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Nostalgia, Transition and the School: An Innovative Approach of Using Photographic Images as a Visual Method in Educational Research

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Abstract

In the context of the study reported in this paper, of transition from nonformal primary schools to formal secondary schools in Bangladesh, the difficulties of smooth school transition relate not only to the making of new relationships and adaptation to new norms in a new environment, but to a very different approach to educating disadvantaged people. The role of images is explored as part of a research process in which formal secondary school students made connections with their past experiences in nonformal primary schools. Interviews with photographic images in this context represent an innovative approach to learning about students' experiences, fitting with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This theoretical framework focuses attention on the significance of the context at several levels of ecological systems to children's development. Images of their nonformal primary school represent an opportunity for nostalgia for new secondary school students, evoking strong feelings which illuminate the many dimensions of transitional challenges.

Key words: nostalgia, school transition, image, photo-elicitation interview, visual method, nonformal primary school, formal secondary school, Bangladesh.

Introduction

In Bangladesh, nonformal primary education is designed to provide basic education to disadvantaged children. The flexible learning environment of nonformal primary schools in a community context facilitates the individual development of young people who would otherwise be excluded from the main stream school system in Bangladesh (Shohel, 2010). After completing courses from nonformal education (NFE) programmes children are able to continue their education by enrolling in formal primary or secondary schools at the appropriate level. But transition between schools often raises difficulties for young people and their families. The informality of nonformal school environment has flexibility for teaching and learning in a community context where interactions between school and community are very influential and fruitful for students' individual development. In the formal school, by contrast, links are neither acknowledged nor valued. Home is often seen as a source of problems, rather than affording the potential for mutual positive influence (Shohel and Howes 2008). For many children 'formal schooling is, to a large degree, the struggle to substitute one kind of tradition (or knowledge) for another within the mind of the child' (Wax and Wax 1971, 3). But promoting children's willingness or motivation to achieve, inevitably at the expense of others, is not an unproblematic goal of schooling.

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Transition from primary to secondary school

In this study 'Transition' is defined as the move from 'one state of certainty to another with a period of uncertainty in between' (Schilling et al 1988, 2) - the move from one phase of life to another. The period of uncertainty in relation to transition is very important in order to understand about human development and therefore educational development for a better future. Transition in human life has effect and impact on individuals differently. Some people see it as 'stressful life events' or 'life crises' and other see it as normal course of life (Berliner 1993; Fenzel 1989b; Garnezy and Rutter 1983). Therefore, the concept of 'transition' is broad, holistic, multidisciplinary and contested.

Transition between schools has effects on every student in either a positive or negative way for a shorter or longer time. The phase of transition has an impact on success or failure of primary school graduates in their secondary school and continuation of future education as well as their later lives. During adolescence, when transition from primary to secondary school often occurs, a major factor is stress. Some research carried out on children in the process of transition which focused on students' anxieties during school transitions, found that the majority of those children have considerable anxieties about the changes (Lucey and Reay 2002), but that they also often have positive anticipations about the new opportunities (Zeedyk et al 2003). Though poverty has strong impact on school transition, adjusting to a new school is 'challenging for students from all social class background, not just for students from low income families' (Antonio 2003, 4).

The number of times students experience transition into new schools throughout their educational career varies depending on the education system as well as life-events e.g. parents' job transfer, moving house. Arguably primary school often teaches children literacy and numeracy, while secondary school often concentrates on a wider subject range and with an aim of gaining knowledge and understanding of this knowledge. The transition from primary to secondary school represents a period of uncertainty and profound change through the 'move from the nest of a protective, familiar environment with considerable individual attention into an often impersonal, intimidating atmosphere' (Berliner, 1993:6) in young adolescents' lives. It is 'potentially stressful because the school changes are taking place in early adolescents' lives and because of the differences in the environments of small, child-centered elementary schools and large, subject-matter-oriented middle-level schools' (Fenzel 1989a, 13). Therefore it is a critical period for both children and their parents (Falbo et al 2001).

Theoretical framework

The ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979; 1992) of human development was used as a theoretical framework to place the individual child at the focus of the study. The theoretical framework focuses on the way different contexts influence children's development (Figure 1). This framework suggests that the development of an individual child cannot be effectively understood without paying attention to the connections between the micro-system (within person), meso-system, exo-system and macro-system elements. For children, the meso-systems are usually considered to include the family, peer group, school and community.

Seen in terms of this theoretical framework, student transition between school systems is seen as a potentially critical life event in the development of the child or young person, linking personal, cultural and economic factors through the meso-level factors of school and home, family, and religion, and seen in connection with changing or dominant aspects of the culture, society and community. Only such a 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 student, 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 blame and unrealistic solutions, because it ignores the interrelationship of factors.

