Impact of Childhood Poverty on Education for Disadvantaged Children in Bangladesh

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Little attempt has been made to empirically investigate the effects of childhood poverty on children’s educational attainments and their everyday life in Bangladesh. Quality education is a prominent aspiration in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but there are few studies of school improvement in relation to the educational achievement of disadvantaged children living in rural Bangladesh. This article offers a theoretical understanding of childhood poverty and educational exclusion, building on the empirical research carried out in two rural areas to explore the following questions: Why do so many socio-economically disadvantaged children tend to dropout from formal secondary school? and Why do some succeed? After exploring the challenges of childhood poverty and educational exclusion, it shows how the challenges could be mitigated through attention to the ecology of human development in the contexts of individual children. Complex ways in which efforts can be made to tackle the challenges of childhood poverty are influenced by ecological factors within the context of the study. Recommendations for policy and practice are offered based on the findings to improve formal secondary schooling for socio-economically disadvantaged children in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Childhood poverty, educational exclusion, disadvantaged children, policy implications, Bangladesh

Bangladesh has made progress in the scale and provision of access to education in recent times and gender equality is satisfactory (World Bank, 2008), but poverty remains a barrier to education for many in Bangladesh where 40% of the population live below the poverty line (World Bank, 2009). Childhood poverty in Bangladesh is a critical issue which is under-explored in the literature (Shohel, 2012), and it is in this area that this article makes a contribution by providing empirical evidence. A range of perspectives is crucial for understanding childhood poverty and educational exclusion, challenges and theoretical orientations. In this light, the present study presents issues relating to childhood poverty from different perspectives including those of disadvantaged children, their parents and teachers as well as NGO workers who support access to education. Importantly, this study paid attention to perspectives or issues in relation to levels of ecological systems of human development. A better understanding of experiences of childhood poverty may lead to more integrated approaches to addressing the influence of childhood poverty on education.

The Context of Bangladesh

Situated in the north-eastern corner of South-Asia, Bangladesh is one of world's most densely populated countries, with about 150 million
people crammed into a system of river deltas which empty into the Bay of Bengal. The population growth rate is about 1.37% (BBS, 2011). In Bangladesh about 44.7% of the total population is estimated to live below the poverty line. The proportion of hard-core poverty (consumption of less than 1,805 calories by a person per day) fell from 30.7% in mid-1970 to 27.9% in 1991-92; the absolute number of persons in hard-core poverty has, however, risen because of the increasing population and is now estimated at thirty million. A key factor contributing to poverty in Bangladesh is levels of literacy, especially among women, which hamper government efforts to curb the population growth rate and increase labour productivity and efficiency (World Bank, 2001).

Since independence, the country has been beset by political and economic instability, aggravated by repeated natural disasters. Development in this context has proved extremely problematic. Although rich in human resources, the country is currently characterised by widespread illiteracy, political chaos and underdevelopment. The majority of the population depends directly or indirectly on agriculture for their livelihood, and live in rural areas in the fertile Ganges-Brahmaputra delta, an area swept by frequent cyclones, tidal surges, floods and river erosion. Average life expectancy for both sexes at birth is 61. Nutritional deficiencies, overcrowding, poor water and sanitation contribute to major health problems.

The alleviation of poverty figures prominently in the development planning of Bangladesh, and it is seen to depend largely on faster economic growth. The Government has prioritised family planning programmes to reduce the rate of population growth, while it has prioritised literacy expansion initiatives to address human resource development, focusing on emerging industries as well as manpower export. By expanding enrolment and improving quality of primary education, the Government expects to make a major contribution to a better-educated workforce in Bangladesh. The key to achieving higher rates of economic growth and at the same time ensuring equitable distribution of these economic benefits is seen to lie in development and utilisation of the human resources, which Bangladesh has in abundance.

It is widely felt that education can help to break through this vicious cycle of underdevelopment. In developing countries such as Bangladesh, many children have no chance to attend even low-quality primary schools. Dropout and failure rates are alarming; many leave semi-literate, soon to relapse into illiteracy (Shohel & Howes, 2011). Given that the result of such failure is often an exclusion from institutional and social processes, the phenomenon of poor quality education is part of a vicious cycle of unsustainability in the broader context of development. Education ought to meet the material, intellectual and moral needs of the people in the country (MoE, 2011). Effective education should address the problems of literacy, create employment opportunities through better distribution of skills, spread useful health knowledge more widely, and have an impact on the economics of population growth at the individual level (Oxfam International, 2000).

Challenges of Education in Bangladesh

A lack of access to education is one of the primary limits on human development. One of the Millennium Development Goals is to provide universal primary education (MDG-2). Education is one of the basic human rights, and no one should be deprived of this right (Shohel, 2013). The constitution of Bangladesh acknowledges education as a basic human right to its citizens and the importance of education is well-established in legal frameworks. However, the State has made a strong commitment to education through ‘a constitutional obligation of providing basic education to all its citizens by removing illiteracy within a given time frame’ (Article 28, clause 3 of the Constitution). This commitment has been strengthened through the Government's engagement in a number of international declarations (UNESCO, 2000; WCEFA, 1990), including the present target for the achievement of EFA goals by the year 2015.

