

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Teachers and informality: an approach to engaging with pupils

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

Shohel, M. Mahruf C. (2010). Teachers and informality: an approach to engaging with pupils. In: The Inclusive and Supportive Education Congress: Promoting Diversity and Inclusive Practice (ISEC 2010), 2-5 Aug 2010, Belfast.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2010 The Author

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://isec2010.org/conference-papers/>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Teachers and Informality: An Approach to Engaging with Students

M Mahruf C Shohel

The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom

Abstract

The well-established nonformal education sector which thrives alongside formal schools in Bangladesh raises critical questions about the role of teachers in relationship with local communities, their practical commitment to principles espoused in the curriculum (such as to environmental care), and especially the way they are perceived by their students. In this research, case study is used to explore these factors, identifying the distinctive and apparently powerful role played by teachers in a particular nonformal education setting. In this particular group of schools, the institutional context for learning appears to sustain teachers' commitment and motivation, with the effect of creating meaningful outcomes for young people who were previously outside the education system. Questions are raised by this example about the significance of the institutional context to teachers' practices, and about approaches to teacher development which omit consideration of that context by, for example, focusing inadvertently on features of individual teachers. In particular, the dominant formal framing of school education is seen to shift attention away from qualities such as teachers' authenticity and care, clearly relevant to the educational experience of marginalised pupils. Those interested in inclusion in Bangladesh and comparable contexts clearly cannot ignore the way these distinctions structure the local discourse of teacher development.

© M M C Shohel. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Teachers; Informality, Engaging with Pupils; UCEP-Bangladesh; School Contexts.

1. Introduction

In a particular group of schools in Bangladesh, the institutional context for learning appears to sustain teachers' commitment and motivation, with the effect of creating meaningful outcomes for young people who were previously outside the education system. This paper raises questions about the significance of institutional context to teachers' practices, and questions approaches to teacher development which omit consideration of that context by, for example, focusing inadvertently on features of individual teachers.

The case studies in this paper take up some of the themes that have been developed here, in describing and analysing an example of relatively successful inclusion in a network of schools. This example addresses the under-rated significance of institutional context, even in the context of physical and logistic constraints which policy makers find hard to imagine. It exemplifies the possibility of dramatic success where few would have expected it, given favourable political connections, a clear objective, a contextually-appropriate educational strategy, and a commitment to teachers as well as to young people.

1.1. Imagining Teachers in Bangladesh

In the context of Bangladeshi educational culture where education is seen as 'simple memorisation for an examination by both teachers and parents' (Banks, 2009:7) it is very difficult to bring changes in practice without making changes in policy and curriculum. As an emergent economy, 'the relevance of education to everyday life is paramount' (Banks, 2009:7) in Bangladesh, and yet this is a criteria for judging curriculum and policy which is not very heavily stressed. To develop human resources, achieve EFA and MDG goals, and to strengthen its economy, Bangladesh needs to strengthen the relevance of education. This necessarily involves a change in the way teachers think about themselves and are perceived by pupils and parents in particular.

2. Methodology

Recent baseline fieldwork in Bangladesh as part of a large internationally-funded teacher development project has focused on a group of around sixteen schools run by UCEP-Bangladesh, the Underprivileged

Children's Educational Program (UCEP, 2008). This one year pre-pilot study of a nine-year project in Bangladesh includes fieldwork carried out in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, in two phases (Phase-I, July 29, 2009 to August 6, 2009 and Phase-II). 6 out of 15 participating schools in the project were purposively selected for the study. 6 school administrators and 12 teachers were interviewed during phase-1. Then 11 teachers were re-interviewed during Phase-II. 12 classroom observations were conducted in Phase-I and 11 classroom observations were conducted in Phase-II. Lessons were filmed and observational fieldnotes were made by the author with the help of two research assistants.

