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Parents' involvement in their children's education: narratives from rural Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background: Parents' roles in their children's education are significant in terms of outcomes for the child. As research on parental involvement in children's education has often been conducted in high-income countries, there is a deep need for more research on parental involvement in contexts of disadvantage.

Purpose: Set in the context of socioeconomically disadvantaged communities in rural Pakistan, this study sought to explore parents' lived experiences of their involvement in their children's education and gain insight into the barriers they encountered in assisting their children's learning.

Methods: A qualitative research design was employed. In total, 12 parents (6 mothers and 6 fathers) of school-age children in rural Pakistan were interviewed about their views on involvement with their children's education. Data were analysed thematically, using a narrative inquiry approach.

Findings: Through in-depth analysis of the data, two distinct narratives of parental involvement were identified: (1) a narrative of hope and trust-building, indicating parents' confidence in state schools and their striving for a better future for their children, and (2) a narrative of dissatisfaction and inequality, reflecting frustration arising from factors including parents' socioeconomic situations, concerns about schools and the influence of local societal norms. It was evident that, despite hardship, the parents wanted their children to be educated and regarded education as a path to improving prospects.

Conclusions: The findings broaden understanding of parents' involvement in their children's education within socioeconomically disadvantaged rural communities by revealing and highlighting the diverse, often context-related barriers the parents encountered.

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Introduction

Parents' involvement in their children's education is regarded as critically important in providing children with a good starting point for independent effort and success (e.g. Epstein 2018; Goodall and Montgomery 2014; Uusimäki et al. 2019). Irrespective of their social, educational or ethnic background, parents' interest and input can aid and

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encourage children to perform better in their studies (Dahie, Mohamed, and Mohamed 2018). Involvement can take the form of a mix of diverse activities through which parents can contribute to their children's education, including helping children with their homework, negotiating with teachers and attending school events (Hill and Tyson 2009; Park and Holloway 2013). For example, parents may support their children's education at home by helping them in the construction of concepts, building their social competence and upholding their learning and development (e.g. Epstein 2018; Puhrová 2018). A positive parental attitude towards their children's education helps to enrich the learning environment at home and school, and facilitates parents' understanding of their child's way of learning (Arapi and Hamel 2021; Bartnikowska, Ćwirynkało, and Froniek 2022). Similarly, good parent–teacher working relations and practical communication can help to dispel misunderstanding or mistrust that may arise between parents and teachers (Orell and Pihlaja 2020; Puccioni, Froiland, and Moeyaert 2020).

The role of parents in their children's education has been variously described in the literature using terms including *home–school cooperation* (e.g. Orell and Pihlaja 2020), *parental engagement* (e.g. Goodall 2021) and *parental involvement* (e.g. Epstein 2018; Wilder 2014). Home–school cooperation describes a collaborative working relationship between parents and teachers in which both parties take equal responsibility for children's learning (e.g. Westergård 2013). Definitions of parental engagement usually include reference to parents' commitment and dedication to their children's learning at school, at home and in the community (Goodall 2021). According to Pushor (2007), parental engagement is a synergy of commitment between parents and teachers, in which they work in tandem, building understanding and mutually deciding on issues pertaining to a child's education and development. Parental involvement may refer to efforts by schools and educational authorities to involve parents in their children's education at school, and to educate parents about helping children in their learning endeavours at home (Đurišić and Bunijevac 2017; Epstein 2018; Fan and Chen 2001).

Whilst the critical role of parents in their children's education has been extensively researched (Arapi and Hamel 2021; Wilder 2014), insufficient attention has been paid to this topic in the context of lower-income countries (Ahmed, Rönkä, and Perälä-Littunen 2022). The study reported in this paper seeks to contribute to efforts to address this gap, by investigating parental involvement in the context of rural Pakistan. In Pakistan, parents – especially those who are poor, have low literacy levels and are rural-dwelling – are often unaware of the importance of involvement in their children's education, as they lack the necessary resources to be involved. For such parents, the notion of involvement is more likely to mean coping with basic realities: for example, providing their children with food and shelter, freeing them from paid or unpaid labour and sending them to school (Ahmed et al. 2021; Mughal 2020). Pakistan has approximately 50 million school-age children, of whom around 22 million are out of school (UNICEF 2018). Although many factors have a bearing on poor grades, dropout or absenteeism, parents' lack of involvement in their children's education is often cited as one of the main reasons for children's low academic performance, or for their dropping out of formal education (Malik, Rafique, and Qayyum 2020; Yousaf 2019).