The Government of Bangladesh has
recognised education as a fundamental right of every citizen through its constitution and enjoins on the State 'to adopt effective measures for (a) establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such a stage as may be determined by law; (b) relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs and (c) remove illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law'. In pursuance of the constitutional commitment to ensure educational opportunities for all citizens and to build a just and equal society, all citizens will have the opportunity to participate in education to fulfill their individual potential, be effective members of their family and community and be productive and responsible citizens, capable of facing the challenges of the 21st century.

Education therefore has been recognised as a priority sector by all Governments since the independence of Bangladesh. In order to maintain a modern, progressive and effective education system, the Government continues to attach the highest priority to the improvement of the education sector at the very least, in terms of stated policy and increasing investment in education (Shohel, 2010). Though investment in education in terms of gross national product (GNP) is relatively low in Bangladesh compared to other South-Asian countries, the Government has taken a number of steps to strengthen governance and performance in the education sectors to pursue both efficiency gains and improve equity and quality in educational outcomes. The policy initiatives that have been taken include policy reforms, specific areas of administrative and functional decentralisation, as well as enhancing financing. While some positive developments have taken place still many challenges remain within the Bangladeshi education systems.

However, basic education remains a massive challenge for Bangladesh, because the quality, range, and state of development of the education system are poor, to such an extent that it actually contributes to inequalities. The Government’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) emphasises education as a key to human development. It therefore states in the section ‘Investing in People: Education’:

*Deprivation from education itself is a key element of poverty. The number of poor people deprived of education is disproportionately high, and lack of education in turn limits their capacity to overcome poverty, thus creating a vicious and intergenerational cycle. Empowering people with knowledge and skills is the most vital component of human development for poverty reduction. Education and learning have thus become key elements of poverty alleviation. The education system in Bangladesh is not pro-poor; and the quality and content of education do not effectively serve the goals of human development and poverty reduction. There is general agreement that the number of institutions and enrolments have grown at all levels, but quality of education has deteriorated especially in institutions where the children of the poor families go.* (Planning Commission, 2005:125)

As primary education receives about half of the education sector budget, a simple way of acquiring a perspective on the education budget is to note that approximately £2 per annum per head of population is spent on primary education in Bangladesh. So while it seems the Government is working towards all children and adults having access to quality basic education, there is also clear evidence that the State continues to fail to provide sufficiently for basic education for all of its citizens through the formal education system. Of the 20 million primary school-aged children, four million are out of school and another four million or more drop out before completing primary education.

As a result of reforms, the enrolment rate has increased and gender equity has been reached but attendance and efficiency levels are average in primary schools, and many disadvantaged children still do not attend (Jahan & Choudhury, 2005). There is also an exceptionally low
average level of attainment among children who complete primary school (Hossain, 2006). A nationwide survey study of primary school completers shows that only 1.6 per cent of the children acquired all of 27 competencies tested in the survey and half of the children failed to achieve 60 per cent or more of the basic competencies (Ahmed, Nath, & Ahmed, 2003).

Five years of primary education have been free since 1973 and compulsory for the 6-10 year age group since 1991 through the Compulsory Primary Education (CPE) Act in 1990, and so should be accessible to all regardless of economic status. However, education is not free in practice. There are still direct and indirect opportunity costs of education for families. Average government spending per student per year for primary schooling is TK1 730 whereas average parent spending is about TK 1,000 per year (Chowdhury, Nath, Choudhury, & Ahmed, 2002). The higher opportunity cost of labour to poor families also means that children attending primary school are not without cost to them.

In the National Education Policy 2010 the Government gave more commitments to education, planning to extend primary education from five to eight years by 2015. Specific strategies have been developed to address major problems identified such as low enrolment particularly of girls, low attendance and secondary dropout in primary and secondary schools (Planning Commission, 2005).

**Childhood poverty and Education in Bangladesh**

Childhood poverty is a huge barrier for social and educational inclusion not only in the Global South, but also in the Global North. Childhood poverty is correlated with dropping out of school, low academic achievement, teenage pregnancy and childbearing, poor mental and physical health, delinquent behaviour, and unemployment in early adulthood (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). The longer children live in poverty, the lower their educational achievement and the worse their social and emotional functioning (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994). Children living in childhood poverty are exposed not only to more psychosocial stressors but also to more impoverished physical living conditions (Evan & English, 2002).

A study by Sen and Hulme (2004) shows that in Bangladesh around 31% of the rural population suffer the indignity of chronic poverty-low consumption, hunger and under-nutrition, lack of access to basic health services, illiteracy and other deprivations for more than a decade. About 20% of the total population live in extreme income poverty and almost 19% of rural households cannot have ‘three full meals’ a day; about 10% subsist on two meals or less for a number of months every year. Despite childhood poverty, across the education systems in Bangladesh, many disadvantaged children and young people do transfer from primary into secondary schools. However, there is significant dropout amongst children who have made this transition. On the face of it, there could be many reasons for this. Childhood poverty is likely to be one of the main reasons behind many of them (Doftori, 2004; Shohel, 2010).