3. UCEP Bangladesh: An Overview

The Underprivileged Children's Educational Program (UCEP) is a non-government organization (NGO) in Bangladesh providing general education and vocational training for working children. The program was started in 1972 from Dhaka University. Currently over thirty thousand poor working children, who have generally missed out on their primary education, are studying in the UCEP schools. Students are accepted into the programme no younger than age 10 for girls and 11 for boys. The UCEP schools normally operate 3 shifts per day, each of 3 hours duration. Children continue to work and earn while they attend school, so that a child can choose a shift of his/her convenience, in consultation with their parents, to minimise the economic loss to the family for the children attending school. Each 3 hour shift is focused on general education but where possible examples are drawn from a technical context. For example, the English alphabet is taught through naming of craft tools – D for dividers, H for hammer. Stories in Bangla are linked to the discovery of inventions and the use of agricultural and other devices. After grade 8 UCEP continues Technical Education training on 16 professional trades (see UCEP, 2008 for more detail about these trades).

Students basically follow the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) curriculum, both at primary and lower secondary level (grades 1 to 8), and the curriculum has been abridged in a careful manner so that it remains comparable with that of national mainstream curriculum. The curriculum consists of Bangla (mother tongue), English, mathematics, vocational, social environment and hygiene. The students learn in a highly vocational and practical way using English where necessary as technical vocabulary (EIA, 2009). At the end of their education and training they are guaranteed a job. In contrast to the mainstream formal government education system, these poor working children attend school regularly and complete their education. The attendance rate is over 94% and the drop-out rate is very low (UCEP 2008).

The organisation is currently headed by a retired army officer, ensuring the strong political connections which are so necessary to the survival of institutions in Bangladesh. University staff continue to contribute as consultants; and there is a board of trustees, also politically well-connected.

3.1. Teacher Recruitment

Teachers are normally recruited on a regional basis. Eligibility for applying for a teacher position is minimum graduation from a recognised university. After getting application from the prospective teachers, they are selected for a written test on the basis of criteria set by UCEP. The applicants need to set for 100 marks written test which is administered locally. Through this test, applicants competency in English (25 marks), Bangla (25 Marks) and Mathematics (30 marks) and general knowledge including understanding of teaching (20 marks) is measured. Minimum qualifying score is 60. According to one School Administrator, it' is very hard to get the qualifying score in this test. However, the final interview stage of teacher recruitment is conducted by head office personnel. During the interview recruitment team try to thoroughly examine the motivation of the applicants. There is no rule for recruiting the teachers from the local community, but they do try to make sure that there would not be a turnover of the teacher and a new recruit would not apply for transfer soon after joining the organisation. They try to ensure that the applicant has the appropriate personality to work with this disadvantaged population who mostly living in the slum areas in urban cities.

3.2. Teacher Training

After recruitment UCEP arrange training for the teachers. Most of the training is led by resource personnel from outside as well as some of the trainers from the organisation (who are from the field, who are normally divisional coordinators and SAs). Table-1 shows the in-service training provided by UCEP and their duration

Table-1: In-service trainings for the UCEP teachers

	<i>Training</i>	<i>Duration</i>
1.	Teachers' Basic Training	7-10 days
2.	Effective Social Work Training	3-5 days
3.	Teaching and Learning Methodology Training	3-5 days
4.	Subject-based Training (Mathematics, English, Bangla and Science)	3-5 days
5.	Teaching Aid Training	1-2 days
6.	Children's Rights and Child Psychology Training	3-5 days
7.	Gender and Development	1-2 days
8.	Others: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive Teaching Training • Child Participation Training 	1 day 1 day

This training programme is arranged on the basis of availability of the teacher at a convenient time for the head office. Teachers attend the *basic training* after joining the organisation but not necessarily immediately after recruitment. After each training teachers go back to their respective schools to carry on with their job. There is no given time schedule for the next training, however teachers then attend the *effective social work training*, which is mainly concerned with relationships with children and interaction with their families to strengthen social activities. This training includes issues, such as what would be strategy to work with the guardians, how the teacher will behave with the students, how to liaise with the community, how to run the follow-up programme for the students. At some point teachers need to attend *teaching and learning methodology training*, which is mainly focused on pedagogy. *Subject based training on Mathematics, English and Bangla* follows, where a SA or an experienced teacher could be the trainer. Sometimes they arrange subject based training in science too depending on need. Sometimes UCEP arrange training on *teaching aids*- supplementary teaching and learning materials focusing on teaching material development and techniques for their use. Sometimes teachers are called for other training such as *children's right training; gender and development training*.

