

Government Prioritisation and Educational Governance: A Case Study of the ‘Parents as Partners’ Programme in Odisha, India

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Abstract— A substantial body of research demonstrates that parental engagement positively influences children's educational outcomes. However, considerably less attention has been paid to how governments prioritise and institutionalise parental engagement within public education systems, particularly in marginalised and indigenous contexts. This study examines Odisha's Parents as Partners (PAP) programme, a government-led initiative implemented in tribal residential schools, to understand how parental engagement emerged as a governance priority and the institutional mechanisms through which it was operationalised. A qualitative case study design was adopted, drawing on seven semi-structured interviews with state, district and school-level stakeholders and one focus group discussion involving four parents. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis in NVivo 12 through iterative coding, cross-case comparison and triangulation with government documents and secondary literature. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Framework and Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework guided the interpretation of the findings. The findings demonstrate that the programme represents more than a parental engagement intervention; it reflects a broader shift in educational governance in which parental engagement became institutionalised through political leadership, cross-sectoral coordination and redesigned school-community relationships. While the programme strengthened communication, increased parents' sense of ownership and fostered greater trust between schools and families, persistent structural barriers including poverty, geographic isolation, teacher shortages and institutional capacity constraints continued to limit equitable participation. The study argues that sustainable parental engagement depends not only on parental motivation or school-level practices but also on government prioritisation and institutional support. By conceptualising parental engagement as a governance challenge rather than solely a pedagogical intervention, the paper extends existing parental engagement literature and offers practical lessons for governments seeking to strengthen educational inclusion in marginalised communities.

Keywords: Parental Engagement, Educational Governance, Tribal Education, Odisha, Bioecological Framework, Educational Policy

I. INTRODUCTION

I.1 Background to the Study

Parents are widely recognised as children's first educators, shaping their cognitive, social and emotional development long before formal schooling begins. A substantial body of research demonstrates that meaningful parental engagement contributes to improved academic achievement, stronger socio-emotional development, better school attendance and reduced dropout rates (Epstein, 2018; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2011). Consequently, international organisations such as UNESCO, the OECD and the World Bank increasingly position family engagement as a critical component of equitable and high-quality education systems capable of improving learning outcomes and reducing educational inequalities (OECD, 2024a; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

Despite this broad consensus, parental engagement remains unevenly embedded within public education systems. Educational reforms have largely prioritised curriculum, teacher development, assessment and school infrastructure, while parental engagement has often been operationalised through discrete activities such as Parent–Teacher Meetings (PTMs) and School Management Committees (SMCs), with parents remaining only formally represented rather than meaningfully embedded within broader education governance processes. (Dyer et al., 2022; Goodall, 2021, OECD, 2024a). As a result, parental engagement frequently depends on individual schools or committed educators beyond becoming an enduring feature of educational practice. (Fullan, 2025)

These challenges are particularly evident in socially and educationally marginalised communities, where poverty, geographical isolation, linguistic diversity and unequal relationships with state institutions shape families' opportunities to engage with schools (Aikman & Rao, 2022; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Strengthening parental engagement in such contexts therefore requires more than encouraging parental participation; it requires institutional arrangements that create sustained opportunities for collaboration between families, schools and government.

India reflects many of these broader challenges. While recent policy reforms increasingly recognise parents as important stakeholders in children's learning, implementation continues to rely largely on procedural mechanisms whose effectiveness in fostering meaningful partnerships remains uneven (Government of India, 2020; Islam, 2019). These limitations are particularly pronounced within tribal residential schools, where geographical distance, socio-economic disadvantage and children's separation from their families complicate sustained engagement. This study examines Odisha's PAP programme, a government-led initiative implemented in tribal residential schools managed by the Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste Development Department. Instead of asking whether parental engagement improves children's learning—a relationship that is already well established—the study investigates how parental engagement becomes institutionalised within public education systems, the governance processes that support this institutionalisation, and the challenges encountered in implementing it within historically marginalised educational contexts.

1.2 From Parental Involvement to Parental Engagement

Scholarship on family–school relationships has evolved considerably over the past three decades. Early research conceptualised parental involvement primarily as parents' participation in school-based activities such as attending meetings, volunteering and communicating with teachers (Epstein, 2018). While these approaches established the importance of family participation, they largely measured engagement through parents' visible presence within schools and positioned parents primarily as supporters of educational institutions.