A report on childhood poverty in Bangladesh shows that 33 million children in Bangladesh - about half of all Bangladeshi children - are living in poverty while about one in four is deprived of at least four basic needs among the following: food, education, health, information, shelter, water and sanitation. In Bangladesh, children (0-17 years) constitute 44% of the total population i.e., 142 million in 2006. One out of every six children is a working child, basically more than seven million children are working across the country. In Bangladesh, around 26.5 million out of 63 million children are living below the national poverty line. The highest proportion of children, 64% of children aged 3-17 years, are deprived of sanitation, 59% of information, 41% of shelter, 35% of food, 16% of health and 8% of education. The report stresses the importance of strengthening the profile of children at the national policy table and, in order to realize the

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1 Taka (TK) is the name of Bangladeshi currency. £1 = TK 130.
existing relevant policy commitments, policy recommendations include monitoring the implementation of laws, regulations and programme results, and an increased budgetary allocation (UNICEF Bangladesh, 2009).

Poor health, lack of basic learning materials and school equipment, and life in catchment areas are the influencing factors of the silent exclusion. Studies suggested that children who are overage, irregularly attending school and under achieving are most likely to drop out (Hossain & Zeitlyn, 2010, Shohel & Howes, 2007) and there are interrelated links between childhood poverty and exclusion from education. Children affected by childhood poverty are less likely to go to school, more likely to dropout from school and even once they are in school are more likely to be ‘silently excluded’ from education (Shohel & Howes, 2008). Children with poor health which is linked to childhood poverty and poor diet perform worse in school than others (Pridmore, 2007).

Whilst poverty is a major factor in educational quality and equity, other factors are at play which could be termed as ‘cultural poverty’. Bangladeshi society is strongly patriarchal. Therefore, in some cases poor families prioritise educating their sons over their daughters because boys have better employment prospects in the future to provide income for the family (Hossain, 2006). On the one hand, as there are no state benefits in Bangladesh, boys are perceived as providers of financial support to aging parents. On the other hand, girls’ labour is often central to the household chores.

Apart from the financial factors, existing socio-cultural norms and practices discourage parents from sending their daughters to school (Papanek, 1985; Quasem, 1983). Also from the parents’ point of view, education for daughters may seem less attractive than for sons because a girl’s education brings fewer economic benefits if she marries early and stops working, or if after marriage she ceases to provide an economic contribution to her parents (Hossain & Yousuf, 2001). It might be argued that this ‘cultural poverty’ hinders community involvement and parental interest in promoting girls’ education (Khatun, 1979).

Also the low relevance of education to the realities of life has been seen as an obstacle to educational achievement. Rural families prefer their daughters to learn those skills which would increase the possibility of marrying into an economically and socially better off family (Quasem, 1983). An earlier study shows that middle class families view education as a favourable factor in increasing the possibilities for their daughters making a good marriage, since education helps girls manage households more efficiently (Ahmed, 1978; Shohel & Howes, 2011).

A comparatively recent government study of school enrolment shows that 91% of children from the most educated families are enrolled in schools whereas only 12% of boys and 7% of girls from illiterate families are enrolled. Lack of physical facilities (i.e., toilets, tube-wells, boundary walls, and so on) discourages attendance of girls more than boys at school (Ahmed & Hasan, 1984). Enrolment of girls is negatively associated with distance of school from home, because parents may be unwilling to allow girls to cross a major road or river on the way to school (Jahan & Choudhury, 2005).

Though over the years infrastructure and teaching staff have been improved and increased, access to education remains problematic as Robinson (1999:20) says:

Access to education remains inequitable, especially for the rural landless, urban poor, and girls. This is purely because the real cost of ‘free’ education to consumers is secondary. The time cost of having children at school may be considerable, and the direct private costs of education are secondary.

Theoretical Framework

The study was theoretically situated in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 1992) work on ecological systems theory which focuses on the way different contexts influence human
development. Whilst it is clear that poverty has a direct impact on school attendance, children’s energy levels, and concentration (Oxfam International, 2000), we have little understanding of how it hinders school transition. Ecological systems theory takes a broader view of the impact of poverty, showing how experience within the school system is dependent on personal, cultural and economic factors through school and home, family, and religion, to be seen in connection with changing or dominant aspects of the culture, society and community.

This framework suggests that the development of children and young people cannot be effectively understood without paying attention to the influence of interaction between microsystems, exosystems and macrosystems. For children, microsystems are usually considered to include the family, peer group, school and community, and interaction between them is called meso-system interaction. Only this committed and broad perspective, says Bronfenbrenner, can do justice to the reality of human development. It is far too easy, for example, to essentialise the child or young person as a pupil, rather than a person, and to see school transition only in terms of increasing academic expectations. In the context of problems and difficulties, any such simplification leads to inappropriate blaming and unrealistic solutions, because it ignores the interrelationship of highly significant factors.

This article focuses on transition between different types of school as a potentially critical life event in the development of the child or young person, and therefore as a lens which links personal, cultural and economic factors through the meso-level factors of school and home, family, and religion, in connection with changing or dominant aspects of the culture, society and community.

Methodology

This was a semi-longitudinal (2003-2007) interpretative empirical study of children making the school transition, aiming to explore the challenges they face over that period of time. A mixed method approach was employed to carry out in-depth case studies of disadvantaged children and their schools from two rural geographical locations in Bangladesh. Considering the length of the article, only qualitative data has been used in this article to explore impact of childhood poverty on education for children in poverty.

Data Collection and Research Participants

The data was derived from the fieldwork conducted in five phases from 2003 to 2007 through a programme of interviews, questionnaires, and observation of children and their teachers in nonformal primary and formal secondary schools. Three nonformal feeder primary schools were purposively selected from each area, together with the linked secondary school in each case, based on the presence of nonformal primary graduates in the first grade (Grade VI) at secondary school. Thus two secondary schools were selected from two research sites.