Figure- 01: Diagrammatic representation of ecological systems theory

From the perspective of the individual child or young person, their experience of transition will depend on what it means to them as individuals, which is likely to be affected by, e.g. their biological development, their personality, and their own particular way of making sense of situations. For example, the child or young person will be leaving behind meaningful relationships and creating new ones; the meaning that those relationships have may be positive or negative, and the meaning may be expressed in terms of other aspects of the child's experience. Understanding transition from the point of view of the child provides a way of investigating the validity of Bronfenbrenner's framework in the particular context under study. The challenge was to develop a methodology which would generate data of appropriate richness and depth.

The weaknesses of data generated by traditional sit-down research interviews with young children soon became very obvious for me during my doctoral research fieldwork in Bangladesh. Most problematic was the way in which the children often answered questions very briefly and ambiguously. What was absent was what the children really feel about the moments and perhaps some sense of the young people's autonomy in the interviewing process.

During interviews in the preliminary fieldwork with young children in primary or secondary school, they said very little about the issues they faced during their experiences in schools. This was a methodological problem, given that the children certainly knew more than the researcher about their own world. However, knowledge is not filed away in children's heads in answer form, waiting for the stimulus of the perfect question to release it. Part of the problem is that of articulating tacit knowledge: most of what children know, they know implicitly, and yet in an interview they are asked to make that knowledge explicit.

Image-based research in education

Image-based information is a key component of human progress in a number of distinct subject domains including education. Image-based research is a relatively new approach to interpretative studies, however, using images in social science research is a first growing research technique with regard to both still and moving images. For long time image-based research method plays a relatively minor role in qualitative research except sociological and anthropological research (Prosser 1998a). Over the last century, the use of images in social science disciplines has fluctuated. It has moved backwards and forwards from being popular to being ignored but more recently there has been a considerable renewal of interest (Hurworth and Sweeney 1995; Banks 1995, 2001; Prosser 1996; Emmison and Smith 2001; Rose 2001). In particular in the context of education, Margolis (2000) explored the use of image in educational research; Coles and Nixon (1998) produced a collaborative photographic and textual exploration of life in schools.

Historically images have been used as a research tool in different academic disciplines. However, they have been used in education only quite recently and making a slow but steady impact in educational research (see Prosser 2007; Shohel and Howes 2007). For example, in comparison with other methods little has been written about how images can be useful for interviewing purposes in the field of education. Nevertheless, image-based interviews have been used successfully for cultural studies and have been employed across a wide variety of disciplines and topics. Over time, various terms have become associated with the technique of using image such as photo elicitation, auto-driving, reflexive photography, photo-novella and photo-voice. The current understanding is that such techniques have a lot to offer to the discipline of education.

Images have great potential as a medium of expression. As the photographer Ansel Adams says, 'We must remember that a photograph can hold just as much as we put into it, and no one has ever approached the full possibilities of the medium' (Levitt et al 1998). Images can hold details of events, memories, emotions and meaning of facts. They allow moments to be captured and stored for future recall and sharing with others. Images also can 'speak' for us when we cannot find the words. We need to apply mix-method interpretative study for understanding social or human problems based on building a complex interpretative and holistic image of a multi-layered social world. As Loeffler (2004, 1) suggested, 'photography proved to be powerful reflective tool that participants utilized as anchors and triggers for past memories'. In recent literature on photo-elicitation and image-based research (Prosser 1998b) photos are used to elicit responses as part of research interviews (Harper 2002). However, photo-elicitation methods of engaging research participants in reflecting on their own experiences by using photographic images of familiar teaching and learning environments proved to be both immediate and thought-provoking (Kaplan and Lewis 2005). In this research images were used as a central part of the interpretative methodology.

Link between nostalgia and images

Researchers using images of past times have noted the significance of nostalgia, seeing it as an important element through which we make sense of our continuing biography and ourselves. Moran (2002, 161) notes that 'photographs of children are an important resource for nostalgia, and are often among people's most treasured possessions'. A snapshot, Stewart (1993, 136) suggests, is necessarily incomplete and partial, and 'will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth with regard to those origins'. Use of these narratives by people in everyday contexts in relation to memories of their own childhoods creates a gap between 'representation' and 'reality', and it is this gap which generates nostalgia. Our ideological myth about 'childhood' 'often leaves children permanently out of the

equation, offering no way to examine the social experience of actual children or to talk about the real world consequences of these ideologies' (Jenkins 1998, 23). It is easy to neglect the question of how people engage with the memory of their own actual childhoods – and it may be added in the current context, how children themselves understand their own past. Here it is worth noting a growing tradition of research with children in schools and other institutions, in which attention to 'student voice' is seen as a potentially energising activity (Rudduck and Flutter 2004). In this paper, I look at transitional challenges 'through the lens of nostalgia' (West 2000, 17), and it is children and young people who do the looking.

