Brown & Beckett, 2007) and student homework (Walker, Hoover–Dempsey, Whetsel, & Green, 2004) are the areas that have benefited from parental involvement and close working relations of teachers with parents.

In addition to the above, research into the interplay of social class and home-school relations has produced significant literature that has greatly contributed to the discourse on equality and equal opportunities for all concerned. The relationship of class with the central themes of race, culture and gender, and social and cultural capital has significantly added to our understanding (e.g. Crozier, 1996; Iyengar, 2012; Mirza, 2009).

It is important to note that the focus of most researchers has remained on primary school research, for explicating parental involvement with children, parent-teacher relations and related social class discourses and dynamics (e.g., Bakker, Denessen, & Brus-Laeven, 2007; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). However, at the secondary school level, few researchers have ventured into these uncharted waters to explore the tides and currents from a number of perspectives, including social class discourse and parental perceptions of their children's education (e.g., Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982; Crozier, 2000; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Reay, 2006; Vincent, 2001). This paper therefore aims to fill the gaps in knowledge concerning parent-teacher relations generally, and parental perceptions of their children's education particularly.

As noted above, in terms of parent-teacher relations, there is abundant international literature that has a broad scope, covering a number of overlapping themes. In this regard, however, in the context of Pakistan, there is a paucity of literature and research. However, researchers have explored a number of problems and issues concerning the system of education in Pakistan. These include student achievement studies with a particular focus on primary education (e.g. Salfi & Saeed, 2007; Stewart, Bond, Ho, Zaman, Dar, & Anwar, 2000) and comparative institutional research (e.g. Aslam, 2009; Khan & Kiefer, 2007). Increasingly in educational research in Pakistan, researchers have shown interest in and have found stark disparities for girls and women, both in the school environments and more generally concerning the various aspects of their life, in home and social contexts (e.g. Ahmed, 2011; Aslam, 2006, 2009; Shami & Hussain, 2005a, 2005b). Other research in the

primary school context has explored various learning and achievement related aspects of boys and girls in urban and rural contexts (e.g. Das, Pandey, & Zajonc, 2006; Glewwe & Kremer, 2006), with others interrogating the area of school quality, student achievement and progression (Behrman, Ross, & Sabot, 2008; Lloyd, Mete, & Grant, 2009). Some researchers have documented inequality, stratification, child labour and corporal punishment and have shown their implications for children's schooling and wellbeing (Khan, 2003; Robson, 2004; Rahman, 2004).

However, in the above discussion and research there seems to be a significant gap in knowledge concerning exploring and documenting the various dimensions of parent-teacher relations and parental perceptions of education and children's schooling, with a specific focus on secondary education. Exception to this has been the work of Gill Crozier whose empirical research on Pakistani parents in the UK is of relevance to the present study. This is not only because of the focus but also because of its relevance and impact on secondary education (Crozier, 2009; Crozier & Davies, 2006, 2007). There has also been some international literature that has some relevance to the context of Pakistan education system, which include, language and literacy research (Huss-keeler, 1997) culture, identity and diversity (Conteh & Kawashima, 2008), social class disparities research (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010), and educational attainment comparisons (Sunder & Uddin, 2007).
The aims of the doctoral study, from which this paper is drawn, were to explore parent-teacher relations in two contrasting but mutually reciprocating urban and rural contexts with a specific focus on secondary schools.

Bourdieu's notions of capital, habitus and field

The theoretical framework underpinning this study consisted of Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual tools of capital, *habitus* and *field*, for understanding parental experiences about education and schooling. Capital and its appropriation play an important role in people's lives. Often, the term is associated with monetary exchanges and economic transactions (Moore, 2008, p. 101). However, the role that 'capital' plays in human interaction and practices transcends all objective/subjective boundaries and is deeply embedded in people's cognition and social understanding. The way parents and teachers talk, behave and respond to various situations of their lives is greatly influenced and determined by the types of capital they possess and appropriate in their given situations. Capital, therefore, "can be embodied in a wide variety of forms" (Swartz, 1997, p. 74) with economic on the one end to symbolic on the other (Bourdieu, 1986).