More recent scholarship has shifted towards understanding parental engagement as a relational process that supports children's learning across home, school and community contexts. Rather than focusing on parents' participation in school activities, this literature emphasises reciprocal partnerships characterised by trust, shared responsibility and two-way communication (Bergman & Mapp, 2021; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Parents are increasingly recognised as co-educators whose knowledge, experiences and everyday interactions contribute to children's learning, challenging school-centred understandings of engagement and highlighting the shared responsibilities of families and schools (Whyte & Karabon, 2016).

This conceptual shift has significantly advanced understanding of family–school relationships by moving beyond deficit-oriented perspectives that attribute limited participation to parents alone. Increasing attention has been given to the relational conditions that enable equitable engagement, including trust, communication and culturally responsive partnerships (Auerbach, 2007; Goodall, 2021). However, while this literature explains why parental engagement matters and how relationships between families and schools influence children's learning, it offers fewer insights into

how such relationships become embedded within education systems in ways that enable them to be sustained beyond individual schools or short-term initiatives. Understanding this transition requires moving beyond a purely relational perspective towards an institutional one.

I.3 Beyond Family–School Partnerships: Towards an Institutional Perspective

Although contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises parental engagement as a partnership between families and schools, relationships alone cannot explain why some parental engagement initiatives become embedded within education systems while others remain isolated programmes. Sustained educational change depends not only on the quality of interactions between parents and educators but also on the institutional arrangements that enable these relationships to become routine educational practice.

In this study, institutionalisation refers to the process through which parental engagement becomes embedded within the structures, organisational routines and administrative practices of public education systems. Instead of viewing parental engagement as a discrete intervention, an institutional perspective focuses on how policy commitments are translated into sustained organisational practices supported by leadership, coordination, accountability and resource allocation. Institutionalisation therefore extends beyond programme implementation to encompass the processes through which parental engagement becomes a routine feature of educational governance.

Educational governance provides the analytical lens for understanding these institutional processes. Governance scholarship emphasises how policy priorities, institutional arrangements and implementation processes shape educational practice across different levels of the education system (Hill & Hupe, 2022; Honig & Rainey, 2023). From this perspective, parental engagement is not solely the responsibility of schools or families but is also shaped by the ways governments coordinate actors, allocate resources and establish organisational conditions that support collaboration. Examining parental engagement through a governance lens therefore shifts attention from individual participation towards the institutional processes through which family–school partnerships are established, sustained and embedded over time.

However, institutionalisation is unlikely to occur uniformly across educational settings. The capacity of governance arrangements to support parental engagement is shaped by broader social and structural conditions, making it necessary to examine how institutional processes operate within contexts characterised by historical marginalisation and educational disadvantage.

I.4 Institutionalising Parental Engagement in Marginalised Contexts

Institutionalising parental engagement is particularly challenging in socially and educationally marginalised contexts, where opportunities for collaboration between families and schools are shaped by structural inequalities as much as by individual relationships. While parental engagement literature increasingly recognises the diversity of families' experiences, earlier approaches often interpreted limited participation through deficit-based assumptions, attributing disengagement to parents' lack of interest, knowledge or capacity (Crozier & Reay, 2005). Such perspectives overlook the broader social and institutional conditions that influence how families interact with schools.

Research demonstrates that poverty, insecure livelihoods, geographical isolation, low literacy, language differences and unequal access to state institutions significantly shape families' opportunities to engage with education (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lareau, 2011). Consequently, lower levels of parental participation should not be understood simply as a reflection of parental attitudes but as an outcome of institutional arrangements that often fail to recognise the realities of families' lives. This has prompted growing calls for culturally responsive and asset-based approaches that value

families' existing knowledge and strengthen partnerships between schools and communities (Aikman & Rao, 2022; Auerbach, 2007; Bergman & Mapp, 2021).

These challenges are particularly evident within indigenous and tribal communities, where historical marginalisation and limited trust in public institutions often shape relationships with formal education systems. They become even more pronounced in tribal residential schools, where children live away from their families for extended periods, reducing opportunities for regular interaction between parents and schools. In such settings, periodic meetings or representative committees alone are unlikely to foster sustained engagement. Institutionalising parental engagement therefore requires governance arrangements that intentionally create opportunities for communication, trust and shared responsibility between families, schools and government.