Having engaged with the literature of image-based research as discussed above, it appeared that this approach was potentially a powerful way of offering children the chance to talk around specific aspects of their reality. I used images as an interview device to explore children's specific contexts and the meaning children made from them, and as stimuli in interviews to understand transitional challenges. Images acted as memory triggers, reflective opportunities, connection facilitators and potent reminders of the students' school experiences.

Using images as central artefacts in the research interaction

Any image preserves a moment in time. Walker and Kimball-Moulton (1989, 157) note that capturing images is about time in that 'the act of photography anticipates the future by ripping the appearance of a moment out of its time, creating a tangible image for the future of what will be the past'. Therefore images are productions of past reality. Some people use images as protection against time by using them as a 'mooring for the evocation of past memories' (Cronin 1998, 73). Colson (1979, 273) surmises that 'people take up photography at times of rapid change in their lives when photography is most clearly expressive of the wish to hold time still, to have greater opportunity to consolidate the ordinarily fleeting experiences of the moment'. The rapid change experienced by children in transition between schools suggests the particular significance of images to them at this time.

When images are used in interviews, they 'sharpen the memory and give the interview an immediate character of realistic reconstruction' (Collier and Collier 1986, 106) and that 'photographs are charged with psychological and highly emotional elements and symbols' (ibid. 1986, 108). This emotional characteristic of images allows research participants to express their ethos while exploring the images within the photo-elicitation interview. The authors further advocate the use of images when interviewing because 'the potential range of data enlarges beyond that obtained in the photographs themselves' (ibid. 1986, 99).

It is important to consider the impact of such an approach on relationships between researcher and research participant. Harper (1994, 410) suggests that the 'photo-elicitation interview redefines the essential relationships of research'. Photographs invite research participants to take the leading role in the interview and to make full use of their expertise. Finally, by using images within the interview, participants are relieved of the stress of being the 'research subject' because the photographs become the focus of the interview (Collier and Collier 1986). In this way, photo-elicitation provides a model for collaborative research in that the researcher becomes a listener as the subject of research interprets the images for the researcher. This is referred to as 'exploring the photographs together' (ibid. 1986, 105) with the key informants. This innovative and collaborative approach to the research contributes greatly to the depths of understanding gained in the present study related to the phenomenon of school experience and transitional challenges.

Methodology

The empirical study and the data which follow are drawn from findings of a longitudinal (2003-2006) doctoral research project focusing on transition from the nonformal to the formal education sector, in the context of Bangladesh. The research is based in two different geographical sites - namely Bogra and Norsindi districts, selected because of the different socio-economic backgrounds of the population.

The data derives from fieldwork conducted in two phases (Phase I: December 2004-February 2005; Phase II: December 2005-February 2006) in two rural areas of above-mentioned districts in Bangladesh. A programme of interviews, questionnaires and observations of students and their classes was been set up in nonformal primary schools, and in formal secondary schools.

Three nonformal feeder primary schools from each area were purposively selected, together with one secondary school based on the presence of graduates of nonformal primary school enrolled in the first grade (grade VI) at secondary school. Interview participants for Phases I and II were selected using ‘criterion-based sampling’ (Patton 1990, 176) from among those nonformal primary students who had the intention of going to formal secondary school, and from those who were already in selected secondary schools in the study areas.

During Phase I, 24 students were interviewed in primary schools and 16 students were interviewed in secondary schools. During Phase II, 16 students were interviewed in primary schools and 30 students were interviewed in secondary schools (see table-01).

	Phase I	Phase II
Method adopted	Traditional interview	Interview using images
Primary	24 students (6 groups of 4)	16 students (4 groups of 4)
Secondary	16 students (individuals)	30 students (30 individuals)
Total:	40	46

Table 01: Summary of data generated in Phases I and II of the research

In Phase I, images were not used, and the data is derived only from traditional semi-structured interviews. For Phase II, the image-based strategy was developed to facilitate and stimulate further reflections on school experiences. Some of the students were involved in both Phases I and II. These interviews used images as a central method for eliciting students’ perspectives. The comparison between these two sets of data is highly illustrative of the limitations and advantages of each method.