In our study, the concept of *parental involvement* is used, as it is widely employed in the literature to refer to the role and contribution of parents in their children's education (e.g. Đurišić and Bunijevac 2017; Epstein 2018; Fan and Chen 2001; Hill and Tyson 2009).

However, for the purposes of this study, the meaning of the concept *parental involvement* has been expanded to better accommodate the circumstances and experiences of parents living in socioeconomically disadvantaged rural areas and regions. For instance, what might be termed parental interference, such as the practice of parents excluding their children from school, may be due to parents' socioeconomic situation (e.g. poverty and low literacy levels) or to irrepressible external conditions (i.e. local customs) that hamper children's opportunities for education. Thus, in this study, the definition of parental involvement also includes the notion of parental interference in their children's education. Before setting out our study in more detail, though, we situate our work with reference to the wider research context.

Background

The social-ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that parents have a profound influence on their children's learning. As parents' active participation and encouragement can enhance children's learning abilities, much research interest has focused on investigating how the home environment can play a crucial role in supporting children's education (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003), with engaged parenting supporting a home environment conducive to children's learning endeavours (US Department of Education 2010). A positive attitude and active involvement by parents can be key to bridging and linking children's learning at school with their learning at home (Puhrová 2018; Schmid and Garrels 2021). Similarly, parental activities such as participating in children's academic work at home, and visiting their school, send children a message that learning is essential (Bartnikowska, Ćwirynkało, and Froněk 2022).

Although not all socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts face the same issues relating to parental involvement in their children's education, and situations may be diverse, they nonetheless have some predicaments in common. These typically include a lack of qualified teachers, parents' limited educational knowledge and the precarious economic situation of families, which often obstruct coordination and communication between parents and schools (Kumar et al. 2023; Lechuga-Peña and Brisson 2018; Malik, Rafique, and Qayyum 2020). For example, according to Hasnat (2015), uneducated or less-educated parents in Bangladesh may not feel comfortable about contacting their children's schools and, thus, remain uninvolved or less involved in their children's education. Likewise, in India, parents' weak educational and economic backgrounds often cause poor connectivity with the school, and school dropout (Kumar et al. 2023). In Pakistan, parents often feeling unwelcome in the school, or receiving insufficient information about their children's education, can widen the gap between home and school and reduce their participation in their children's education (Ashraf 2019). Studies emphasise that parents can contribute to their children's education, and better understand their children's difficulties with learning, when they are able to facilitate their children's schooling by participating in the educational process and communicating with their children's schools (Bempechat and Shernoff 2012; Đurišić and Bunijevac 2017; Puccioni, Froiland, and Moeyaert 2020).

Many people in lower-income countries reside in rural areas, which are educationally and economically more disadvantaged than urban areas (World Databank 2017). It is often the case that parents are heavily involved in maintaining their households and

making a living, and hence will find it extremely difficult to invest scarce resources (e.g. time and/or money) in their children's education (Malik, Rafique, and Qayyum 2020; Mughal 2020). Many obstacles, including poverty, lack of financial resources, lack of access to information and lack of awareness, make it difficult for parents to be involved in their children's education (Williams and Sánchez 2013). In rural Pakistan, household circumstances are often unsuited to children's learning and development (Mughal 2020). It is evident that the family's financial situation, the parents' educational background, and even the family's size can influence children's learning and parental participation considerably (Malik, Rafique, and Qayyum 2020). Another factor contributing to the lack of parental involvement is patriarchy. The structure of the rural Pakistani community reflects a powerful male dominance, in which women traditionally do not have opportunities to participate in many spheres of life (Abbas, Hashim, and Alzuhairi 2018). For example, girls are often shut off from attending school, especially after primary education, and mothers' participation in their children's education is restricted (Agha 2021; Shah and Shah 2012). Male family members (e.g. the father or another male family member) often discourage the education of girls (Agha 2018), and instead of receiving formal education girls are frequently instructed in household duties (Shah and Shah 2012). Such norms habitually force girls into premature marriage and deprive them of their fundamental right to education (Abbas, Hashim, and Alzuhairi 2018).