1.5 Institutionalising Parental Engagement in India: Policy Context and the Odisha Case

India provides an important context for examining how parental engagement becomes institutionalised within public education systems. Over the past two decades, education policy has increasingly recognised parents as important stakeholders in children's learning. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 mandated parental representation through SMCs, while the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises stronger school–family partnerships, particularly during the foundational years (Government of India, 2009, 2020). Together, these reforms reflect growing policy recognition that children's learning extends beyond the classroom.

However, policy recognition has not always translated into meaningful institutional practice. Evidence suggests that mechanisms such as PTMs and SMCs often function as procedural forums for information sharing beyond collaborative decision-making, expanding opportunities for parental participation without fundamentally reshaping relationships between families and schools (Dyer et al., 2022; Islam, 2019). Consequently, while the formal architecture for parental participation has strengthened, sustained parental engagement remains unevenly institutionalised across educational contexts.

These challenges are particularly pronounced in tribal residential schools, where socio-economic disadvantage, geographical isolation and children's separation from their families complicate sustained engagement. It is within this context that Odisha's Parents as Partners (PAP) programme emerged. Implemented by the Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste Development Department, PAP sought to strengthen relationships between families, schools and government through coordinated institutional support rather than relying solely on periodic school meetings. As a government-led initiative implemented across a public education system, PAP provides an opportunity to examine how parental engagement is translated from policy intent into routine institutional practice within historically marginalised communities.

1.6 Research Gap

Research on parental engagement has substantially advanced understanding of why family–school partnerships matter and how they influence children's educational outcomes. At the same time, educational governance scholarship has generated important insights into policy implementation, organisational change and system reform. However, existing research largely explains why parental engagement matters and how families and schools interact, while paying considerably less attention to how governments institutionalise parental engagement through governance and implementation processes (Honig & Rainey, 2023; Fullan, 2025, Ma et al., 2024). This gap is particularly evident in public education systems, where the sustainability of parental engagement depends on broader institutional arrangements beyond individual schools.

This study addresses this gap by examining Odisha's PAP programme as a case of institutionalising parental engagement within tribal residential schools. It contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it shifts attention from family–school relationships alone to the institutional processes through which parental engagement becomes embedded within education systems. Second, it integrates parental engagement and educational governance scholarship to explain how governance processes shape the institutionalisation of family–school partnerships. Third, it provides empirical evidence from tribal residential schools, a context that remains underrepresented in international parental engagement research despite presenting distinctive institutional challenges.

The study therefore addresses the following research questions:

1. How did parental engagement become institutionalised within Odisha's public education system?
2. What governance processes enabled this institutionalisation?
3. What challenges influenced its implementation within tribal residential schools?

Instead of asking whether parental engagement improves children's learning, the study investigates how parental engagement becomes institutionalised within public education systems, the governance processes that support this institutionalisation, and the challenges encountered in implementing these processes within historically marginalised educational contexts.

1.7 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To examine these questions, this study integrates Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Framework (BBF). Although developed within different disciplinary traditions, the two frameworks provide complementary perspectives for understanding how parental engagement becomes institutionalised within public education systems.

Kingdon's MSF explains how parental engagement emerged as a policy priority within Odisha's education system. The framework argues that policy change occurs when three streams converge: recognition of a policy problem, the availability of feasible policy solutions and favourable political conditions (Kingdon, 2014). In this study, MSF explains how parental engagement gained policy legitimacy and was translated into the PAP programme.

However, policy adoption alone does not explain how parental engagement becomes embedded within everyday educational practice. BBF complements this perspective by examining how interactions across families, schools, communities and broader institutional environments shape children's educational experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Extending its traditional application, this study uses the framework to examine how governance processes influence relationships across ecological systems and how these relationships shape the implementation of parental engagement in practice.

Together, the two frameworks provide an integrated explanation of institutionalisation. Kingdon explains how parental engagement became a policy priority, while Bronfenbrenner explains how that policy was enacted through interactions across different ecological systems. Combining these perspectives enables institutionalisation to be understood as a dynamic process through which policy intentions are translated into organisational routines, family–school relationships and sustained educational practice. This integrated framework underpins the analysis presented in the subsequent sections and provides the conceptual basis for examining how governance processes shape meaningful parental engagement within public education systems.