Sometimes teachers attend training outside their organisational setting. For instance, they were previously sent to the English language training run by the British Council, as well as training abroad in India. In the beginning these kinds of trainings were for the SAs, but now teachers are also sent abroad for training, such as India. Apart from these, the organisation also gives scope to the teacher to continue their further education such as BEd, MEd or BBA, MBA programmes run by different universities in the evening shift. According to our respondents, many teachers are currently enrolled for further education programmes. The organisation does not provide any financial support for teaching qualifications but does not object to teachers achieving one. There is no obligation for the teacher to achieve teaching qualifications as UCEP provide trainings internally. In mainstream government schools there is an obligation for the teacher to achieve their teaching qualification in a certain time. There is no refresher training for UCEP teachers in terms of continuous professional development (CPD).

3.3. *Teaching and Learning in Practice*

In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, teachers are positioned in complex ways depending on local contrasts and distinctions. In a recent comparison of teaching, environment and ethos in formal and nonformal primary schools the formal school was often seen to be a rather unfriendly institution, comparatively lacking in a sense of care and personal connection with students (Shohel and Howes 2008). Teachers in formal schools, it seemed, were influenced by the character of their institutions, and came to behave in ways that were typical of the majority, adopting a traditional and non-interactive pedagogical style. By contrast, in

nonformal schools teachers paid greater attention to the personal and to creating contexts for learning that were meaningful to children, though for example the use of games, songs and other activities.

However, teacher training in these cases typically focuses on the characteristics and skills of the individual, and paying almost no attention to the institutional contexts in which teachers go on to work. By contrast, in the UCEP system most teachers are untrained when they start, and in all the training that they receive; the context of their work is a significant feature:

‘We got basic teacher training when we joined UCEP. It’s includes context of UCEP school as well as background of the students. Then we had subject-based training and continuous professional training provided by the UCEP training division. [1.X.X]

The culture of the school is integral to the development of teachers, and is supported by a training operation which emphasises that culture.

4. Lessons Learned from the UCEP Intervention

A key to successful educational change is the provision of appropriate ‘incentives’ in their context for teachers to improve their practice in the classroom. Though sometimes incentives are an element of institutional culture, when teachers are engaged with an external intervention, then incentives are not necessarily part of school culture. It is also true that many features of the school system are maintained and supported by the institutional culture and socio-political context of the school (Shohel and Howes, 2008). EIA, as a major educational development programme in Bangladesh, is creating a space for teachers to raise their voice and to be empowered. Therefore, during EIA intervention in UCEP, the project should consider what it could offer teachers as incentives for being an active participating English language teacher apart from training and technological tools.

In the case of UCEP schools, teachers are overloaded by duties including delivering 5 to 6 lessons per day in 3 shift and following up 10 to 15 students per month.

Everyday I have to conduct three English lessons. If there are 30 working days, I have to plan 60 lessons, which is quite a heavy load for me, surely a burden on me. [2.1.24]

These teachers are already working hard to provide education for underprivileged working children. But extra duties from an international educational development project are really burden for them and it is extremely hard for them to cope with extra duties.

I feel a bit over-loaded. Previously we were taking 6 classes in the traditional way. Now we are taking three of them using the EIA method and after these three I feel like I am finished. But I still like EIA training. [2.2.47]

Though the teachers enjoy taking part in EIA intervention, it is very demanding for their time. Eventually they are getting used to the training activities and practicing their learning in schools.

4.1. Space for teacher development

In describing this case, it is important to note that these are not schools with enormous resources or other advantageous features, and in many senses quite the reverse. There are significant constraints on teachers in UCEP schools, but these are understood and accounted for in the policies which govern their work. Children from the age of 11 are eligible to attend if they have had no previous schooling and prepare them for technical schooling at age 14, through an accelerated primary school education program of three hours’ schooling per day, completing the equivalent of two grades in a year in four core subjects. Most of the children work in or near the slum areas where they live, delivering goods, working as maids, in hotels and workshops.