Digital photographic images were taken by the researcher during classroom observations in primary schools. Whatever was going on, the researcher tried to capture it as far as possible in an image. The images were shown later on a laptop computer screen during interviews to talk about their experiences of schooling and to explore what it meant to students, how they described it to an outsider. Through this photo-elicitation interview, I tried to capture the students’ interpretation of the same images. It was interesting in some cases that they came up with different contexts and interpretations that the researcher might have expected during capturing the images. Interestingly the research participants stated that the images had stimulated many thoughts and memories. Some also said that the images had encouraged them to reflect upon situations never experienced before.

Each of the interviews took approximately 30 minutes and students were given the opportunities to see the photographic images to recall their memories in school. Each time 4 students were involved in primary schools and only one student was involved in secondary schools. Images were also used for group interviews in secondary

schools. In primary schools students were interviewed in front of their teacher while other students were filling out the questionnaire and their teacher was seated in her designated place. She listened to what the students were saying. Each time students were looking at her before answering the questions. But in secondary school students were interviewed in a different room whilst other students were in their class with their teacher which provide a space for student talking about their experiences and challenges in schools.

Ethical considerations

Images have great potential within educational research, and it is to be expected that as they become easier to include in research processes, so they will become more widely used. Ethical considerations regarding their use are therefore necessarily highly critical. At different stages of the research process, different ethical principles come to bear, but throughout, potential participants have the right to be assured that they will not be damaged, misinterpreted, misrepresented or prejudiced in any way by their participation in the process.

It may be argued that the presence of a camera may incite suspicion and discourage naturalistic behaviour and environment. Again, the students in this study were interpreting contexts familiar to them, and they were able to comment on any such strange behaviour. The fact that they did not suggests that by and large the presence of the camera was not a major influence on behaviour, in terms of the images included here.

A major issue in such work concerns the identification of individual subjects, and here informed consent is the main way to tackle the issue ethically as well as legally. Accordingly, potential participants in the research were informed about the possible usage of their image as part of the research and development of their educational systems, for example in developing transitional programmes to facilitate smoother transition between the nonformal and the formal education sectors. An associated difficulty concerned their consent to use within research publications from the project; here participants were informed as clearly as possible about this potential usage, but their remoteness from research outputs made this difficult. There are questions as to how informed the consent actually was, despite the fact that these possibilities were been consistently mentioned through out the phases of fieldwork.

Another aspect of context is relevant here. Most people in Bangladesh are keen to be seen in the mass media; people suspecting anyone of being a journalist (by virtue of using a motor bike and carrying a camera, for example) are likely to be asked to take images of them in the hope of publication in the national daily newspaper or a magazine. Participants were reminded that this was a case of research rather than journalism, but they were indifferent to the difference. 'They just want me to take their images' [Research Diary 2005-06].

There are ethical considerations in regard to the precise use of images in this study. Other studies using image-based research have involved students with cameras taking their own images (Kaplan and Lewis 2005), and it can be argued that the product of this research paper is that voices are heard that are usually silent. A single image may have many legitimate interpretations. It has been thought that images are 'telling us what the world is really like' (Beloff 1985, 100). We see them more often as reflections of the photographer's point of view, biases and knowledge (Becker 1974). But Harper (1998, 34) reminds that 'we see and photograph through our own cultural lenses'. Both the photographer and the viewer of the image construct the meaning in the photographic act. In addition, the meaning of an image can change when viewed in different contexts (ibid. 1998). In this light, Cronin (1998, 77) suggests that 'the function of photographs

is the creation and maintenance of meaning, and to this end a hermeneutic approach, [in research] which concentrates on the meaning woven around a photograph, is desirable’.

It is therefore important to reiterate that in this study, although the images were taken by the researcher, they were nevertheless interpreted by the students. It is important to note that none of the images were posed. The researcher as a photographer never attempted to rearrange a situation.

Comparison of the data generated with and without images

A central methodological challenge for a study of school transition from this perspective then is how to generate data which does justice to the individual perspectives of the children and young people experiencing transition, so that they are seen not just as students, or even just as (passive) children, but as learners actively making sense of their environment and the tasks presented to them in terms of their prior experience. Such a methodology would greatly facilitate understanding of transition in terms of the interconnected context that Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1992) consistently describes and holds within the attention of the reflective actor.

The impetus to search for a more appropriate methodology came as a result of a crisis at the end of the first phase of the research, and in particular from the obvious shortcomings of data generated through traditional interviews with students. It seemed that students were engaging in only a fairly limited way with questions about the difference between schools, for example. Their answers were thin, and there seemed to be nothing to interrogate in terms of the hypothesised links of meaning between elements of context. For example:

Q: Do you like your secondary school?

A: Yeah.

Q: Why do you like secondary school?

A: Very big school.

Q: What else do you like?

A: Big playground.