The word *habitus* means "a habitual or typical condition, state or appearance, particularly of the body" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 74). Mahar, Harker, and Wilkes (1990, p. 10) define habitus as "a set of dispositions, created and reformulated through the conjuncture of objective structures and personal history." 'Dispositions' are at the heart of the concept of habitus, which Bourdieu argues involve learning, conscious or unconscious, deliberate or unplanned, in the numerous fields where agents participate. Hence, "one of the crucial features of habitus is that it is embodied, it is not composed solely of mental attitudes and perceptions" (Reay, 2004, p. 432). Similarly, Harker (1984, p. 118) suggests that the concept of habitus "may be seen as close to the concept of culture, but in a personalised sense - i.e. habitus is the way a culture is embodied in the individual."

The actualization of habitus, capital and the process of reproduction cannot be meaningful and complete without the concept of *field*, which makes everything meaningful, commonsensical and worth investing one's time and energies. For Bourdieu, a field is a social arena "within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 84). The notion of field is not a static concept; rather it is dynamic and multidimensional in character. It is the site for production and reproduction of strategies, actions and practices of the agents in the existing physical and social space within a given field. The *field* is therefore not only the site for the agents to structure, change and adapt their habituses to maximise their profits, but as a result, it remains itself in a constant flux and therefore reproduces and restructures with the passage of time. Bourdieu sees structure, agency and practices as dynamic entities and stresses the relational capacity or quality of the field throughout his work. He argues that to "think in terms of field is to *think relationally*" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 39). In the social space or field, habitus, capital and practices therefore overlap and interlink in multidimensional ways.

Research context

In Pakistan, a number of education systems run side by side. At one end of the spectrum are the elite (English-medium) private fee-charging schools, designed and run on the contemporary western education model, offering an O and A level curriculum, which are followed by a varying range of private (English-medium) fee-charging schools and other non-profit private schools (run by NGOs etc.). Towards the other end of the spectrum–at the lower rung of the education ladder–are the state or public (Urdu-medium) schools, which offer education to the masses, which include mostly working-class and poor parents (Aslam, 2006, 2009). There is a further stream of non-profit charitable institutions, called *madaris* or *madrasas*, which provide religious and some contemporary education to children and adults of various class backgrounds, but their share in the education provision is around 1% to 2.6% (Andrabi, Das, Khwaja, & Zajonc, 2006; Cockcroft, Cockcroft, Andersson, Milne, Omer, Ansari, Khan, & Chaudhry, 2009; McClure, 2009). According to Federal Bureau of Statistics of the GoP,[1] the current total literacy rates in Pakistan stand at 55%, in which 67% males are considered literate compared to 42% females.[2]

Method

The research approach adopted in this study was the qualitative case study, which involved gathering data from parents through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, field notes and photographs. The study was conducted in four schools, in two boys' and two girls', with one each from urban and rural areas of Peshawar. The research context mainly underpins Pashtun culture, of which the first author is also a member, which proved of immense help as an 'insider' and also because of having 'a feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 80). Since the study employed a qualitative methodology and used qualitative methods, the research participants were purposively selected for producing "thick description" (Geertz, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the context under investigation.

Participants and setting

The fieldwork was conducted in four public secondary schools and participants were selected using purposive sampling approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). The decision to select schools from different contexts and gender was intended to recruit a diverse set of participants for the study sample and to have *maximum (heterogeneous) variation sampling* (Patton, 2002, p. 234). To achieve this, as an 'insider,' the first author used his knowledge and experience of working with people and context, and of the culture in making decisions to recruit participants from a diverse set of potential participants. The primary aim was capturing the "core experiences and central, shared dimensions" of the participants and their settings (Patton, 2002, p. 235). A total of twenty parents volunteered to participate in the research. Twelve parents were interviewed, of which nine were fathers (4 and 5 in urban and rural schools respectively) and three were mothers (urban school). In addition, two focus groups were conducted in the boys' schools; in the urban school, three fathers participated and in the rural school, five fathers took part.