Interview participants were selected using ‘criterion-based sampling’ (Patton, 1990:176) from children who were studying in nonformal school with an intention of going to formal secondary school, and from those who were already in the selected secondary schools. The study also included a survey covering children’s socio-economic background and schools’ policies, and in-depth case studies to explore the context of particular schools and transition between them. A research diary was maintained during different phases of the fieldwork for recording reflection on wider understanding of research process and context (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Two cohorts of children who started their secondary school in 2003 were chosen as the target population from two selected secondary schools. Twelve disadvantaged children from each school were chosen for case studies six of whom were female for gender balance. Thus a total of 24 disadvantaged children were selected as a sample for case studies. Among these, half
of them had dropped out during different stages of their secondary schooling while others continued their study at Grade X level during the fieldwork period.

To gain better understanding of the children’s family and the school context, interviews were conducted with their parents and head teachers as well as focus group discussions with NGO workers as well as their class teachers. Three focus group discussions with NGO workers were arranged in December 2004. They were male and female workers in their 20’s and 30’s with a range of experience in the job between 1 and 5 years.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used as a way of analyzing data. Qualitative data was coded to identify common themes and ideas that arose from the analysis. Finally thematic analysis carried out to present findings regarding childhood poverty and educational exclusion from different perspectives

Ethical Consideration

Ethical principles were followed throughout the research process (Maclure, 1997; Punch, 1986 & 1994). Research participants were informed about the purpose and process of the research performed. They were given freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any explanation or reason. They were assured of complete confidentiality of the information they provide. Before collecting data, appropriate authorities (i.e., school, local council and NGO) were asked for permission.

Findings

NGO Workers’ Perspectives

NGO workers are the main reinforcing agents of NGO run nonformal schools, making an important contribution towards the success of nonformal primary education in Bangladesh.

The focus groups with NGO workers suggest that economic circumstances of the families are the main challenge for the students during transition.

Most of the children are from economically deprived families. So their families cannot afford education or provide enough support for them while they’re attending secondary school. It’s especially true when some children need to contribute to the family by doing some sort of income generating work. They also need to help their parents in household work. So they do not have enough time for their study. [FGD-1, Putia 2004]

One of the criteria for enrolling in a nonformal primary school is that students have to be economically disadvantaged. But to send children to secondary school is to lose a potential source of immediate income. Though NGOs are helping them to gain access to education, they do not provide any kind of financial support to subsidise substantial costs for the family or any kind of incentives to those families while their children go for education.

In the literal sense primary education in Bangladesh is ‘universal, compulsory and free’, but in reality it is not. Children studying at formal primary schools need to buy their learning materials (other than textbooks which are supplied by the Government) and have to pay different types of fees (Shohel, 2010). In contrast, children studying at nonformal primary school do not need to pay for anything. These schools are run by NGOs and funded by different national, international and government bodies. According to focus group discussions, therefore, poor families prefer to send their children to nonformal primary schools. However, the Government introduced the ‘Food for Education Programme’ into formal primary schools in some selected areas. Parents in those areas tend to send their children to formal primary schools because of this incentive.

Parents from poor background prefer to
send their children to the nonformal schools because they don’t need to pay anything for their children’s education. Learning materials are supplied by the NGO. Also they realise that teachers from the nonformal stream are more caring than in the formal stream. But in some cases where formal primary schools are under the Government ‘Food for Education’ programme, parents prefer to send their children to formal schools. In those areas, we face difficulty to run our schools. So it is clear that financial benefits are of more concern to the parents from rural areas. [FGD-2, Madobdi 2004]

There are two issues indicative here. First, in some areas children do not go to school because there is no school for them or there might be a school nearby, but they do not attend school, because it is not attractive or it does not help through financial contributions to their day-to-day life. This also demonstrates that economic benefit is a reinforcing fact for bringing marginalised children into schools. Second, NGOs are not just working on the areas where there are not enough schools to accommodate children, they also work in a catchment area of a formal primary school.

Generally, nonformal graduates are from economically deprived families. Therefore, financial strain is very obvious when these students move to the formal secondary school. They need to pay admission fees in the first place when they go to enrol in a secondary school. Also they have to buy the school uniform, textbooks and educational materials for attending school. As one of the NGO workers said:

When nonformal graduates move to the formal secondary school they need to pay admission fees, session fees, and other fees at the beginning of the school year. They also need to pay for the school uniform and textbooks. On top of that, they need to buy notebooks of every subject, pens, pencils and geometric boxes. In some schools they need to pay some money for electricity every month. [FGD-3, Fultala 2004]

The parents have to pay a significant proportion of their income in paying for the concealed costs, such as subscriptions, private tutoring and stationeries for their children school success. If parents cannot pay these costs, there will be great possibility of failure at school; an obvious consequence will be dropping-out from school.

It is also true that teaching-learning methods in formal secondary schools are generally more teacher-centred. The teacher gives a lecture and children listen to him or her. It is ideologically based on ‘Jug and Mug’ theory. Teachers are donors and children are recipients. This generates a passive learning environment in the classrooms. Therefore, because of teaching-learning methods of formal secondary schools, students need to go for private tutoring if they want to catch up with the progress of the class or want to do well in exams.