Q: Do you miss your primary school?

A: Some times.

Q: How do you miss your primary school?

A: I don't know. But some times I think of it.

Q: What do you think of?

A: Sometimes, may be, thinking of *apa*².

Q: What else?

A: Sometimes about the classroom.

[Interview- VI: 07 (Norsingdi 2004)]

Data in which the perspective of the child or young person is meaningfully constructed is a necessary starting point to tracing the interconnections between elements of their experience. Literature suggested that images could be seen as tools which can play a role in generating richer data in such a context. Certainly, there was evidence that images could make it easier for students to speak about their experiences, some of which perhaps did not come to mind when asked a question ‘cold’ (Collier and Collier 1986). Researchers had suggested that in speaking about particular photographs, participants describe links between themselves and various elements of their context (ibid. 1986)

² Primary school pupils call their female teacher as ‘Apa’ rather than teacher or ‘Mis’ which means ‘elder sister’. Culture-wise ‘Apa’ used to address elderly woman, unfamiliar lady or schoolmistress. It is assumed that schoolmistress is a respectable, responsible and caring person.

When images were used in Phase-II to ask the students about different aspects of their school experiences, they started to open up and seemed to speak more about their experiences and expectations regarding the learning environment.

In what follows, a comparison of data from Phases I and II on particular themes is being presented to illustrate the way in which I believe images enriched the data and engaged participants in a collaborative manner, and helped me to learn more about appropriate research methods involving young children in such educational contexts. Table- 02 is an example of this comparison, showing the answers of several different primary school children who were asked about their enjoyment of school, and about who they identify with.

<i>Phase I</i>	<i>Phase II</i>
Q: Do you enjoy your school? A: Yes, we do.	Q: Do you enjoy your school? A: We do enjoy our school. You see on the image every one is happy. [referring to image 02] We are so close to each other. We look like a family. Our <i>apa</i> is treating us, as we're her own children.
Q: What do you mean by we? A: I mean, we the students who are studying in this school.	Q: What do you mean by we? A: by we, I mean the students of our school. We learn together. We play together. We sing and dance together.
Q: What type of things do you enjoy in school? A: I enjoy everything of my school.	Q: What type of things do you enjoy in school? A: I enjoy being in school. Because it's giving me chance to join my group, singing with them, dancing with them, drawing with them, and even playing with them cards and caroms ³ . [While she was answering me, she was pointing at images which are representing her experiences.]
[Interview- V: 05 (Bogra 2004)]	[Interview- V: 11 (Bogra 2005)]

Table- 02: Comparisons of interview data of Grade V students

These are prime examples of the kind of differences that were evident in the data presented on the two occasions. As mentioned earlier, the whole dataset involves 66 students, with 34 of them interviewed at Phase-II. Analysis shows that in the majority of these cases, there is significantly more information provided by those students who were speaking with the stimulus of the images. However, it is not simply the amount of information that distinguishes the data generated by the two types of interviews. As already discussed, the ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979; 1992) broadens the concept of social context, suggesting that young learners develop their identities in multiple social contexts that include their home and school, but also extend to the community and the larger political and economic arena. The generated data could be usefully analysed with reference to this framework.

In this first comparison of interview data, the Phase-I interview extract makes no mention of the issues of social context explicitly. By contrast in Phase-II, this interviewee mentions themes which relate to Bronfenbrenner's meso-system elements

³ A kind of game played on a square board with 19 pellets and striker.

of family, school, peer and community, and this suggests a *prima facie* case for the value of the method. What is particularly striking here is the way in which the student in the Phase-II interview conveys links between these different elements of their context, through the use of family names, such as *apa*, family relationships ('as if we're her own children'), and in terms of games such as *carom* which are typically played at home as well as at school. Looked at in another way, the images appear to get students speaking in much more concrete and practical ways about different aspects of their lives. The data is rich enough to encourage further analysis so as to learn more about the way students are making these connections, and clearly this is an area of great interest in terms of the overall subject of transition.

When I consider the interviews conducted with students already at secondary school, a possible interpretation of the data is that when they had been shown images from nonformal schools, they made them nostalgic and emotional about their past days in primary schools. They started to talk more about their learning experiences in nonformal primary schools. The two images below triggered a student's memories about his primary school experiences.

Image-01: A teacher writing on the blackboard during a lesson.

Image-02: A teacher keeping her eyes on student while they are doing a writing task.