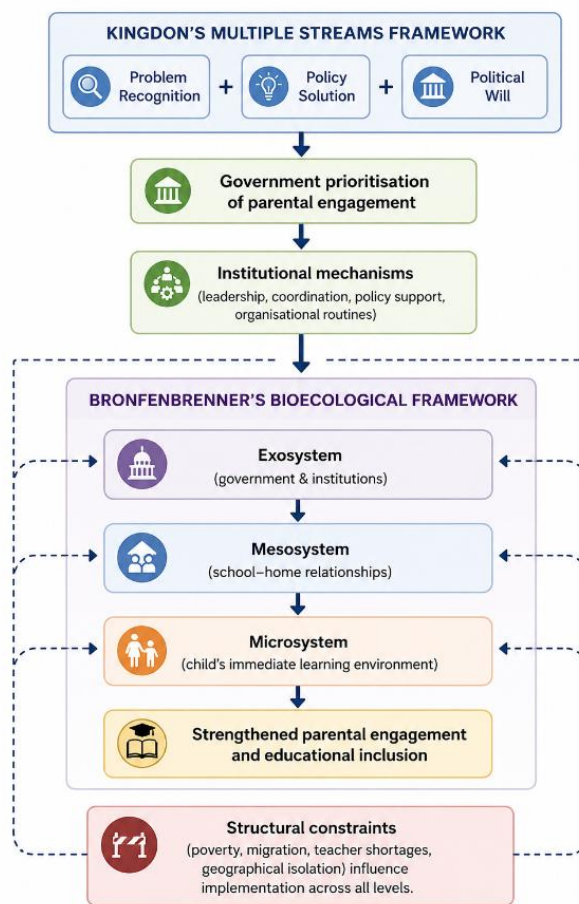
Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 presents the study's conceptual framework, illustrating how parental engagement is institutionalised through the interaction of policy prioritisation, institutional mechanisms and ecological systems. Integrating Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Framework, the model positions parental engagement as an educational governance process influenced by wider structural conditions.

II. METHODS

II.1 Research Design

This study adopts an interpretivist qualitative case study design to examine how parental engagement became institutionalised through Odisha's PAP programme. An interpretivist approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand how policymakers, administrators, educators and parents interpreted parental engagement within its institutional context, instead of evaluating programme effectiveness. A qualitative case study enables in-depth examination of contemporary phenomena situated within their real-world contexts, particularly where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are closely intertwined (Yin, 2018). Rather than treating PAP solely as an educational intervention, the study conceptualises it as an institutional case through which broader questions of educational governance, policy prioritisation and parental engagement can be examined. This design informed the selection of Odisha's Parents as Partners programme as the empirical case.

II.2 Case Selection

Given the study's focus on how parental engagement became institutionalised within a public education system, Odisha provides an analytically valuable case for three reasons. First, the state has one of India's largest Scheduled Tribe populations and continues to experience persistent educational inequalities despite sustained public investment in tribal education. Residential schools form a central component of the state's educational strategy for tribal communities, making parental engagement particularly challenging because children remain separated from their families for extended periods.

Second, the Parents as Partners programme represents one of the few government-led initiatives in India explicitly designed to strengthen parental engagement within tribal residential schools. Unlike conventional mechanisms such as PTMs or SMCs, PAP seeks to strengthen relationships between families, schools and government through coordinated institutional support.

Third, the programme was at an early stage of implementation during the study, providing an opportunity to examine not only participants' experiences but also the governance processes, policy decisions and institutional arrangements that shaped its development. The case was therefore selected for its analytical, more than statistical, generalisability (Yin, 2018). Examining the programme required perspectives from multiple levels of implementation.

II.3 Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

The study treats the PAP programme as an information-rich critical case (Patton, 1999), with participants selected to capture perspectives across different levels of programme design, implementation and participation. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was employed to ensure that the study reflected the perspectives of key stakeholders while remaining responsive to practical constraints associated with field access.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit state- and district-level government officials directly involved in the design and implementation of PAP. These participants were selected because of their knowledge of the programme's policy objectives, governance arrangements and administrative processes. School-level participants, including educators and parents, were recruited through district officials and school leadership using convenience sampling, as no comprehensive sampling frame was available. While this approach facilitated access within geographically dispersed tribal communities, it may have resulted in greater representation of participants who were more actively engaged with the programme.

Table 1. Characteristics of Study Participants

Stakeholder	Role in PAP	Level	n	Data Collection
Secretary & senior officials	Programme design and policy	State	3	Interviews
District & block officials	Programme implementation	District/Block	2	Interviews
Headmaster & teacher	School implementation	School	2	Interviews
Parents/guardians	Programme experience	Community	4	Focus group discussion

Including participants across multiple administrative levels enabled the study to examine how parental engagement was understood and enacted from policy formulation through programme implementation to community experience. Rather than seeking statistical representation, the sampling strategy was designed to capture complementary perspectives that could illuminate the institutional processes through which parental engagement was prioritised and implemented within Odisha's tribal residential schools.