Despite education being free in state schools in Khyber Pakhtun-khwa, the region in which the data for this study were gathered, children from disadvantaged families often cannot access all the resources they need (e.g. notebooks, school bags and transport). This is clearly a situation which imposes extra stress and strain on parents (Ghazi et al. 2013; Jadoon, Aajiz, and Khan 2021). Moreover, a significant proportion (over 40%) of the Pakistani population is not literate (World Databank 2017), and parents whose first language is not Urdu (the national language) find it difficult to interact with teachers, culminating in their feeling distanced from their children's school activities (LaRocque, Kleiman, and Darling 2011). Research has shown that in families where poverty and low levels of literacy prevail, and food and health services are inadequate, it is not possible for children to attain age-appropriate physical and intellectual development (Abid et al. 2021; Erdener and Knoepfel 2018; Mughal 2020). In addition, according to a report by UNESCO (2007), parents' poor socioeconomic circumstances and the resulting absence of parental support and motivation have remained underexplored. In rural Pakistan, for example, where 61% of the total population of the country reside, parental involvement is a serious issue (World Databank 2015). It is evident that factors including precarious socioeconomic conditions and limited teacher-parent cooperation have greatly discouraged parents, and may ultimately lead them to abandon their children's education (Malik, Rafique, and Qayyum 2020; Mughal 2020).

Purpose

With the research landscape and socioeconomic context of disadvantage set out above in mind, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of parents of school-age children in rural Pakistan, in terms of their involvement in their children's education. The research question we sought to address was as follows: *How do parents in rural Pakistan view their*

involvement in children's learning, and what barriers hinder them from assisting their children's learning?

Methods

Methodological approach

This study adopted a qualitative research design based on narrative inquiry. Given the suitability of narrative inquiry to support the exploration of stories and experiences about individuals and society (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), it was considered an appropriate means by which to address the study's purpose. Narrative methods can enable the uncovering of lived experiences and help identify nuance in people's stories (Ntinda 2019). In narratives, people may reveal how they make sense of their lived experiences and talk about their communities (Nuran 2015; Riessman 2008). Thus, a key feature of this study's design was to examine rural parents' narratives of involvement in their children's education.

Ethical considerations

As this research was carried out at a Finnish University, the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity and of the Responsible Conduct of Research and Research Ethics were followed. In advance of collecting data, the prospective study participants gave their informed consent. The interviewer (researcher and first author of this paper) explained the study objectives and consent form to the parents, most of whom were not literate, prior to starting each interview. This ensured that they understood the study aims and were aware of their rights as research participants. It was made clear to the parents that their opinions, ideas and beliefs were important. The interviewer was familiar with the pertinent socio-cultural norms and traditions. During the interviews, some participants expressed strong emotions while telling their stories. The interviewer responded to these expressions of emotion sensitively. As the interaction between men and women is not common or can be a sensitive issue, particularly in rural Pakistan, the male interviewer was accompanied by his sister during the interviews, a strategy that helped maintain a safe and motivating atmosphere. This especially supported mothers' openness, ensured a flow of talk and enabled discussion about gender-sensitive issues. All interviews were audio-recorded with the interviewees' consent, and they were assured that their data would be treated confidentially and de-identified.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted with parents of low socioeconomic status (i.e. financially and academically less privileged) living in rural Pakistan. An approach based on snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study (Ghaljaie, Naderifar, and Goli 2017). Some parents who were initially recruited then assisted us in locating further potential participants. The primary criteria for inclusion were: living in a rural area of Pakistan, and having school-going children. A total of 12 parents were interviewed, of

whom eight were not literate, three had completed primary school and one had completed high school. The participants comprised six mothers and six fathers, whose ages ranged within 30–55 years.