<i>Phase I</i>	<i>Phase II</i>
Q: Do you miss your primary school? A: Yes, we do. But it's all right. Now we are grown up.	Q: Do you miss your primary school? A: We do miss our primary school. We miss our <i>apa</i> . [He was referring to the above image] She was so kind and caring. She was so affectionate and always tried to explain the course content as long as we don't understand it. She also tried to motivate us to be an ideal student ⁴ . But it's all right.
Q: Don't you miss your primary school teacher? A: Oh, yah! She was a lovely person.	Q: Why do you particularly miss her? A: You know, in secondary school, teachers don't bother whether you've learnt anything from their lessons or not. Don't care whether you come to school or not. You see, she was sitting down with us on the mat [He was pointing to the image] like our mum. She hardly hit us. But in this school if you failed to answer the teacher's question, you definitely

⁴ The notion of the 'ideal student' is based on social and religious values. An ideal student ought to abide by social moral values and norms. He or she need to listen and obey elders.

	will be slapped or beaten [with a stick]. I hate punishment in secondary school.
Q: What else do you miss from your primary school? A: Well, I miss learning in-group, singing songs and reciting poems in the classroom.	Q: What else do you miss from your primary school? A: I miss many other things such as writing for wall magazine, drawing for decorating classroom, group learning, singing songs, reciting poems. It's interesting that we never felt bored in the school. We did different things and it's joyful learning environment. You know, in here [He was referring to secondary school] I feel miserable.
[Interview- VI: 08 (Norsingdi 2004)]	[Interview- VI: 14 (Norsingdi 2005)]

Table- 03: Comparisons of interview data of Grade VI students

In the Phase-II interview, many of the words chosen by the interviewee to describe their nonformal school teacher suggest a connection with the family. She is 'kind', 'caring', 'affectionate'... 'sitting down with us... like our mum'. A vein of nostalgia runs through these interview extracts, with a sense of loss communicated by the repeated 'miss' in relation to the teacher, and to a list of creative activities such as the wall magazine, singing, and group learning. The student makes an explicit connection between this emotionally-rich classroom context and the intentions of the teacher to explain, with the aim of helping students to learn. Whilst some of these elements are mentioned in the Phase-I interview, the links between them are not made. The concrete situations framed in the **images** leads the children to move between different aspects of their lives in their explanations, in a way that evokes Bronfenbrenner's framework.

What this comparison of data suggests so far is that the methodology using images to stimulate talk is a very productive way of stimulating students to talk about the *informality* of the nonformal school. What the students talk about is the detail of informality – the way the teachers talked to them, the feelings they had about those teachers. In doing so they make many links with the other aspects of their lives – their home, and the other issues that they are living with. The findings support the argument for using images, in terms of the obvious richness of the Phase-II data in comparison to that from Phase-I. But further than that, the content of that Phase II data begins to indicate the way the young people make sense of their context by relating one element of context to others. In other words, from the point of view of personal experience, the connections that Bronfenbrenner suggests in the meso-system are central to the way participants experience their world.

In the next section of the paper, I begin to identify further details of this informality, from the themes which arise when students talk in detail about particular images. Not everything that they talk about is comfortable or easy, but what is common is the sense of feeling that they have for the nonformal primary school.

Nostalgic Memories: Looking back to the nonformal primary school

In the analysis that follows, I focus on images of classroom settings and school environments which were taken to illustrate transitional issues. This selection was made partly as a result of analysing Phase-I interview data, and partly from previous experiences working with young learners in nonformal primary schools, for example in a primer (textbook) evaluation study (Shohel 1999). However, during the interviews, participants chose images that most represented the meaning of the experience for them.

There were many surprises when students came forward to interpret the images on the basis of their own school experiences. In many cases their interpretations drew on a different set of connections from those made by the researcher in the field.

The starting point in what follows is with images that evoke connections with the meso-system elements of family, school, community and peer group. I move on to images about which children discuss elements of the macro-system, such as the culture and socio-economic factors.

Moments of joy – co-curricular activities

Images about co-curricular activities were powerful in eliciting respondents feeling and experiences. Nonformal schooling gives importance to co-curricular activities like music, dancing, drawing, recitation, story telling, role-play etc to make the lessons enjoyable experiences and participatory activities. Classroom decorations were the subject of one image.