II.4 Data Collection

Data were collected over a four-week period through seven semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided a consistent structure while allowing flexibility to explore participants' experiences and probe emerging governance processes.

Separate interview guides were developed for each stakeholder group. Government officials were asked about the programme's origins, objectives, governance arrangements, funding, interdepartmental coordination and implementation challenges. Interviews with educators focused on programme implementation, school–home relationships and institutional constraints, while the focus group discussion explored parents' experiences of participation, perceived programme benefits and barriers to engagement.

The interview guides were piloted with one government official, resulting in minor revisions to question wording, sequencing and prompts. Interviews lasted approximately 60–100 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in Hindi were translated into English, with translations checked against the original recordings to preserve contextual meaning. Reflexive field notes documenting contextual observations, researcher reflections and emerging analytical insights were maintained throughout data collection and informed subsequent analysis. The resulting dataset formed the basis for reflexive thematic analysis.

II.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. As summarised in Table 2, analysis proceeded iteratively through six stages: familiarisation, initial coding, category development, theme development, cross-participant comparison and interpretation. Coding was conducted inductively to remain grounded in participants' accounts, while Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Framework and Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework were subsequently used as interpretive lenses rather than coding frameworks.

Table 2. Stages of Data Analysis

Stage	Analytical Process	Output
1. Familiarisation	Interview recordings were listened to repeatedly while transcripts were read and re-read. Reflexive memos and preliminary observations were recorded throughout.	Initial observations and analytical memos.

2. Initial Coding	Line-by-line open coding was conducted across all transcripts. Coding remained descriptive to stay grounded in participants' accounts. Examples included parental trust, teacher shortages, leadership commitment, welfare integration, seasonal migration and parental confidence.	Approximately 90 initial descriptive codes.
3. Category Development	Related codes were iteratively reviewed and grouped into broader conceptual categories that captured recurring patterns while preserving differences across participants.	Conceptual categories representing recurring governance processes and relational dynamics.
4. Theme Development	Categories were synthesised into higher-order themes through iterative comparison across the dataset. BBF and Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework were subsequently used as interpretive lenses.	Three analytically derived themes explaining how governance processes shaped parental engagement across ecological systems: Government Prioritisation (Exosystem), School–Home Relationships (Mesosystem), and Children's Immediate Learning Environment (Microsystem).
5. Cross-Participant Comparison	Themes were compared across government officials, school leaders, teachers and parents to identify areas of convergence and divergence.	Refined thematic interpretation through triangulation of stakeholder perspectives.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, credibility was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, the focus group discussion, documentary evidence and comparison of perspectives across policymakers, administrators, educators and parents. Dependability was supported through reflexive field notes and an audit trail documenting coding decisions throughout the analytical process, while confirmability was enhanced through continual reflection on the researcher's assumptions and consideration of alternative interpretations during theme development. The detailed description of the study context, participants and analytical process enables readers to assess the transferability of the findings to comparable educational settings.

II. 6 Researcher Reflexivity

Given the researcher's previous professional engagement with Odisha's education sector, reflexivity formed an integral part of the research process. The researcher's familiarity with Odisha's education sector provided valuable contextual insight while also requiring continual reflexive scrutiny throughout the research process. To mitigate this risk, reflexive field notes were maintained throughout data collection and analysis. Emerging interpretations were continually revisited, alternative explanations were considered and findings were grounded in participants' accounts. Particular attention was given to identifying contradictory perspectives and negative cases, thereby strengthening the transparency and credibility of the analysis.

II. 7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee (Approval No. ER/NJ252/1). Participants received detailed information about the study before providing informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained through participant codes, and all recordings and transcripts were securely stored. Given the study's focus on tribal communities and government institutions, particular care was taken to ensure that participants could speak freely without concern that their responses would affect professional relationships or access to public services.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that the Parents as Partners programme represents more than a school-level parental engagement initiative. Instead of locating responsibility for parental engagement solely with parents or schools, the findings reveal the institutional processes through which parental engagement began to be prioritised and embedded within Odisha's public education system. Interpreted through BBF, governance reforms at the exosystem reshaped relationships within the mesosystem and influenced children's immediate learning environments at the microsystem. Three interrelated themes emerged: (1) institutionalising parental engagement as a governance priority, (2) reconfiguring school-home relationships, and (3) strengthening parental engagement while confronting persistent structural constraints. Accounts across stakeholder groups illuminate the governance processes through which governments create the governance structures necessary for reciprocal and sustained parental engagement and suggest that parental engagement should be understood not only as a relational practice but also as an educational governance process.