The parents' views were elicited through participation in audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews. In preparation for data collection, we developed an interview guide that was based on topics evident in previous research on aspects of parental involvement in their children's education (e.g. Bower and Griffin 2011; Epstein 2018; Kim 2018; Wilder 2014). Throughout this process of development, the cultural context of rural Pakistan was taken into account. The interview guide included demographic questions and key areas for discussion with the participating parents. Various dimensions of parental involvement in their children's education were explored in the interviews, including: parental involvement in school activities; parents' interaction and cooperation with teachers; parents helping children's learning at home; and factors that they felt hindered their involvement in their children's education.

The interviews were conducted in Hindko, which is a regional language widely spoken in the Abbottabad, Haripur and Mansehra regions of Pakistan. Hindko was used because many rural dwellers generally do not fluently speak or fully understand Urdu, the national language. The interviewer (first author) is fluent in Hindko. A total of 12 interviews was conducted (i.e. one interview with each of the 12 participants). One parent per household was interviewed to support collection of a diversity of views on the phenomenon being studied. The interviews with fathers were conducted in various locations, such as their garden, farm, shop or home, whilst the interviews with mothers took place in their homes, with their consent and at their convenience.

Data analysis

The overall aim of the analysis was to better understand a phenomenon in a specific context by focusing on what was actually said in the participants' narratives, as they spoke about their involvement in their children's education. An analytical procedure informed by Riessman's 2008 thematic-narrative approach was employed. The first author conducted the analysis by hand. This process began with transcription of all the audio-recorded interviews, which resulted in 178 handwritten A4 pages. The next stage involved the first author reading the transcripts to better understand the parents' views. Similarities and differences between viewpoints were noted. To check for accuracy and consistency, all the transcripts were confirmed back with the original audio recordings.

The conceptualisation and understanding of the participants' views developed through close reading, in which common thematic elements (codes) relevant to the aim of the study were identified and highlighted (Glesne 2006; Riessman 2008). As a following step, the ideas and topics that had been pinpointed in the interviewed parents' narratives were categorised and grouped. This process allowed for the generation of two broader narratives and several sub-narratives. Next, the first author re-read the transcripts to confirm these findings and consider their relevance to the research questions. During this step, suitable labels for the different narratives and sub-narratives were also sought. To enhance the credibility and transparency of the data analysis, all decisions were

discussed, in detail, with the co-authors of the paper. The first author re-visited the transcribed data several times to locate necessary information and ensure the categories of narratives and sub-narratives accurately reflected the data.

Findings

Through the process of in-depth analysis described above, we were able to gain insight into the lived experiences of the parents of school-age children in rural Pakistan that we had interviewed. This enabled us to better understand how the parents perceived their involvement in children's education, and the barriers that they felt hindered them from assisting their children's learning. Overall, two distinct narratives were identified in the interview data: (1) *a narrative of hope and trust-building* and (2) *a narrative of dissatisfaction and inequality*. Both of these narratives were evident in most of the parents' interviews. Table 1 presents the two narratives, associated sub-narratives, and topics that arose from the analysis of interview data. First, the narrative of hope and trust-building comprised three different sub-narratives: (i) *parents noticed some improvements*; (ii) *parents' aspirations for a better future for their children* and (iii) *the extended family as a resource for involvement*. This narrative contained encouraging aspects, such as the parents' perceptions of the gradual emergence of parent-teacher cooperation and processes of trust-building. Despite all their hardships, the interviewed parents expressed a desire for their

Table 1. The narratives, sub-narratives and topics arising from analysis of the interviews.