Ethical issues

The research followed both the ethical guidelines of BERA (2004) as well as the contextual ethical protocols in Pakistan. Throughout the research process, the earnest efforts had been "to be independent, objective and honest" in the conduct and reporting of the research (Denscombe, 2002, p. 178). Informed consent meant that it needed to be made sure that the participants understood and agreed to their participation without any duress, prior to beginning the research (BERA, 2004). The principle of informed consent entailed providing detailed and meaningful information to the participants in plain and simple language (mainly Pashtu). This included explaining: the nature of the research, what was required from their participation, who was undertaking and financing the research, why it was being undertaken, and how the research was to be disseminated and used (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 67). Anonymity and confidentially of the participants' identities and privacy were one of the main concerns of conducting the research in an ethical manner; through repeated verbal assurances and through the Consent Form it was made sure that the participants' data remained confidential and anonymous.

[1]Source: http://www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/fbs/statistics/pslm2006_07/report_pslm06_07.pdf
[2]Source: Pakistan Social and Living Standard Measurement (PSLM) Survey 2006-07

Data analysis

The data gathered were analysed and interpreted through an analytical framework adapted from Creswell and Plano-Clarke (2007, p. 129). The procedure adopted for the data analysis and interpretation consisted of five main stages: data preparation, initial exploration of the data, analysis of the data, representation and display of the data, and validation of the data. The data were simultaneously transcribed and translated into English. During the translation/transcription of the data, extreme care was required so as not to miss any cultural nuances due to the translation. This was the 'analytical stage' (Gray, 2003), where besides the data reduction, continuous engagement was required in the process of interpreting and shaping the data. The interpretation involved a dual process of theoretical scaffolding and providing contextual 'explanatory insights' of the data (Gray, 2003). The pseudonyms assigned to schools were based on the context they belonged to and the gender they represented, i.e. for the urban boys' school an abbreviation of UBS was assigned. For the urban girls' school an abbreviation of UGS was allocated. Similarly, for the rural boys' school a name of RBS was selected and for the rural girls' school an acronym of RGS was selected.

Results and discussion

Relationship between norms, values and education

For most parents one of the primary purposes of educating their children was the inculcation of norms, values and manners that they espoused. The most common responses of many parents were that through education their children are able to differentiate between the good and bad as illustrated here:

> The purpose of education is that one must be able to differentiate between the good and bad. Apart from this, thinking of an educated person is different and more refined from a person who is uneducated (Father, UBS).
> Education itself is very important. Education shows us every way, of every respect. It shows about the good and bad, about the right and wrong (Mother, UGS).

Whilst parents differed individually in terms of their "educational knowledge and awareness" (Crozier, 1996), the manner in which many parents shared their views about norms and values they wanted their children to follow also signified parental desire to appropriate and enhance their cultural capital. In this regard, many parents therefore often compared uneducated and educated people given the underlying differences in their 'thinking,' which is also mentioned in one of the excerpts above. The difference in 'thinking' of educated people seems to imply the underlying structural complexity and quality of parental dispositions. Given this understanding, naturally, for such parents negotiating access to the school and comprehending and negotiating teachers' talk and practices required a different set of 'thinking,' thus a daunting experience. Most parents therefore saw education as capital, as it signified an ability and capacity by following which a person could not only differentiate between the 'right' and 'wrong,' but also the mental structures acquired/attained through education itself were seen as more enabling.

For some other parents, the purpose of education signified deportment:

> Education gives you many things. Education gives manners, tells about the procedures of meeting with youngsters and elders, of meeting and greeting people, of sitting and standing [in a specific environment]. (Mother, UGS)
> Education enables you to know about mannerisms, of how to speak with [people] and sit in the company of people (Father, RBS).

It is through socialization and cultural frames of reference that behaviour patterns and manners are learned, which are used for interaction and communication in society. The purpose of education here is not just about speaking, meeting with, sitting and talking to people, it has more to do with the structures and quality of those manners that one acquires by investing time and energy in those pursuits. Many parents were of the view that education not only makes a difference to one's own values and manners, it also has an enabling ripple effect for others in other social circles.