In order to take account of children’s home background and to build connections between parent and teacher for the child, each child who wants to enrol at a UCEP school is visited at home over a period of twelve months by their prospective teacher, who in this way establishes a relationship and is able to assess and build the child’s motivation for schooling. Teachers continue home visits every three months to each of the 33 children in their class while they are at school, maintaining and building a connection with the family and ensuring that they as teachers have a detailed appreciation of the context of their children’s lives, along the lines of the *Funds of Knowledge* approach (González, Moll et al. 2005). In particular teachers are clear that for most children if not all, the only place for academic learning is at school, or very

little space for studying at home for many of them and therefore space is made available for extra study outside the children's classroom hours. The only space available is the school corridor, but it is available. In addition, children can respond to the demands of their working life by attending an alternative shift at school where possible. These represent adaptations by teachers to challenging circumstances. Teachers' understanding is represented by the following teacher, speaking about her pupils:

Actually they're deprived from many opportunities of life. If we can motivate them a bit, by saying that, your present situation could be change, you could go to a better position through education. I mean we've to create eagerness among them for learning. [1.X.X]

Schools are typically very short of space, often with 700 children using the premises in three shifts over the school day. Whilst class size is small, classrooms are even smaller, and with desks in place there is little room for movement. To work in groups, children can at best turn their head, having no space to turn around on their benches. Classroom conditions are typically difficult – extremely hot, noisy, often in a building subject to traffic pollution.

In these circumstances, teachers organize pupils in three groups – slow, medium and fast learners – and seat them in a plan which mixes them up to facilitate peer tutoring. Active learning is an aspect of most lessons, and teachers are expected to make use of visual aids as part of the school policy. Particularly impressive to an observer used to formal school classrooms in Bangladesh is the relationship between pupils and teachers, which is generally one of respect and calm understanding. The overall feeling is that these children are committed to the purpose of their schooling, to learn and so to improve their position in terms of work; and that teachers are likewise committed.

4.2. Opportunities and facilitators of inclusion

What is very noticeable is that teachers in these schools demonstrate an inspiring level of dedication and commitment. They are all graduates and some have a teaching qualification, but for most of them UCEP is their first teaching post. The conditions in which they work are harsh; the demands on them heavy. They are a little better paid than teachers in government schools; and their class sizes are relatively small, as described above. But they teach three shifts of children a day, working hard and effectively with the children in their care in difficult conditions, and making regular home visits as described. Teachers average eight years' experience in UCEP schools, and so they have the right to talk of their feeling that they are doing something for the community- this is not social work done in a flush of youthful enthusiasm. It appears to be this feeling of commitment to the children they teach, coupled with the reliable and relatively generous pay, which keeps them committed to their work.

In addition, school administrators maintain some social distance from the teachers (with separate rooms, for example) and actively supervise their work in class.

Well, I joined UCEP because I like to work for the disadvantaged children. I personally believe that we've to do something for the underprivileged people of our society. I enjoy working here and feel good that I'm contributing to their lives. [1.X.X]

What stands out about this case is that here is a tightly-structured educational organization tackling an endemic and challenging issue and appearing to do so with great success. Observations in five schools suggest that the features of this case are widely replicated.

5. Policy Recommendations for Bangladesh

If the school achievement levels are to rise up to a certain standard then appropriate teacher education and training must be available for all teachers. Children's 'cognitive achievement... increase as school expenditure, teacher education and school facilities are enhanced' (UNESCO, 2005:228). Therefore, Bangladesh needs to invest more on education including school-based technology enhanced teacher training to provide quality education for its citizens.

The status of teachers in the community as well as the professional world and their involvement in policy development and implementation are as important as their academic qualification and training. Countries which perform well in offering quality education to their citizens have placed a high value on teacher education and CPD as well as social networking (UNESCO, 2005). Teachers also enjoy high status in those countries.

Forms of training engagement in which teachers gain confidence and a sense of agency in context should be promoted and encouraged. Looking at the UCET case, it appears that such training most usefully focuses on the wellbeing and education of relatively marginalized young people. Policy relating to teacher development should be evaluated in terms of how far it will facilitate teachers to become effective agents in their institutional contexts.

6. Conclusions: Implications for the Global South and North

General concern and trends around teacher education and training relate to ‘the resolution of the balance between theory and practice; the attempts to match the demand for and supply of teachers; the degree of central control of teacher education; the status, recruitment and output of teachers’ (Morris and Williamson, 2000:281). Successful teacher education and training could happen in the context of school, though there is little evidence of this happening in the Global South. Considering the urgency of teacher education and training, TPD should be school-based and it is essential to provide a stable policy basis for development.