Narratives	Sub-narratives	Topics
<i>Narrative of hope and trust-building</i>	<i>Parents noticed some improvements</i> <i>Parents' aspirations for a better future for their children</i> <i>The extended family as a resource for involvement</i>	Cooperation between parents and teachers Teachers' empathy with poor parents Feedback on children's learning activities The giving of homework by teachers Some progress in children's education Parental motivation and guidance to children The desire of parents for their children to receive education Parental encouragement Parents seek support from neighbours for their children's education Parents work hard to arrange private tuition for children Support of relatives for children's education
<i>Narrative of dissatisfaction and inequality</i>	<i>Parents' personal circumstances and teachers' conduct</i> <i>Gender inequalities</i>	Parents' discontent with teachers Parental poverty affects parents' involvement Lack of literacy impedes parents from helping children Teachers' disrespectful attitudes towards parents Parents lack of trust in teachers Parents disappointed by state schools Teachers responsible for children's poor performance Male domination hampers mothers' free involvement Early marriages due to parental lack of knowledge Gender segregation due to settled practices Parental interference Withdrawal from school and child labour

children to be educated, and perceived that schooling and teaching in state schools had improved in some way. The parents spoke, too, about the potential role of their extended family in their children's education. Second, the narrative of dissatisfaction and inequality was a construct formed from two sub-narratives: (i) *parents' personal circumstances and teachers' conduct*; and (ii) *gender inequalities*. Through these narratives, the interviewees spoke about disheartening and undesirable factors that, they felt, reduced or minimised their involvement, including unbalanced power relations between parents and teachers, parents' impoverished personal circumstances and gender discrimination. In the subsections below, the two narratives and their sub-narratives are presented and discussed. Where helpful to illuminate the main findings, anonymised excerpts from the data have been included. These have been translated from Hindko into English by the first author.

A narrative of hope and trust-building

This narrative established that, despite various obstacles, the interviewed parents felt some degree of confidence in state schools and perceived that they had some hope for a better future for their children. In addition, it was clear from the analysis that the parents referred to their prospects of support for their children's education provided by other family members and neighbours.

The sub-narrative *parents noticed some improvements* indicated that the parents considered that formal education in rural Pakistan was gradually improving. The kinds of positive developments that were mentioned included, for example, increased communication between teachers and parents, the paying of attention to problems impeding children's education and – to some extent – the adoption of strategies to smooth the process of parent–teacher collaboration and the children's education. Some parents expressed satisfaction with becoming more familiar or even acquainted with teachers, which appeared to boost their self-confidence. For instance, it was evident that parents who had switched their children from private to public schools felt that the state education system had improved. As one of the interviewed mothers commented:

If there is an issue with our children's learning, the teacher sometimes writes messages in their notebook, e.g. the child is not good at learning, or helps him in doing his homework. I would say state schools are a little bit better now ... I withdrew my children from a private school for financial reasons and enrolled them in a state school, and they (children) are getting on better.

An interviewed father reflected as follows:

Now the situation is somehow improving in state schools, and teachers somehow concentrate on children's learning ... I am satisfied because sometimes I myself visit the school to find out about my children's performance and noticed that teachers somehow pay some attention. I know some teachers, and sometimes I call them and ask about my children.

In a similar vein, the analysis suggested a sense of change, in that what was originally felt to be a lack of cooperation between teachers and parents had been replaced by some measure of coordination and feedback about their children's education, according to the parents. This gradual transformation was evident, too, in the shift from traditional, conservative thinking about schooling to a somewhat more up-to-date approach to learning and teaching. As exemplified, some parents

reported that teaching and learning in state schools was slowly getting better, describing how teachers would, from time to time, keep them informed about their children's education through such means as phone calls and notes. A few parents mentioned the extent to which they valued the part currently played by teachers. The parents' views signified that, while slight, these small adjustments testified to the efforts of teachers and parents in rural communities. This was in the direction of improving children's learning, as well as the adoption of new practices, such as feedback and coordination, directly or indirectly between home and school. For instance, another interviewed mother described improved communication with her daughter's school, explaining that 'I tell them that I can't make myself free even for one day because I'm the only breadwinner in my family' and confirming that, as a consequence, 'now they discuss matters concerning my daughter's education on the phone'.