Social class and education

The findings suggest that the relationship between parental social class and education was deeply intertwined. Most parents therefore saw education as a means of upward social mobility, for improvement in their socio-economic status (SES) and as a tool for fulfilling the utilitarian aims. Therefore, for some parents, as a source of social recognition and difference, the significance and application of education in everyday life was quite compelling in the way they shared their experiences:

> When children seek education, they won't be lifting big carpet rolls in our shop … I tell my children: "seek education, education is a good thing. It is a good thing because you will make use of the pen and earn your living. You won't do the donkey-work like I do: get underneath it [the carpets], lift it up, put it down." My life has already been spoiled (Father, RBS).
> There are many benefits of education, it gives you comfort in life; it helps you in avoiding working under the sun, of avoiding drudgery, and of avoiding undesirable and wasteful habits (Father, RBS).

The importance of education was evident to most parents, especially to those that were less educated, as they had first-hand experience of what it entailed to be a person without an education. This experience had informed and 'educated' the parents through which they could compare and contrast the social class consequences of not being educated. The difference of social class and parental aspirations for education making difference to one's quality of life comes across quite strongly through the parents' reflection.

The findings also show that the majority of parents interviewed desired upward social-class mobility. In order to do this, most of them wanted a better and different future for their children and did not want that their children follow the work and life they themselves had been going through:

> In my opinion, I think that the way I have spent my life, my children should not follow my footsteps and they must have a good [decent] life. No matter which direction they go [in their life] and I don't understand what is good and beneficial, but I wish that their standard of living is raised (Father, UBS).
> I don't want that my children end up doing the work I am doing now (Father, UBS).
> We [parents] say [discuss] that we have an impoverished and miserable life, and think that our children's future be somewhat brighter by seeking worldly or religious education … so that they may be able to read something (Father, RBS).

Clearly, there is a sense of deprivation in the respondents' assertions, exemplifying their social class standings. Parental experiences of their social and professional spheres positioned them to see a strong connection between education, class structures and the inherent logic of reproduction within the society, due to which they saw purposes of education in utilitarian terms and as a way of upward social mobility. Moreover, since education in its institutionalized and embodied form did not form an important part of the cultural capital and *habitus* of many parents, they knew that they did not have the 'code' to 'decipher' (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 73) the complex and higher order structures and practices to appropriate social, cultural and economic benefits for themselves.

A view also shared by most teachers in the schools, most less educated parents considered secondary education as the threshold for their children, beyond which they did not see much scope and significance. The restricted or limited approach of most of these (uneducated) parents towards the children's education was also due to economic and cultural reasons.

> In our culture education in real sense is not the aim of many of us, including parents. Poor parents usually aim for quick fixes, which means their sons securing a government job after having their secondary or higher secondary certificate (Teacher, RBS).

> Many of them [fathers] think that matric [secondary education] should be enough for their sons so that they can apply for a position of an orderly or get engaged in any menial public job (Teacher, UBS).

From the economic point of view, the fact that parents had a working-class or poor background and had large families meant that affording their children's education beyond secondary education was not possible. Most of them therefore wanted that their son(s) get a job in public or private sectors, or otherwise get employed in some other trade or work. However, from the cultural point of view, a number of uneducated parents deemed it inappropriate for the daughters to go to a college or university. For such parents, sending daughters to a university for education was a taboo and a stereotype, which indicated the constraining factors of culture and parental dispositions. Those parents who had left school either at the primary, middle or secondary levels also did not want their children to follow their life and work patterns:

> Education is a good thing. Had I acquired a good education I would not have been doing the peon's job. I don't want that my children end up doing the work I am doing now. I want that they get good places (jobs) which other ordinary people get (Father, UBS).

The pattern of thought above suggests some difference and depth of parental dispositions compared to uneducated parents. This difference of social and cultural capital helped such parents to compare and contrast their positions with that of 'others' by expressing their desire for 'good places' for their children that 'other ordinary people get.' In other words, these parents had limited or low levels of "educational *habitus*" (Fowler, 1997, p. 27). However, the parents had acquired an understanding and appreciation for a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 782) as they could see the difference education had made to the lives of 'ordinary people.'

Although parents spoke highly of education and its importance in one's life, for some parents their day-to-day experience of seeing young people with education without jobs were glaring examples of educational inflation and joblessness. These parents were therefore critical of and sceptical towards the perceived benefits of education in the job market and indicated gaps in the quality of public school education. Many parents therefore blamed the mainstream public education for its poor quality output.