Image- 03: A wall magazine developed by a group of students

When I showed them the images of their classroom decoration by wall magazines and hand-made flowers, respondents were talking about how they made their wall magazines and hand made flowers with colourful clothes, and how they decorated their classroom. One of the respondents said:

‘We made those flower after *apa* showed us how to make flowers with colourful pieces of cloths. It’s a wonderful experience for us. You know our place is famous for loom industry. I know how to use a weaving machine. But I never made flowers with cloths. When *apa* showed us how to make flowers with clothes, we were excited. I went home and showed my mother how to make flowers with cloths. The following day, *apa* brought some colourful cloths and we made flowers together and hang those in our classroom. Later on I decorated our house too by cloths made flowers. You see how beautiful the classroom was!’ [Interview- VI: 03 (Norsingdi, 2005-06)]

Another respondent said about the wall magazine:

‘You see the wall magazine. We use to develop one every three month. We wrote poems, stories and then illustrate them with colours and group-wise hang on the wall. There was competition among the groups. Actually it was fun. But there is nothing like that in secondary school. They just want us to prepare lessons and listen to them.’ [Interview- VI: 04 (Norsingdi, 2005-06)]

Here I note first the evidence of what Bronfenbrenner calls a bi-directional relationship, where the activities done in school are seen to influence the home, in this case by way of showing mother how to make and display decorative flowers. These flowers in the home are symbols of the school and the emphasis placed there on creativity expression and aesthetic value. Learning how to make the flowers in school was a 'wonderful experience', and the resulting decorations made the classroom 'beautiful'. For the second respondent, the secondary school by comparison is empty of symbols of fun and beauty: there is 'nothing like that' there. It is important to note the emotional content of the descriptions here; evidence of the strong emotional value placed by children on their nonformal school, and the relative lack of emotional connection with the secondary school environment.

Feelings of security – evidence of care from beyond the local community

Image- 05: Students are listening to their teacher and NGO officer.

The word security has very wide meaning. In this case I used the word for physical and mental security. The nonformal primary school is a place of physical and mental security for the disadvantaged children. For the time being, they are free from household child labour, free from anxiety of daily life deprivation.

From the viewpoint of the researcher, Image-05 represents the objective reality of the supervision system of nonformal education, in which NGO workers expend two-thirds of their working time in the field to make schools effective and fulfil the target of the programme [Research Diary 2005-2006]. However, the children saw these visits differently. For them, the way the NGO workers behaved made it clear that they were supporters, helping to take care of them and their school. A respondent was talking about how they feel secure in the school environment looking at these two images. She said:

'You know, every day *apa* came to the school on time. Then almost every day someone from BRAC office use to visit our school. After talking to *apa*, he or she came to us and ask about learning progress, they tried to evaluate our learning outcomes. You see, in each of these two images, *bhai*⁵ is present to monitoring the school. They are working together to make our life better.' [Interview- VI: 02 (Bogra 2005-2006)]

⁵ Bhai means brother. In NGO culture, they address their superior 'bhai' rather than 'sir'. The reason behind it is that they think, in social context 'bhai' is used as a term of friendly address. Therefore it ensure openness, trust and comfort to work with superior.

Interpreted by this girl, these images speak about the informality of the nonformal school supervision system, through the evidently fond memories she has of the NGO officer's visits.

It is important to note that not all of the memories evoked by images were positive. **Need to elaborate this.**

Religious and cultural values vs. intervention policy

One of the images shown to the respondents was taken as a document of classroom setting and also light and ventilation of the school. During the interview however, it became clear that the image is also indicative of the pressures on teachers to conform to religious expectations by separating girls and boys in the class, and also of cultural expectations of the extra attention earned by 'good' students, seated at the front of the class.

Respondents discussing this image said:

'Now we're grown up, we don't talk much with boys. Sometimes in absence of *apa*, they try to wind us up. We keep distance from them. You see, girls are sitting together and so do boys. But when visitors come to visit us, we rearrange our seats.' [Interview- VI: 11 (Norsingdi, 2005-06)]

'Girls who set down in the front, they are good student. They always sit there. Teacher likes them and they get more attention than other students. So most of the time they come forward to the visitors to answer their question.' [Interview- VI: 14 (Norsingdi, 2005-06)]

It is clear from these comments that teachers experience pressure from the NGO to arrange classes with boys and girls sitting together (as a challenge to dominant cultural norms). Teachers are placed between competing forces: for example, one of the teachers we interviewed suggested that the NGO should allow gender segregation in classroom setting.

Ongoing difficulties with resources for writing

Another image was shown to the students was taken as evidence of the questionnaire survey process. But when students looked at it, they interpreted it reminded them of the difficulty of writing on the floor and its contribution to the transitional challenge during their early days in secondary schools. The participants see it as a struggle to cope with the situation that they have to bend to write on papers which give them back pain and in the long run, during their secondary school, they found it problematic for them to get used to the benches and it has negative effect on their writing. As respondents our attention regarding harming their back:

'Look at this image, the way he is writing it's not easy and at the beginning of my primary school days, I felt back pain. Over the time, though the pain went away, I didn't find it easy to write banding on my back and writing on the slat. And then when I begin secondary school I found it difficult to sit on a low bench and write on high bench and my handwriting became terrible. Now I am adapted with bench. [Interview- VI: 09 (Bogra, 2005-2006)]'