The second sub-narrative highlighted the *parents' aspirations for a better future for their children*. Although most of the parents were poor and not literate, they insisted that they wanted their children to be educated, and explained that they were trying their best to assist them in all possible ways. Their narratives included illustrations of their attempts to motivate their children. For instance, some explained how they told their children about examples of people who had not become literate and, as a result, had to endure challenges in the form of hard labour and long working days. Some parents were concerned, in particular, about education for their daughters. Their narratives demonstrated the belief that education can help children, especially daughters, in situations in life when things might not go to plan; indeed, this was regarded as one of the major reasons for promoting female education. One of the interviewed fathers expressed his thoughts as follows:

We desire that our children study. I believe that my daughter will learn more and become a doctor. Every parent thinks of their children's future, but I think one should be more concerned about a daughter's destiny, especially in our society [rural area]. If they [daughters] are well educated, and in the future, if anything go wrong, at least they will be able to handle the situation.

The third sub-narrative within the hope and trust-building narrative demonstrated the important role of the *extended family as a resource for involvement*. The analysis revealed how, in some senses, extended family were able to compensate for parents who found involvement difficult. It was evident that some participants reported that lack of skills, or difficult working conditions, sometimes prevented them from being self-reliant with respect to helping their children with their schoolwork. In such situations, parents often depended on more educated family members: for instance, when their children required support in doing their homework. The parents' narratives made clear that their collectivistic, socio-domestic culture provided this possibility. Most of them reported seeking support from more educated members of their families (this might, for example, be their children's uncles, aunts, or cousins) or turning to neighbours in efforts to satisfy their children's learning needs. For example, one of the interviewed mothers referred to assistance from a neighbour:

I can't help my daughters with their homework because their books are difficult for me to understand. They often go to a neighbour's place to do their homework because a lady there is educated and a friend of mine. My daughters do their homework together with her children, and she guides them.

An interviewed father cited help given by a family member:

The children often sit and study at home, and they are fond of learning. I remain busy at work most of the time, and also, I'm not educated enough to be able to help them. But when their exams approach or they have to prepare for a test, they go to their uncle's place to study.

The parents referred to working longer hours to be able to pay for private tuition. Thus, in a range of ways, the data analysis suggested that parental endeavours, including parent-initiated support from others, helped to reduce the barriers to their children's learning. Although most of the interviewed parents had not had access to education themselves, and were in a precarious economic situation, they wished to see their children become educated and successful.

A narrative of dissatisfaction and inequality

According to the analysis, important factors that the parents felt reduced or minimised their involvement included unbalanced power relations between parents and teachers, and parents' disadvantaged personal circumstances. In the interviews, parents talked, too, about the local norms, trends and patriarchy that they believed hampered their involvement in the education of their children, especially girls.

Although, as detailed above, it was clear from the data that parents had mentioned being aware of a gradual improvement in teaching and learning in state schools, they spoke as well about barriers to their involvement, and were of the view that this was due to miscommunication and poor coordination between home and school. These challenges formed the sub-narrative which focused on *parents' personal circumstances and teachers' conduct*. The analysis showed that most parents perceived the state school-teachers as non-professional and regarded the teachers as acting disrespectfully towards them. The parents felt that such behaviours impaired cooperation between home and school. These views reflect the sense of asymmetrical power relations between teachers and parents, which resonates with the parents' belief that teachers in state schools think of themselves as superior to their students' parents and therefore do not allow parents to criticise them. Moreover, the interviewed parents believed that teachers' poor performance in their job was a major cause of their children's poor and non-productive learning. For example, one father expressed his views as follows:

We want teachers to teach our children honestly. We receive no cooperation from the school or teachers because when we ask the children to do their homework, they say today we didn't open our bags in school, the teacher didn't come to class. How can we teach them as we are illiterate and have no idea about children's books? Most of the time, our children tell us that today we had a new teacher . . . Sometimes the actual teachers don't come to school for one or two weeks, and they hire another local person who comes to school just for their attendance and teaches nothing . . .

Most of the interviewed parents expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of their children's teachers, feeling that the quality of teaching fell far short of their expectations. As noted above, this emphasises the sense of a wide gap between school and home, and, in particular, the parents' sense of an unequal power relations between teachers and parents. Some of the parents commented that state school teachers often sent their children to private schools because they themselves were not satisfied with the quality of education given in state schools. Parents' observations included the view that many teachers only go to school to pass the time, and that children were used to run errands for them.