‘Training models for teachers should be reconsidered in many countries to strengthen the school-based pre- and in-service training rather than rely on lengthy traditional, institutional pre-service training’ (UNESCO, 2005:3).

For doing so, school-based forms of open and distance learning (ODL) using new communication technologies are the only viable way forward (Banks et al, 2009). ‘Increasingly new modes of open and distance learning, including new information and communication technology application are seen as vital to new approaches to training provision on a large scale’ (UNESCO, 2008:2). School-based modes of supported ODL, exploring ICTs are the only feasible way to make such provision widely available.

It appears that UCET is an educational organization which manages to work to a challenging but achievable and socially-worthy goal, sustained by the creation of a culture of professional engagement among teachers. These schools are well-known in their local area, and respected for the work they do. Teachers learn from each other and take the best from the example that each is able to offer. Relatively good salaries enable them to stay and contribute for a long time. As a result, they make a considerable difference to the lives of many ‘hard-to-reach’ young people.

The study demonstrates that teachers’ ownership and commitment to a group of young people, when situated in an institutional context which supports and encourages such commitment, can make a difference at a system-wide level to the life chances and outcomes for young people. ‘Training’ here is largely subsumed into participation in an institutional culture which deliberately looks for and recognises possibilities for education even in a very constrained context. Among the apparently remarkable features of this case is the sense of reinforcement between individual teachers’ agency, the espoused goals of the NGO and the culture of the institutions involved.

Dewey’s (1938/1997) concept of an educational experience is one that leads the learner to engage in further learning. Agency – taken as the sense of being able to affect what goes on in a particular context – is very akin to the product of this simple but powerful idea. Training is often far from educational, on that basis – it traps teachers into feeling inadequate or unable to change anything, given the challenges of their context, or disinterested in what to them remain irrelevant and only partially understood ideas. A supportive institutional context can significantly address these weaknesses in relation to training.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank UKAID for funding the EIA programme and UCEP Bangladesh authority to allow us carry out the research. I am also very thankful to 2 TDCs from EIA Base office- Mohammad Arifuzzaman and Yeasmin Ali for working with us during fieldworks. I also thank the SAs and teachers who take part in research activities.

References

Banks, F. (2009). Technological literacy in a developing world context: The case of Bangladesh. In: PATT-22: ‘Pupils Attitude Towards Technology’ Conference, 24-28 August 2009. Delft: Netherlands.

Inclusive and Supportive Education Congress (ISEC) 2010, 2-5 August 2010 in Belfast, UK

- Banks, F., Moon, B. and Wolfenden, F. (2009). New modes of communication technologies and the reform of open and distance learning programmes: A response to the global crisis in teacher education and training. In M-2009 Conference.
- Dewey, J. (1938/1997). *Experience and education*. London: Macmillan.
- English in Action (EIA). (2009). *Baseline study- 6b: A survey study of technology environment related to learning and using English for communicative purposes*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.
- González, N., Moll, L. C. and Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*. Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc Inc.
- Howes, A. J., Davies, S. M. B. and Fox, S. (2009). *Improving the Context for Inclusion: Personalising teacher development through collaborative action research*. London: Routledge.
- Howes, A., Davies, S. and Fox, S. (2009). *Improving the context for Inclusion through collaborative action research*. London: Routledge.
- Morris, P and Williamson, J. (eds) (2000). *Teacher education in the Asia-Pacific region: A comparative Study*. London: Falmer Press.
- Shohel, M. M. C. and Howes, A. J. (2008). Informality of teaching and learning in nonformal schools: Socio-cultural processes as mesosystems of student development. *Education 3-13*, 36(3): 293-309.
- UIS. (2006). *Teachers and educational quality: Monitoring global needs for 2015*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
- Underprivileged Children's educational programs (UCEP). (2008). Transforming underprivileged children into productive human resource. <http://www.ucepbd.org/index.htm> (Accessed 29 June 2009)
- UNESCO. (2005). *Education for All: The quality imperative (Summary)*. EFA Global Monitoring Report. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2008). *Supply, retention, preparation and career long professional development of teachers in E9 countries*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Yates, C. (2007). *Teacher education policy: International development discourses and the development of teacher education*. Paris: UNESCO.