III.1 Exosystem: Government Prioritisation and Policy Development

Within BBF, the exosystem encompasses the institutional, administrative and policy environments that indirectly influence children's educational experiences. The findings show that the institutionalisation of parental engagement began not within schools but within government, where policy priorities, administrative leadership and interdepartmental coordination reshaped the conditions under which schools and families interacted.

A key finding was the reframing of parental engagement within Odisha's education system. Government officials consistently argued that weak parental engagement reflected the limitations of existing institutional arrangements rather than parental disinterest. PTMs were widely described as

procedural exercises characterised by one-way communication, offering parents few opportunities to contribute meaningfully. As one senior official explained:

"For parents, PTMs are like listening sessions. They feel their role is to come, sit, and listen to teachers and headmasters for two hours, and then go back, without much scope for interaction."

This account shifted attention from parents' behaviour to the design of engagement itself. Instead of asking why parents were not participating, officials questioned how existing institutional arrangements constrained participation. Consultations, field observations and engagement with tribal communities further highlighted how geographical distance, weak communication channels and limited relationships between schools and families restricted engagement. PAP therefore emerged not as an additional school activity but as an attempt to redesign the institutional conditions through which parent's genuine engagement occurred.

While previous studies have highlighted the importance of trust, communication and reciprocal relationships, they have largely focused on interactions between schools and families. The study's analysis suggests that these relationships are also shaped by decisions taken within education systems. Governments therefore emerge not simply as facilitators of parental engagement but as institutional actors that define priorities, allocate resources and establish the organisational conditions through which meaningful family-school partnerships become possible. (Honig & Rainey, 2023; Datnow, 2024; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024)

Leadership constituted a second important dimension of this process. Participants consistently attributed the development of PAP to senior officials who recognised parental engagement as a governance priority and actively championed the programme across the department. Rather than simply endorsing a new initiative, they legitimised parental engagement as an issue requiring government action. This closely reflects Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework, whereby weak parental engagement was recognised as a policy problem, PAP emerged as a viable policy response, and administrative leadership created the opportunity for implementation.

Participants also described how this leadership expanded parental engagement beyond the education department. Rather than expecting schools to address the issue independently, PAP deliberately linked education with welfare, health, agriculture and livelihood services. As one block-level officer explained,

"We asked ourselves, 'What would motivate a parent to attend PTMs, even if they aren't primarily interested in their child's education?'"

This question illustrates an important shift in thinking. Parents were no longer viewed as individuals who simply needed encouragement to participate; instead, participation was understood as being shaped by families' everyday realities. Integrating welfare and other public services reduced some of the practical costs of engagement while making schools more relevant to community life.

Participants nevertheless acknowledged that differences in departmental priorities, administrative capacity and resource availability often complicated implementation, highlighting that cross-sector collaboration remained an ongoing governance challenge rather than a one-time achievement. They also cautioned that the programme's long-term sustainability would depend on embedding parental engagement within routine policy and administrative practice rather than relying on committed individuals or programme champions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that institutionalising parental engagement depends less on introducing new programmes than on embedding parental engagement within routine governance processes through policy prioritisation, administrative leadership and cross-sector coordination.

III.2 Mesosystem: Strengthening School-Home Relationships

Within BBF, the mesosystem captures the relationships between children's immediate environments, particularly the interactions between schools and families. Analysis indicates that PAP extended beyond administrative reform to reshape these everyday relationships. Rather than simply increasing parents' attendance at school activities, the programme altered how parents, teachers and schools understood their respective roles in children's education, creating new forms of collaboration between families and schools.

Participants consistently contrasted PAP with earlier PTMs, which were widely described as one-way forums where teachers shared information and parents listened. Under PAP, parents assumed visible responsibilities in organising school events and participating in decision-making. As one headmaster explained,

"Around 50–60 out of 120 parents were involved in taking up roles and responsibilities to organise and manage the PAP activities; some parents were even made judges of the dance or debate competitions."