'Education is light; it takes you towards the path of light': Parents' use of analogies and metaphors for education

Parents used metaphors and analogies for visualizing and describing education and its various dimensions. For many parents the use of 'light' as a metaphor came across very strongly, which exemplified and manifested their attitudes and understanding that were structured around their immediate and intimate experiences of life. Some parents made use of the analogies of 'sight,' 'language' and cognition to describe the significance of education concerning their lives. They seemed to point to differences between the underlying structures of cognition and understanding of individuals in which language plays an important and significant role, using which people appropriate and decode structures and practices in various social settings. Thus, for the parents these powerful analogies and metaphors seemed to have a physical as well as a personal dimension.
Education as light was a source of power and enlightenment, and an ability to make a difference to one's life, by avoiding 'darkness' and following or benefiting from light:

> Education is like, when you enter a house at night time with a light [bulb] switched on in which you see everything, from wardrobes, chairs, to beds so that you may not tumble upon these things … So education is like when a light [bulb] is on. An uneducated person is like when you enter a room with pitch darkness and no light (Father, RBS).
> Seeking education is very important. It brings people out of darkness into light … (Mother, UGS)
> … Education is like [the difference between] darkness and light; like day and night. An uneducated person is like night, with pitch darkness you tumble on things, and see nothing … (Father, RBS)

'Light' in the physical sense has an enabling entity or power, which is external in nature but helps people realize and appropriate their individual potentials to obtain benefits of various sorts in varying contexts. Likewise, 'light' as a personal dimension of the parents pertains not only to the use of one's inherited and acquired capacities, but also signifies the reciprocal nature of the long lasting interaction with the social and physical world, which gives people the 'visual' and 'physical' freedom with which they derive benefits in their own unique ways. For some other parents, the purpose of education as light signified a constant and never-ending struggle to appropriate the riches that it contained in terms of one's improvement at personal, material, and symbolic levels:

> The purpose of education is that … [it] is like light. My advice to my sons is that "it [education] is like a light; the further you can go in that go ahead and if there are any obstacles down the line, then one can think about alternatives." (Father, UBS)
> Education is light; it takes you towards the path of light. (Father, RBS)

'Light' in its physical sense provides an ability and more specifically visibility that one appropriates to do innumerable tasks according to one's own potential and propensity. The suggestion here is progress and development in that the further one goes through light the more light they can gather, the more places they can see and the more detail they can internalise. In this manner, education equips people with structures and mechanisms that serve as a decoding process, of making sense of one's own sense and place in a specific social field and of appropriating the same structures to make effective sense of the countless and multidimensional externalities that lie outside one's self.

For some other parents, the analogy that they used concerned the immediate senses of sight, touch and cognition/language, which necessarily are the pathways and the go-between the people's internal worlds and as tools for effective appropriation of the externalities of the outside world:

> Education is important for all aspects of life. People having eyes are blind if they are uneducated, [they may] have a tongue and would talk but are dumb if they are uneducated. [It is because] English [language] these days is very much in common use, and Urdu [language] is in common use, and you meet with such people [who speak these languages] (Mother, UGS).
> Education is a very good thing. It opens your eyes, it enlightens you … You tend to know about things, about reading and writing, which is comforting (Father, RBS).

The 'blindness' and 'dumbness' of people without education are powerful descriptors that separate, situate and identify the complexities of the underlying coding and decoding of the structures, patterns and processes that signify the various mediums of transactions and the structures of appropriation in one's fields of reference. The parental emphasis on the power of languages as descriptors of dominance and ability provides some understanding into how constrained people might feel if/when the structure of practices incorporating language and the related structures of transactions is beyond one's reach and understanding. From such a parental perspective, education and its appropriation in life was therefore regarded as one that 'enlightened' people's lives and opened one's eyes, through which people could seek various 'comforts.'

Education as capital, as a liberating force

Education and being educated signified having an ability and capital that many parents saw as a liberating force. Given their respective dispositions and social and professional milieus, many parents extended the use of the 'light' metaphor to describe and interpret the significance and value that education had in their personal and social lives. For some parents, education therefore signified access, movement, and liberty:

> By light, I mean knowledge, whereby one can see things. ... An illiterate man cannot go to any place. An illiterate man is just restricted to his job, to his home … When the sun rises, you can see everything but when there is pitch darkness, you cannot see anything (Father, UBS).