Private tutoring is a part of formal secondary school culture across the country. Because of the large class size and ineffective teaching-learning methods, students fail to catch up with the class progress. This is also difficult for the teacher to treat each and every child individual with a large class size. Therefore, if they want to do better in the exams, they need to pay for a private tutor. In most cases of nonformal graduates, they can’t afford it. [FGD-2, Madobdi 2004]

This demonstrates the limitation of the formal schooling as teacher student ratio is very high in formal secondary school in Bangladesh. The quality of teaching in a crowded classroom would not be good enough to deliver learning to all students equally.

Since 1992 secondary education is free for girls in rural areas of Bangladesh, but not for boys. The parents have to pay tuition fees for their boys. That is why, tuition fees contribute to dropout rates of male students from economically deprived families in the formal secondary schools.
The financial aspect is more stressful for boys when they move to the formal secondary schools. They need to pay for everything. They are also the wage-earning members of the family, or they can do some productive work for the betterment of the family. Therefore, because of financial difficulties, sometimes parents are unwilling to pay for boys at secondary school. Some parents also prefer to ask them to work for the family. [FGD-1, Putia 2004]

It shows that families find both direct and opportunity (indirect) costs of schooling are difficult to bear. Though some parents are aware of the importance of education, and they try to keep their children in school for better future, poverty prevents them from sending their children to schools.

The focus group data also provided that the socio-cultural norms of the country have an impact on dropout rates from the formal secondary schools. In the context of education in rural Bangladesh, social insecurity, especially among girls, and social customs also seemed to be determinants of schooling.

We all know that in some rural areas, parents are not comfortable to send their girls to the secondary schools. They are worried about their daughters. Local gang stars might disturb them. There is evidence that some spoilt boys teased girls on their way to the schools. [FGD-3, Fultala 2004]

Here we see the way in which girls’ education may be influenced by boys, not just acting alone, but in the form of gangs, and giving parents a genuinely-held fear of the consequences of allowing girls to continue to attend school.

The concepts of gender roles deprived in social norms are very powerful motivators for the uneducated parents. Especially for girls, they normally leave their parents’ house soon after marrying someone from a different family. So expending on girls education is seen as non-beneficial for the family:

Illiterate people think that if you educate your girl, at the end of the day you will not be able to get anything from her. She will leave you and her education will benefit her husband’s family. So it is better to keep girls at home and involve them in different activities from which the family can get more benefits before they leave the family. [FGD-2, Madobdi 2004]

Here we see how illiteracy has influence on school enrolment. Cultural values have direct impact on school enrolment and retention. Relationships with the opposite sex are culturally forbidden before marriage. It is also dishonour for family and parents if their daughter falls in love with someone before marriage and they think it might destroy their social dignity.

During the adolescent period, boys and girls are attracted to the opposite sex. They fall in love in secondary schools. When they fall in love, they start writing letters to each other and most of the time they think about each other. It hampers their study. But if it one sided love, then it creates tension between them, even between families. [FGD-3, Fultala 2004]

Though psycho-physical change is inevitable during transition as they go through the adolescent period, there are socio-cultural implications of this change which can have a much bigger effect on schooling. Early marriage is a concerning issue for the rural community in Bangladesh. Recent study shows that 70% of women between ages 18 and 24 were married before the age of 18 in 2005 (Amin, 2006). While among the rural poor in Bangladesh, the most security a daughter can be given is a good marriage, nevertheless, this can hinder their education. Though the minimum legal age at marriage is 18 years, most girls get married before completion of their secondary school.

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2 This is not the exact translation of the word in the transcript which was ‘Bakhate Chelera’ in Bangla means ‘spoilt boys’.
which means that they get married before the age of 16 years.

Though girls’ secondary education is free and they get a stipend during their schooling, after marriage most girls leave schools. A girl will move to her husbands’ house and her husband or father-in-law does not like her to continue education. They think she should stay at home and take care of her family. [FGD-1, Putia 2004]

Among the rural poor in Bangladesh, the most security parents can give their daughters is a good marriage. In this case, a little schooling makes a girl a more sought-after bride, while too much schooling may drive away prospective husbands with less education. Also girls need to take over family responsibilities while their mothers are pregnant. Therefore, they fail to attend schools during their mothers’ pregnancy period.

Islam is the predominant religion in Bangladesh. Mixing without the hijab with the opposite sex who you can marry is forbidden in Islam. Therefore, religious obligation makes parents uncomfortable in sending their daughter or son to a co-education (mixed sex) school.

Because of religious obligation, some Muslim parents want to send their children to a single sex school. Therefore girls’ schools or madrasas are growing. But in some areas a single sex school is not available. In those areas early marriage is the main reason for dropping out from schools. It is also unacceptable in almost every religion to have sex outside marriage. Therefore, practice of early marriage is found as additional common reasons for discontinuation. [FGD-2, Madobdi 2004]

Islam as a religion does not allow free mixing in such a way where there is a possibility of a sexual relationship, but it does allow Muslims to mix with the opposite sex with dignity and respect for each other. Women’s mobility especially for economic reasons could contribute in solving their economic crisis. It also considered as one of the most influential determinants of human rights, promoting independence. But people misinterpret the Islamic concept of gender relationship. Therefore some people believe that their religion dictates women should perform their domestic activities and should take care of their children. They also think, women should perform domestic activities and men should be the wage earners. In this way, ignorance of proper religious knowledge contributes to early marriage and dropout.