This shift was significant not because more parents attended school events, but because participation itself was redefined. Assigning parents roles as organisers and judges challenged conventional hierarchies in which schools were viewed as the sole authority over educational matters. Instead, parents were publicly recognised as contributors whose knowledge and judgement carried value within school life. Participants described how these responsibilities encouraged more open communication with teachers and fostered a stronger sense of shared ownership over children's education. Consistent with Goodall and Montgomery's (2014) distinction between parental involvement and parental engagement, PAP moved beyond attendance-based participation towards more reciprocal partnerships. The evidence points to this transition resulted not simply from changing parental attitudes but from creating institutional opportunities that enabled parents to participate differently.

Trust emerged as another important feature of these changing relationships. Many participants explained that parents had previously viewed residential schools as distant institutions with little scope for dialogue or influence. As opportunities for interaction increased, these perceptions gradually changed. One district official reflected,

"Earlier, parents would only come when the school called them. Now they come on their own, ask about their children's progress and participate in school activities."

Parents similarly described feeling more comfortable approaching teachers with concerns about their children's learning, while teachers reported that conversations increasingly focused on children's progress rather than administrative matters alone. These accounts suggest that trust developed through repeated opportunities for interaction and shared responsibility rather than through communication alone. Rather than treating trust as a prerequisite for parental engagement, PAP created institutional spaces in which trust could gradually develop through sustained collaboration.

Participants also highlighted the importance of culturally responsive initiatives such as Mo Paridhi in strengthening school-home relationships. These activities brought together parents, students and community members through local cultural programmes, creating opportunities for participation that resonated with tribal identities and traditions. As one block-level official explained,

"Mo Paridhi became a platform where parents, students and community members could celebrate local traditions together within the school."

Rather than expecting communities to adapt to school norms, these initiatives brought community knowledge into the school, reducing the social distance that often characterises relationships between educational institutions and historically marginalised communities. Participants described how parents who had rarely visited schools became more willing to participate when engagement centred on familiar cultural practices. The findings therefore suggest that recognising community identities was not simply a cultural activity but an important mechanism for strengthening schools' legitimacy within local communities.

Despite these positive developments, opportunities for participation remained uneven. Parents with greater confidence, education or prior engagement continued to assume more visible roles, while others participated less actively. Institutional reforms therefore expanded opportunities for engagement without fully overcoming the broader social inequalities shaping families' capacity to participate.

Collectively, these findings indicate that reciprocal parental engagement emerged because governance reforms reshaped institutional roles and redistributed responsibility between schools and families, rather than simply increasing parental participation.

III.3 Microsystem: Child's Immediate Environment

Within BBF, the microsystem refers to the immediate settings in which children interact and learn. The findings show how governance reforms initiated at the exosystem and translated through changing school-home relationships at the mesosystem shaped children's everyday educational experiences. However, they also demonstrate the limits of institutional reform in contexts where families continue to navigate persistent socio-economic disadvantage. Rather than presenting parental engagement as a universal solution, the evidence points to the fact that governance reforms create more favourable conditions for engagement without fully overcoming the structural realities shaping children's lives.

One of the programme's most significant outcomes was a shift in how parents understood their role in children's education. Rather than viewing schooling as the sole responsibility of teachers, participants described a growing recognition that parents were active partners in supporting children's learning. Teachers observed that parents increasingly approached schools to discuss their children's progress, while parents themselves reported feeling more respected, listened to and included in educational processes that had previously appeared distant and inaccessible.

Assigning parents substantive responsibilities further reinforced this shift by recognising their knowledge and lived experiences as valuable contributions to school life. As one parent reflected, "Earlier, we used to think the school was responsible for everything. Now we understand that our role is equally important in our child's education." Consistent with previous research linking parental engagement to increased parental confidence, these findings suggest that confidence emerged not simply because parents became more motivated, but because schools increasingly recognised parents as legitimate participants in children's education. The significance of PAP therefore lies less in encouraging parents to participate than in reshaping the administrative arrangements under which participation became meaningful.

Poverty, seasonal migration, agricultural livelihoods and geographical isolation continued to shape families' ability to engage with education. As one teacher observed,

"Students often have prolonged absences during the crop season, as parents keep them home to assist with agricultural work."

This illustrates how livelihood demands frequently competed with educational aspirations. Several parents similarly explained that although they valued education, daily economic responsibilities often determined when and how they could participate in school activities. These accounts challenge deficit-based explanations that locate weak parental engagement within parents themselves. Instead, they suggest that participation remained contingent upon structural conditions that no school-based intervention could fully resolve. PAP expanded opportunities for engagement but could not eliminate the inequalities that continued to shape families' educational choices.