Aside from the parents' perceived unsatisfactory and irresponsible conduct of teachers, the narratives revealed the struggles of many families of limited means who, nevertheless, endeavoured to meet the demands of supporting their children's education. For instance, most parents explained that it was often difficult for them to meet the costs of their children's schooling, especially when starting new classes, as children then required a new uniform, books, bags and other essential school equipment. It was evident from the narratives that there were many profound barriers to schooling, including some parents not being able to provide the family with a balanced diet because of food poverty, or compelling their children to work in order to supplement the family's income, thereby illustrating reasons why students may drop out at an early stage in schooling. In addition, parents regarded their own lack of literacy as one of the primary reasons for children lacking guidance and proper guardianship, as they saw it. The parents wished that 'they were educated' and could guide their children appropriately. The interviews made clear how the parents' personal circumstances influenced their school involvement and, hence, their children's education. In sum, the analysis of parents' descriptions of their lived experiences highlights a cycle whereby parents who are impoverished cannot adequately support their children, which leads to their children experiencing the same socioeconomic situation as their parents.

In the sub-narrative *gender inequalities*, the interview participants spoke about the issue of education for girls. According to the interviewed parents, and especially mothers, it was not only parental poverty and lack of literacy, but unequal gender power relations as well that could result in the neglect of children's education and other fundamental rights, particularly for girls. For example, most of the mothers stated that girls were often discouraged from studying, as they tended to be provided with fewer resources than boys and were overshadowed. More generally, the rural mothers' concerns about their daughters' premature withdrawal from school and early marriage are indications of gender inequality and help explain why some families may be more concerned about girls being married rather than pursuing their formal education. The following quotations from the interviews clearly reveal the gender disparities that the parents perceived as impeding girls' education. For example, one of the interviewed mothers described the family situation as follows:

One of my daughters completed the [...] grade. She is fond of learning and wants to study until graduation. I asked her if she wanted to study. I would support her because she has big

dreams, but her father's mentality is different and difficult to understand (displays sadness). He says whether the girls are educated or uneducated, our living situation will still be the same.

Elsewhere, another interviewed mother's description illuminates boys' and girls' different educational experiences more broadly:

My sons go to school and study, but unfortunately, we only let our daughter study up to the [...] grade. She is fond of learning and wants to study more, but her father believed that what she would do if she got an education, in any case, she would do the household tasks. Children's grandparents are also against girls' education, especially after primary education.

Overall, the narrative of *dissatisfaction and inequality* and its sub-narratives has drawn attention to the parents' perceptions of non-professionalism, trust deficit and miscommunication on the part of teachers, which the parents felt resulted in poor cooperation between home and school. It revealed the ways in which poverty, lack of literacy and local norms were primary reasons which impeded their involvement in their children's education.

Discussion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of parental involvement in children's education within impoverished contexts, by offering insight into the lived experiences of parents of school-age children in rural Pakistan. Most of the interviewees and their families lived on, or below, the poverty line. The analysis yielded two contrasting but interrelated narratives: a narrative of *hope and trust-building* and a narrative of *dissatisfaction and inequality*. Both of these narratives were generated by most of the interviewed parents. The first narrative reflects the parents' expressions of confidence in state schools, their belief in the importance of education and the encouragement they described receiving via the support of their extended family to set their sights on, and work towards, securing a successful future for their children. At the same time, the second narrative reflects the weak situation of rural parents, as manifested in their vulnerable socioeconomic position, their views and concerns about schools and teachers and perspectives on gender-based marginalisation. These two intertwined narratives reflect both parents' hopes and their apprehensions. Despite their hardships, and the tensions and anxieties they described, it was evident that the parents hoped and believed that their efforts would help their children succeed. Indeed, some parents spoke of recently witnessing piecemeal improvements in state schools.