Teacher-parent contact is vital for children’s academic achievements and overall school success. Most of the NGO workers think that teacher-parent contact is very low in formal secondary schools.

School is a social institute. Therefore, teacher-parent contact is very important to make a school effective. It also creates a social bondage among parents and teachers. [FGD-1, Putia 2004]

In general, school has been seen as a social institute. From a policy perspective, expectation from school is based on social needs. Especially from the individual perspective, school is a place where children learn about socialisation. Therefore, without teacher-parent interaction, it is quite impossible to make a school a social institution.

There is regular teacher-parent meeting in nonformal primary schools under the supervision of NGO workers. In contrast, there is no regular teacher-parent meeting in formal secondary schools. [FGD-2, Madobdi 2004]

Here we see the distinction between the formal secondary and nonformal primary school management system. The teacher-parent relationship is an integral part of the nonformal primary school management system, whereas in formal school management it is not widely practiced.
Teachers from formal secondary schools do not even bother to contact parents regarding their children’s academic achievements or any possible risk of school failure. [FGD-3, Fultala 2004]

Teachers from formal secondary schools do think that they need to involve parents with the school mechanism. But because of parents’ level of education and struggle for survival they do not come to school normally. Some other empirical data also support this argument by NGO workers.

Most children with poor socio-economic backgrounds were experiencing academic and transitional difficulties at secondary school whether they come from formal or nonformal primary schools. Most children who are at risk of dropout from secondary schools had financial strains from the family. One of the NGO workers said:

Socio-economic background of the nonformal students is very bad. There is neither atmosphere for study nor support for education. Actually we pick them and drag them to the school for study. We are the only hope for them. [Interview NGO Worker, Narsingdi, 2004-2005]

Children’s Perspectives

Some of the children reported that they had been ignored in their secondary school at the beginning of the school year due to being nonformal graduates. But that changes when they proved through their performance in the class that they are no less qualified than their counterpart from formal primary schools. On the other hand some of the nonformal students have an inferiority complex as they come from an economically deprived family regarding dress; and having lunch in school is not possible for them. However, it is reality of life that their parents cannot afford lunch for them in school.

At first when we came to this school some of our classmates behaved as if we’re not the same as them. They thought we got bad education and we’re living on other people’s kindness. They teased us and tried not to mix with us. But in reality when they found that we are very nice to people and we’re easy-going, then they started to talk to us and making friends with us. [Interview Nonformal Graduate (Female) Student, Grade-VI: 2005]

Parental pressure to work after primary school is inevitable for some students. Therefore the challenge to transition at this point is obvious: they would not even have the chance to experience transition to formal secondary school. Most of these children come from poorer families. Therefore if they can work and contribute to the family income, parents will be happier to see that, rather than seeing them in schools without basic needs as a human being. Also they need to work in the household for their family survival.

My father is a farmer. I have to help him to cultivate land and prepare food for our cattle. Sometimes I need to go to the market place to sell our products. I want to study but I can’t give enough time for studying. You know, we’re poor and need to work for a living. [Interview Nonformal Graduate Student, Grade VI: 2005]

I have younger brothers and sisters. When I go back home, I have to take care of them and also need to give a hand to my mother to do household work. As the oldest kid of the family I have to cook for the family, clean the house and wash up dishes after a meal. It’s not an excuse for me. But I could have study more than what I’m doing. Household work is hampering my study a lot. [Interview Nonformal Graduate Student (Female), Grade-VII: 2006]

Study is difficult and less attractive than earning money when there is little support (Shohel, 2010). Nonformal graduates find it very difficult to study in formal secondary school considering the support system in school and at home. It is also less interesting than earning
money selling their labour. Earning money is very attractive to most people, particularly for those from an economically deprived family. So they lose interest in education, especially during the challenging time of transition from nonformal to formal secondary school.

Children have to depend on their parents for their fees and other costs related to schooling. If the parents refuse to pay then they do not have any other alternative, but to dropout of formal secondary school.

*When I had been asked to pay my fee I asked my father to give me money to pay my fees, but he became angry and he beat me. Then I asked my mum for money. She said that she didn’t have money. Then I asked her - What should I do? She said, Well, go and find a job. You don’t need to go to school then. Here I’m now.* [Interview Nonformal Graduate (Male) Student, Grade-VI: Narsingdi, 2005]

**Teachers’ Perspectives**

Interviews with teachers showed that there is no information exchange or formal visit unlike in developed countries.

*Typically, primary school and secondary school teachers are working in different places and have little or no opportunity to interact with each other and they don’t have the chance to share their ideas. Therefore an initiative needs to be taken to bring them together so that they can talk about the strengths and weaknesses of their students and the present school system, and the secondary school teachers can talk about what they see coming up from primary schools.* [Interview Secondary School Teacher (Head Teacher)- 01: Narsingdi, 2004]

This is a clear comment on interaction between teachers from primary and secondary schools. Apart from primary schools which are near to or attached to secondary school there is no chance for primary teachers to meet secondary school teachers or vice-a-versa. He also suggested the way they can both get benefit from this interaction. As primary school teachers know their children over years, they easily pass the information to the secondary school so that secondary school teachers get information about the children before hand and take the initiatives to support them in a better way.