Institutional constraints within schools further influenced the programme's implementation. Teacher shortages were repeatedly identified as barriers not only to classroom learning but also to sustained engagement with families. As one parent remarked,

"In my daughter's school there are only five teachers for approximately 200 children," while another reflected, "My child is suffering in her studies because of lack of individual attention."

These concerns point to a broader issue than staffing alone. Building equitable relationships with parents requires time for communication, follow-up and collaboration—resources that become increasingly scarce when schools operate under severe capacity constraints. Participants also noted that many teachers felt insufficiently prepared to engage with culturally diverse communities. Institutionalising parental engagement therefore depends not only on parents' willingness to participate but also on the capacity of schools to sustain partnerships.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that governance reforms created more enabling conditions for parental engagement across ecological systems, but their effects remained mediated by wider structural inequalities including poverty, migration, geographical isolation and institutional capacity constraints. Institutionalising parental engagement therefore depends not only on governance reform but also on addressing the structural conditions shaping families' opportunities to participate.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examined how Odisha's Parents as Partners (PAP) programme sought to institutionalise parental engagement within tribal residential schools. While parental engagement is typically conceptualised as a relationship between parents, teachers and schools, the analysis demonstrates that governments play a critical role in creating the institutional environment through which meaningful engagement can emerge and be sustained. Drawing on BBF and Kingdon's MSF, the study shows how policy prioritisation, administrative leadership and cross-sector coordination collectively shaped the institutionalisation of parental engagement. Beyond representing a completed institutional reform, PAP illustrates an evolving governance process through which parental engagement became progressively embedded within the public education system.

Accounts across stakeholder groups highlight four interconnected governance processes underpinning this institutionalisation: recognising parental engagement as a policy priority, mobilising administrative leadership, coordinating action across sectors and creating organisational routines that strengthened relationships between schools, families and communities. The findings demonstrate that governance reforms alone cannot overcome structural barriers such as poverty, seasonal migration, geographical isolation and limited institutional capacity. Instead, they create more enabling conditions for participation while remaining mediated by wider socio-economic realities.

This study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it advances a governance perspective on parental engagement by demonstrating that governments are not merely facilitators of engagement but institutional actors that shape how parental engagement is prioritised, organised and sustained within education systems. Second, by integrating Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective with Kingdon's policy process framework, it explains both how parental engagement becomes a policy priority and how governance processes influence its implementation across multiple levels of the education system. Third, it contributes empirical evidence from tribal residential schools in India, a context that remains underrepresented within international parental engagement scholarship. Collectively, these contributions extend parental engagement scholarship by repositioning governments as institutional actors and conceptualising parental engagement as an educational governance process rather than solely a relational or pedagogical practice.

The findings also have important implications for policy. Strengthening parental engagement requires more than increasing attendance at school meetings or introducing isolated school-level initiatives. Governments should embed parental engagement within education policy, strengthen institutional capacity, invest in teacher and school leadership, and promote cross-sector collaboration that recognises the wider conditions shaping families' participation (Fullan, 2025, OECD, 2024b). In marginalised contexts, parental engagement is unlikely to be sustained unless governance arrangements respond to the structural realities influencing children's educational experiences.

This study has several limitations. As a qualitative case study of a single government programme in Odisha, the findings provide an analytical more than a statistical generalisation and capture stakeholder perspectives during the early stages of implementation. Future research could examine how parental engagement initiatives evolve over time and across different educational contexts using comparative and longitudinal designs, while also exploring the relationship between institutional reforms and children's educational outcomes.

Ultimately, this study argues that parental engagement should be understood as an educational governance process rather than solely a pedagogical or school-based practice. By shifting attention from parental behaviour to the institutional conditions that shape participation, this study provides a broader conceptual framework for understanding how governments can institutionalise parental engagement as part of equitable education system reform.

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The idea for this dissertation emerged from my professional experiences working with the education department in Odisha, where I witnessed first-hand both the challenges and possibilities associated with parental engagement in marginalised communities. I was particularly drawn to the “Parents as Partners” programme, which represents a significant shift in government efforts towards actively involving parents in the educational process. My interest in governance and public policy, combined with my commitment to improving educational opportunities for underserved populations, motivated me to explore this topic further.

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