The parents' narratives indicated their anxieties about their limited resources to support their children's education and highlighted the role of the extended family system. Research has shown that the extended family is a potential resource (e.g. for parents with low levels of literacy) that can compensate for parental involvement in their children's education (Ahmed, Rönkä, and Perälä-Littunen 2022). Moreover, the skewed nature of power relations between parents and teachers was mentioned by the parents, most of whom felt that they and their children had received unfair and inequitable treatment. This underscores the importance of parents being enabled to

provide their children with the learning resources they need, and teachers creating an environment conducive to learning (e.g. Orell and Pihlaja 2020). If these conditions are not met, the learning process may be compromised.

In our study, the interviewed mothers expressed more focused concerns than fathers on the question of girls' schooling. This showed awareness of the negative aspects of a society where girls are often prevented from gaining an education. Although the mothers voiced their concerns, most were dependent on their husbands, which limited their free involvement, especially in the education of their daughters. Thus, the parents' stories were not only subjective, in that each individual expressed personal views, but also, on a broader level, were revealing about the hierarchical, patriarchal structure of their society (e.g. Agha 2018; Shah and Shah 2012).

The parents described some positive changes, too, including mentioning that teachers had started giving them feedback on their children's education and sometimes invited them to visit the school. As earlier studies demonstrate, underpinning the improvements in state schools is the introduction and regulation of formal education by a unit set up by the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtun-khwa, and teacher training carried out by local educational institutes, which has improved teachers' attendance in the schools (e.g. Ahmad and Ali 2018; Ullah, Ullah, and Ullah 2020).

Overall, our study draws attention to the point that the parents' involvement in their children's education appeared very limited, for the reasons detailed above. It emphasises the need for parents to be supported and enabled to play a comprehensive role in the process of their children's education (Puhrová 2018; Tekin 2011): if parents feel contented about visiting their children's school and are welcomed by teachers, they will most likely form a connection with the school and stay involved in helping and supporting their children in their education (Đurišić and Bunijevac 2017; Puccioni, Froiland, and Moeyaert 2020). The findings of this study, therefore, suggest a range of practical implications for teacher education and school administration in the broader context of rural, impoverished communities internationally. This could include greater quality assurance in the supply of teachers, and provision of training for teachers to support their communication and collaboration with parents (e.g. finding ways to communicate with rural parents who may not permit their daughters to go to school). At school management level, it could also include the development of parental involvement strategies and operational procedures for dealing fairly with all families, and facilitation of parents' access to information on their children's learning at school, so that parents can confidently state their concerns, irrespective of their academic, economic or professional backgrounds.

Limitations and future research

This small-scale, qualitative study was generated from interviews with 12 participants. Generalisation, therefore, is not intended: the study's value lies in findings drawn from the in-depth analysis of rich data. Pakistan comprises a variety of cultures and sub-cultures. This qualitative study was conducted in one particular province; implementing the same study in other provinces could, due to reasons including cultural variation, yield different results. In terms of future research directions, further studies could helpfully explore differences in parents' views and attitudes in relation to their school-going sons and

daughters. It may also be useful to conduct studies comparing the experiences of rural parents with the experiences of economically less disadvantaged parents in urban Pakistan and elsewhere. Quantitative research designs involving large surveys could be employed to yield more generalisable results.

Conclusions

In terms of providing children with a good start in life, parental involvement in their children's education is crucial. Since most research focusing on parental involvement has been carried out in wealthy countries, there is a pressing need to better understand less advantaged contexts. This study offers a contribution to this by providing insight into parents' lived experiences of their involvement in their children's education within a socioeconomically disadvantaged rural context in Pakistan. Through the research, it was possible to gain understanding of the barriers these parents encountered in assisting their children's learning. Our analysis uncovered two distinct narratives of parental involvement: a narrative of hope and trust-building, indicating parents' confidence in state schools and striving for a better future for their children, and a narrative of dissatisfaction and inequality, reflecting frustration arising from factors including parents' impoverished situations, concerns about schools and the influence of local societal norms. We suggest a broadening of the term *parental involvement* to better reflect the diverse, often context-related challenges to parents' involvement and the importance of the extended family in supporting parents in their children's education that characterise poor parents living in deprived rural areas. The findings we have presented will be of interest to those working in education internationally who are involved in designing education strategies to support outcomes for children and families living in disadvantaged communities.

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