In rural Bangladesh, agriculture is the main employment sector but millions cannot find work of any kind. Therefore, some of them migrate to urban areas to find employment or some other source of income. Parental movement from rural to urban areas has an effect on children’s schooling. In some cases, children move with parents to urban areas. During my visit to a nonformal school, I found that 3 children were absent from the classroom. In an interview, the teacher told me:

*Among the three missing students, one of them moved to Dhaka as her mother got a job in a garment factory. She had to move to Dhaka with her family, as there is no one to take care of her. Another got married and move to her husband home. The other one, became spoilt and wouldn’t listen to anyone. His mum tried to take him back to school, but couldn’t manage him.* [Interview Nonformal Primary Teacher, Narsingdi, 2004-2005]

The three missing children represent three socio-cultural influences that can create difficulties for children making transition throughout their secondary school.

**Parents’ Perspectives**

Transition from primary to secondary school has an impact on parents’ lives. Therefore, it is important to know what parents think about the school transition of their children because it

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3 ‘Spoilt’ carries the meaning of being negatively influenced by peer culture, for example on the street.
could affect parents in different ways. However, the parents who participated in the interviews were not aware of the changes in their children’s lives during school transition.

Well, my daughter is growing and she is going to secondary school. It’s news of joy for me. I never had been to school. She made it. There are good teachers in that secondary school. They’ll take care of her. I’m not worried about her at all. [Interview Parents (Mother) : Bogra, 2005]

This was not an untypical example of joy just before the transfer, but most parents were much more ambivalent about having a child at secondary school. But the expectation of parents is that secondary school teachers are good and will take care of their children. It is a kind of withdrawal from the situation that they do not know anything about education and they know that will not be any help for their children’s education.

In a male dominated patriarchal society, social norms regarding gender roles and relationships have impact on girls’ schooling. During secondary school parents were more concerned about their daughters because there is a possibility of being involved in inappropriate relationships with boys. In Bangladesh, sexual relationships before marriage are not allowed and strict standards are applied to girls. Any sort of close relationship with the opposite sex is treated as shame for the parents. Therefore parents try to protect their daughter from shame.

Our daughter is a beautiful girl. After she started her secondary school some boys were after her. We’re so afraid and had to arrange marriage for her to protect us from being ashamed. What can we do? After marriage her husband’s family didn’t allow her to go to school. That’s the life for us, isn’t it? [Interview Parent : Bogra, 2005]

Parents are worried about their daughter, especially if their daughter is attractive and boys go after her. Before she gets into any trouble parents want to arrange marriage for their daughter.

The main concern for parents is the financial aspect of schooling. They know that if their child goes to nonformal school they will receive school materials for free. Therefore, one of the parents said:

NGO provides free materials for children. So we’ve sent our daughter to the NGO run school. Apart from that it’s just next door and I can see whether she is studying in school or hanging around with her friends. [Interview Parent : Bogra, 2005]

This parent also emphasises another benefit of sending their children to NGO run school, in terms of proximity and ease of communication.

When parents have to pay school fees themselves, the cost of education is very significant. Fees are very high compared with their income and school uniform is very expensive. Most parents of nonformal graduates are from economically deprived backgrounds.

When my child was in primary school I didn’t have to pay anything. But when he moved to secondary school I had to pay school fees, buy a uniform for him and he has been asking me to pay for a private tutor too. It’s too much for me. I’m trying to meet the demand. I don’t know how long I can carry on. [Interview Parent (Father) : Narsingdi, 2005]

School fees and substantial cost during secondary school are burden for most parents of nonformal graduates. While struggling economically to manage their families, financial cost for children’s education is an extra burden for parents to cope with.

Discussion

By using the theoretical framework, the data generated show how each of the problems represents a significant challenge at different
levels (micro, meso, exo and macro) for the ecology of human development. This article shows the ways in which different individuals (children, teachers and parents) contribute to the challenges of childhood poverty and educational exclusion, and the ways in which they provide resources for overcoming these challenges.

In the following section we see how the challenges of childhood poverty and educational exclusion are related to and influenced by the different levels of ecology of human development. The following analysis helps to show which challenges are deeply embedded in and maintained through the ecological systems, and also which are well-understood and perceived by those involved. This will lead to substantial recommendations for ways forward in addressing these challenges.

Poverty

Longitudinal empirical data demonstrate clearly that poverty impacts on children’s ability to enrol, attend and remain in school, especially at higher grades in secondary schools. Empirical evidence from the study shows that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds were over-represented in terms of dropout rates and failure at school (Shohel, 2010).

The goal of nonformal schooling is to provide a flexible and high-quality basic education. But the data demonstrates that the influence of poverty on educational attainment for disadvantaged children is maintained at every level (i.e., micro, meso, exo and macro) of ecology of personal development. For instance, the financial barriers of school fees for many children, and children’s daily feelings of hunger and malnutrition, which influence their learning, are micro-level influences of poverty. Attitudes of the members of the communities and institutions towards economically deprived children, as may be shown by the teacher’s behaviour in the classroom towards poor children, are meso-level aspects as these are interconnection between micro-systems. State policy, which hinders an individual’s emergence from a situation of economic deprivation by not supporting children to continue their studies, is a macro-level factor.