In negotiating text-based symbols, complex language structures and a constraining and limiting influence on these parents' sense of movement and effective use of the social world. Such parents envisioned education as a vehicle for access and freedom and the lack of it as a restriction. Seen from the perspective of negotiating access to school and making sense of and interacting effectively with teachers was a daunting experience for such parents. This implied that they did not feel confident to interact properly with teachers.
In a similar vein, for some other parents, the significance of education was evident in interpreting messages and decoding the structures of the written words and the underlying logic of it:

> For one who is educated, wherever you go, one can read signboards that this is Dr. so-and-so or this is a such-and-such place, this is Hayatabad [a town], or this is Board [a place] or this is a medical ward in hospital, or this is a so-and-so shopkeeper, or go to a such-and-such pharmacy and bring such-and-such medicine. So when that person is educated, he would go, read the [sign] board, enter [the shop] and take it [medicine]. So everything is dependent on education. Is it [everything] dependent [on education] or not? (Father, RBS)
> … I see myself that I am uneducated … [For instance] when I take my child to hospital, I would stand next to the doctor's room but would ask [people] where such-and-such [doctor] is based … (Mother, UGS)
> … when you go out of your house, or go to hospital for a doctor's appointment–for all these things, education is very important (Mother, UGS).

These reflections of the parents give some insight into how these and such parents visualised education as capital and power that is empowering, giving a sense of liberty, freedom and the ability to effectively appropriate structures and practices to one's own advantage.

Many parents wished and desired to have had enough education that would have helped them in the various problems that they experienced in their personal and social lives. However, since many of them did not seem to have in due proportion the required and appropriate capital, which included "the material and the ideational: [social products of] thoughts, actions, [and] objects," (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 18) as the currency of the social intercourse, they found themselves ill equipped to make sense of the practices in various social situations. Nevertheless, some parents seemed to have adapted to engage more deeply with their children's education at home:

> I myself being illiterate [uneducated] understandably, don't know much. But I do know to the extent that when my children come home [after school], I check their copies [notebooks] to see that they have been given a 'good' at one place and a 'star' at other; and [I] check their marks that out of 20 how much marks they have obtained in tests. … So when you have an interest in something you strive towards that. I check their copies [notebooks]. I know to the extent that I check their writing for neatness and clarity (Mother, UGS).

This suggests that underpinning the above excerpt is a reference to the inculcation or appropriation of secondary *habitus* (Reed-Danahay, 2005, p. 155). The mother may have acquired these 'skills' or 'capital' over time at home by engaging with children about school matters and in some ways learning from them what it entailed to be given a 'good' and a 'star' etc. The benefits of such an engagement of mothers meant monitoring children's progress but a means of reassuring children the importance of education and learning.

Parents on children's education: how constrained are they?

Many fathers held conservative views about daughters' education and a majority of parents treated sons and daughters differently, preferring sons in education and everyday aspects of life. A father expressed the following views about the education of his daughters:

> In my view, when girls have some basic education, then that should be sufficient for them (Father, RBS).

This consequently on the local and national level has implications for gender disparities in education for girls, documented extensively in the context of Pakistan (e.g. Aslam & Kingdon, 2008; Shami & Hussain, 2005b; Winkvist & Akhtar, 2000). Of particular importance here is the fact that "strong cultural norms of *purdah* and restrictions on female mobility, empowerment and decision-making … undermine [girls'] access to schooling when of school-going-age," especially in the rural parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Pakistan (Aslam, 2006, pp. 13-14). In a similar vein, one father shared the following opinion about daughters' education:

> I think they [daughters] should be sent [to school] but not beyond a specific stage. They should be educated to the extent that they can write their name, put their signature, or write a letter. They should be allowed to read [study] up to class 7 and 8. After that, they should stay home, she is better off at home. She does not belong outside home (Father, RBS).

