Factors Influencing Non-native Parents to Use Educational e-Services: A Case Study of Preschools in A Swedish Municipality

Gomathi Thangavel, Örebro University School of Business, Örebro, Sweden
Elham Rostami, Örebro University School of Business, Örebro, Sweden
M. Sirajul Islam, Örebro University School of Business, Örebro, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Educational e-services in schools help to bridge the gap between parents and teachers by sharing information about the children’s school activities in a collaborative way. However, there is a lack of research explaining how effectively this collaboration takes place and the challenges that inhibit as well as promote such collaboration in a multicultural context. This paper investigates the factors which influence non-native parents to use educational e-services in the context of preschools (förskola) in Sweden. This is an interpretive case study based on interviewing non-native parents through structured as well as semi-structured questionnaires and literature review. The findings show that apart from some ‘internal factors’, creating ‘awareness’ and providing ‘motivation’ are the two important successful factors that should be taken care of by the school management in order to influence non-native residents in a country to use educational e-services.

KEYWORDS

ICT adoption, Immigrants, Learning Management System (LMS), Non-native users, Preschool (förskola), Refugees, Sweden, Unikum

INTRODUCTION

Preschool children have difficulty verbally explaining their daily school activities to their parents. Hence parents are required to have constant interaction with teachers (Näsänen, Oulasvirta & Lehmuskallio, 2009). Moreover, parent’s involvement in their children’s educational activities helps in shaping the children’s futures (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Zarate, 2007). According to Graham (2005), “Effective partnerships between teachers and parents become even more essential to meet the needs of the children they share [responsibility for]” (p. 117). In earlier days, parents found out about their children’s activities through traditional means such as, meeting teachers while bringing their children to preschool or meeting on a weekly/monthly basis (Loughran, 2008), and also via phone calls, if required. In the USA and Europe, webcams were used in kindergartens (Watchmegrow, KinderCam) in early 2000 which offered parents a way of monitoring activities of their kids during the school hours (Jorgensen, 2002). However, both the traditional and webcam solutions have their own limitations. For example, parents and teachers have limited time during meetings (daily and monthly) and parents cannot be online all the time to monitor the webcam feeds. But nowadays, contemporary technology
connects teachers and parents in a web of mutual support, more effectively than ever before, by means of emails and online chats/messengers.

During recent years, preschools started using Learning Management Systems (LMS) as a communication tool to bridge the gap between parents and teachers, where both share photos and information about the children’s activities in a collaborative way. With the advent of Smartphone technologies, it has become even easier for parents to have access to LMS anytime, anywhere. One LMS that is being used in Sweden is Unikum (unikum.net), which is a web and mobile phone based e-service for online communication between home and school (Husain, 2012).

Parent-child interactions at preschool age result in increased likelihood of high school graduation (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). As stated by the 2010 European Commission report, in Europe, many immigrants’ and refugees’ children have lower levels of educational attainment than their native peers (Redecker, Haché & Centeno, 2010). Regular interactions between parents and school allow parents to identify children’s natural abilities at an early stage. This need for interaction among parents and school is expected to be provided by Unikum. Given the background above, the purpose of this study is to: Investigate the factors (inhibiting as well as enabling) which influence non-native parents to use educational e-services. To operationalize this main research goal, we explored contemporary literature to understand earlier theories on evaluation relevant to LMS and conducted a survey among the non-native parents in Sweden who were familiar with the Unikum e-service.

This study is expected to help the management of the municipalities’ preschools to have a better insight into and deeper understanding of the factors impacting non-native users when using new e-services. In addition, researchers interested in the usability of a similar kind of system could benefit from this study. The paper is organized as follows. After this introduction, the following section provides a brief literature review and a conceptual framework for evaluation. Section 3 explains the research methodology which includes the methods used for selection of participants, data collection and analysis. Section 4 presents our results along with our discussion and key findings. Finally, Section 5 highlights our findings, limitations and suggestions for future study.

LITERATURE REVIEW: TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There are several studies which evaluate the usability of educational e-services, such as LMS from teachers and students’ perspectives (Afshari et al., 2009; Asiri et al., 2012; Al-Busaidi & Al-Shihi, 2010, Al-Busaidi, 2012). The term “usability” here means the human factors and non-qualitative attributes that assess how easy an e-service interface is to use. As parents are one of the major stakeholders of preschools, they are one of the main user groups of educational e-services as well. However, we did not find a complete framework which had been used to assess in particular to the usability of learning portal from parent’s perspective. So, the first part of this study focuses on conceptualizing a framework which can aid the identification of the factors and can assess the usability of an e-service from non-native parents’ point of view. We conducted a systematic literature review by following Webster and Watson (2002) guidelines on developing a ‘concept matrix’ which helped us to synthesize the existing factors from relevant papers available online. The resulting categories are as follows: (1) Internal Factors: Individual, Technical, Privacy, Cultural and Social, (2) External Factors: Availability of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

By doing a pre-study about Unikum and conducting interviews with the manager we learned that there are additional factors impacting non-natives’ use of Unikum, which fall under the category of (3) Management. These factors are “awareness” and “motivation”.
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