From the perspectives of those involved, their understanding of the influences of poverty depends enormously on their own particular positions. Poverty is seen as a structural problem contributing to school failure, but the policymakers do not pay attention to discriminating behaviours/conducts of teachers, or to the lack of food, and neither do they use their influence at the local level to challenge practices at the macro-level. Children see poverty as the main obstacle to continuing their education, but they also experience it as hunger and neglect by other people. Teachers see poverty as a barrier but they do not see it as a result of societal structure, or as anything that they have power to change. They often think that people are not hard working and that the majority do not have enough understanding regarding the complexity of life. Parents see poverty as the misfortune of not having inherited wealth and being born into a poor family. They also see it as instability of earnings and job opportunities. So the challenge of childhood poverty for educational attainment is very real and maintained at all four levels, but only very partially understood by all those involved. This means that no-one is seriously addressing this challenge.

Early Marriage

Early marriage is a problem for the continuing education of girls in general; but data show that it is more of a problem for children from low socio-economic backgrounds, because they experience more pressure to find financial and cultural security during the early adolescent period of secondary school. Marriage is an exo-system element of individual life and a life changing event. Marriage brings family responsibilities to an individual. Society holds the idea that females should be at home and taking care of the family, therefore in most cases after marriage girls do not have the chance to carry on their education. Therefore, early marriage represents a challenge for girls to continue education. It has psycho-physical and
socio-cultural dimensions in personal life. The new role of a spouse brings psychological stress and creates social identity and responsibilities.

Early marriage is seen as a malpractice of social norms and an effect of childhood poverty, as well as a lack of awareness of early marriage and family responsibilities. Children see it as part of life. Teachers consider one of the causes to be poverty, as well as lack of education and awareness. Parents see it as their duty to get their children married on time for the betterment of the family as early marriage is cultural norm in rural areas; some of them have seen daughter as a burden of the family.

The challenge of early marriage puts pressure on girls to leave school. Childhood poverty has a link with early marriage as parents need to continue their expenditure on their daughter, including indirect costs of education. In addition there is a risk of failing to arrange a good marriage for their daughter. And in the long run, investment in girls’ education does not bring any financial benefit for the family as it does in the case of boys. The community and state level structure is particularly responsible as there is neither social security nor better employment opportunity for girls, and their chances of financial freedom are minimal.

Value of Education

Empirical data show that people from lower social classes generally do not value education for its own sake. Some saw it as a tool for changing life if it leads to better opportunities for getting a job. Firstly at micro-level, from the personal perspective, an individual will decide if considering his or her own life – education is worthwhile or not. Secondly at meso-level, the value of education is generated and appreciated through social awareness and interaction as well as by setting examples. And finally at exo-level, in general it is developed through social value, institutional approach and work place policy. In this case education is treated as a tool for obtaining a job.

The value of education is not widely recognised in poor communities in Bangladesh. That has an impact on school enrolment and children remaining at school. Some children perceived that education is not intended for the poor. Teachers claimed that parents do not value education, as they are not educated. But parents argued that a limited amount of education does not change their children’s lives. Children and teachers appeared to suggest that the poor do not value education. The institutional culture of formal secondary schools supported the general view of teachers, that the poor are unable to see the value of schooling. An interesting quote from a pupil about teachers was that they were ‘thinking I’m not worth teaching’. Parents appeared to think differently – in general they value education, but pragmatically they see that limited education has no practical benefit for many children. Parents value education if their children can achieve a certain level of schooling which will offer the opportunity of a better life. Therefore, in practical terms, if there does not appear to be that kind of opportunity children will often not be enrolled in schools, or they will drop out later.

Conclusion

Changes in policy and practice must be based on firm evidence which serves to identify the key underlying issues through the lens of theory, and makes policy makers and practitioners aware of the implications of failing to address these issues. However, it is tempting to draw up a list of recommendations which follows the theoretical framework of the study.

The findings of this study are very important as a contribution to the knowledge domain if they are linked with conceptual and theoretical understanding. Theoretically grounded critical accounts are needed in the study of policy (Finch, 1985). In a different context, relating to the education of women in Bangladesh, Hassan (1995 cited in Khan, 2001:27) gives the following summary statement:

... the core and surface of the society is still prone to superstitious beliefs, the mind is accustomed more to surrender than to
question. Emotion together with blind faith makes it hard for intellect to make any headway there and work effectively.

Even if this oversimplifies the situation, the empirical data of the study supports to some extent the argument that it is nevertheless difficult for research to bring about change to educational policy if it fails to reach the policymakers.

The truth is that many of unnoticed features of classroom and school life constitute ‘the reality of secondary schooling’ for disadvantaged children. However, schooling is about the fit between the life of individual children and the school system. That is why everyone involved in each aspect of education must work together creatively in an attempt to solve the issues and problems within the whole area of childhood poverty and educational exclusion. Many perspectives are therefore needed to understand the nature of the educational process, whether in terms of decision making, or developing teaching strategies (McCutcheon, 1981).

This study has thrown lights on the complex reality of childhood poverty to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of marginalised children in Bangladesh. Findings successfully demonstrate that the challenges of childhood poverty for a marginalised individual student are not just the temperament and ability of that specific individual, nor peer acceptance and support, quality of teachers and services, school policy and environment, economic and social background, community functions and social norms, or State policy and support; but rather a combination of all these factors.

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