Whilst many fathers made decisions about daughters' education and future, in many ways they seemed constrained by the dominant and contextually specific social practices that dictated the social and cultural notions of educating girls up to a specific level. Although most parents aspired and desired that their children do well in education and have a better life, they did not seem to have the means (economic and symbolic) to have made phenomenal changes to their work and life patterns, for the education of their children. Yet, some parents, due to economic or cultural reasons or the combination of both, had specifically left their villages for providing better learning opportunities and environment for their children. One mother shared her perspective as such:

> I don't discriminate between sons and daughters. I try my best that my daughters do well in their studies … For the education of our children, we have migrated from our village, … for secondary school education girls cannot go to Hangu city, because of the stereotypical environment of villages. So therefore, I came here–and we left everything back there … (Mother, UGS)

One visible difference about parents who had migrated from towns and villages to the city was that they demonstrated flexibility in their attitudes to the many issues of children and their education, especially to the education of their daughters. The above excerpt also illustrates another important point. This pertains to the stereotypical gender sensitive attitudes of people in rural settings towards girls' education. For many families migration to the urban dwelling was one way of avoiding conservative and constrained societal norms that challenged and stigmatized one's children's education, especially that of the education of girls.

Conclusion and implications

The findings and discussion above have shown that the relationship between parental *habitus* and culture is deeply intertwined, informing and perpetuating patterns of parental perceptions and behaviour about norms and values parents wanted to instill in their children through education. There was a strong desire amongst all parents that their children do well in education, become better human beings and are protected from the bad influences of the society. However, for most parents the purposes of education signified social mobility by seeing their children securing jobs and positions in public and private sector institutions. To this end, social class featured prominently in the parents' data, with most parents therefore desiring that their children do not end up doing the work they were doing and wanted something better for them. Social class of parents and their educational backgrounds, therefore, played an important role.

Parents described education metaphorically, which highlighted the role of *habitus* in structuring parental dispositions and experiences of their respective personal and social worlds. Using common and ordinary language, parents saw the world and education from a number of visual and physical characteristics, and within which education's role as capital, potential and propensity for making a difference to one's life emerges as deeply interconnected and culturally embedded. The gendered dimensions and perspectives have emerged as important predicators in which patriarchal norms and masculinity obscure, curtail and constrain girls and women's education and movement. In this regard, many fathers had restrictive views on the education of daughters, predominantly because of cultural reasons and due to economic constraints. Culture, class, capital

and *habitus* played a significant role in structuring parents' views about how they viewed education in their own lives and the varying and diverse perspectives they held about the education of their children.

For improving parental communication with children and changing parental orientations towards children and their education, some implications are discussed. There is a need to consider how parental perceptions towards children's education can be better aligned to improve the education, especially for girls. In this regard, for parents, especially for fathers, rural social and educational mobilization programmes need to be considered. Moreover, parent teacher councils (PTCs) in schools need to be mobilized for providing parental awareness programmes, and for ensuring teacher and student attendance at school. However, ensuring parental support without proper monetary incentives will not work. In this regard, not only financial support for parents, but also support for their children is required in the form of scholarships, free education, free books and uniforms.

Girls are not only culturally disadvantaged, lack of sufficient and appropriately located schools pose double disadvantage for them. More educational institutions for children – especially females – need establishing, so that the ratio of girls' participation in education can be increased. Moreover, for changing community and cultural attitudes towards female and girls' education, awareness campaigns about the importance of female education are required. Mass awareness campaigns about the importance of female education need to be started urgently. For this, help and support of religious scholars and leaders be ensured for its effectiveness and success.

Equally important is the role that *purdah* plays in restricting female education. While Islam does allow girls and women to seek education and knowledge, some elements of the Pushtun culture obfuscate Islamic identity, especially in the rural and conservative communities (Barfield, 2007; Drumbl, 2004; Jacinto, 2006). The Quran and *Hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad encourage and necessitate both Muslim men and women to acquire knowledge and education (Jawad, 1998; Khatab & Bouma, 2007), something, which is clearly interpreted differently by some parents who seem to see no contradiction between this stance and the withdrawal of girls from educational institutions. Giving due regard to the cultural notions of purdah, separate educational institutions, offering easy access for females need to be provided so that they are not deprived of their due right to education.

Acknowledgements: We are thankful to Dr. Peter Mtika, School of Education, University of Aberdeen, for his helpful comments, suggestions and critical-constructive feedback on earlier drafts of the paper.

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Received: June 6, 2016
Revisions Received: Nov 20, 2016