Constructions of national identity

Image-07: A detail map of Bangladesh is hanging on the wall with charts

Image-08: An art work of a student is hanging on the wall with charts and posters

These two images were taken from two different primary schools. Both of them are holding national icons. Image-07 has a map of Bangladesh on it. I did not know that students played with the map before their teacher comes to school. A student informed me about the image:

‘We use to play with the map when *apa* wasn’t around. We tried to find out names of the places from the map and then asked other whether they can point the place or not. Whoever could find the place he got a point. Whoever told first it was his or her turn to ask the rest of us about the place. Though we hardly visit other places of our country, but we know almost all places names on the map and their geographical situation. It’s great experience of fun and learning.’ [Interview- VI: 12 (Bogra, 2005-2006)]

This is an example of a student looking back on a positive learning experience which is coming from the informal character of the nonformal schools.

Image-08 has an artwork of a student which is demonstrating *Shohid Minar*⁶ and the national flag. The student who drew it, said:

‘I drew it [he was proud]. I copied it from the book, I coloured it on my own. 21st February is a big day for us, isn’t it? I watched programmes on TV about 21st February. I think, it’s our national pride and we should remember those who sacrificed their lives to give us right to speak in Bangla. Therefore I drew the *Shohid Minar*.’ [Interview- VI: 13 (Bogra, 2005-2006)]

Making a surprisingly rapid association, another student pointed her finger to the national flag and said:

‘There is the national flag. We have a nation flag flying on the stand out there [She is pointing to the national flag in front of the school office room]. You know, we attend assembly before starting our class to show our respect to our national flag. We also remember the martyrs who sacrifice their lives during the independence movement. We never attended assembly in our primary school.’ [Interview- VI: 06 (Norsingdi, 2005-2006)]

⁶ Shahid Minar is the monument of the language martyrs of February the 21st, 1952 that was the spirit of the Bangladeshi nationalism. As recognition of the sacrifice of lives for mother tongue, UNESCO declared 21st February as International Mother Language Day.

Perceptions of class identity

Image-09: Children from neighbourhood wondering about researcher and what is going on inside the classroom

Image-10: Children are playing with a toy car

The above Image-09 prostrates the curiosity of children from the neighbourhood. The child who is standing up and holding the door was from a family of better economic background. Though this school is next door to his house, he is studying at a private kindergarten half kilometre away from his home. A participant pointed his finger to him, said:

‘Oh, I know him. He wasn’t student of our school. He is from a nearby house. His father has money to send him a kindergarten. He looked down on us.’ [Interview- VI: 01 (Bogra, 2005-2006)]

When I asked him what he meant by ‘look down’, he was silent for while then said:

‘We are poor. Our parents couldn’t afford to send us to expensive school. You know, you need to pay high tuition fee, buy school uniforms and expensive textbooks and supplementary learning materials.’ [Interview- VI: 01 (Bogra, 2005-2006)]

Image-10 was not taken from the school environments. It was taken from a different context. But I used it to know what they think about the others who are not from the socio-economic background. In response to the image, a student said:

‘You see, they put on nice cloths and sandals. They are also playing with an expensive toy car. I wish I could play with toys. But I never did. Actually they are lucky to be born into a wealthy family.’ [Interview- VI: 02 (Bogra 2005-2006)]

Frustrations associated with socio-economic position

Two of the selected images reminded my respondents about their everyday frustration as members of a poor family. One of the images reminded them about their responsibility to take care of their siblings when they get back at home and they are not happy to take responsibility to take care of their younger siblings. As one of them said:

‘It’s reminding me how difficult it was for me to take care of my two younger siblings after going back home. They gave me hard time. That’s why I didn’t want to go back from school. Because of restraining them I missed to go to play with my mates. Even sometimes it’s hard for me to prepare my lessons.’ [Interview- VI: 05 (Norsingdi, 2005-06)]

Another image reminded them about their poverty. Because of poverty they could not afford a rucksack to carry their textbooks and learning materials. Recalling from the past memories, a respondent said:

‘Using a shopping bag as our school bag was frustrating. Some of our mates use to have school bags. I asked my father to buy a school bag for me few times. He said to me that if he could have enough money, he would have bought a bag for me. I knew that he couldn’t buy a school bag for me as it is very expensive and it was hard for him to provide food and clothing for 6 members of his family. I know he loves me, but it is beyond his capacity.’ [Interview- VI: 04 (Bogra, 2005-2006)]

For these respondents, the lack of fulfilment of their expectations is nostalgic; and again, they are making the connections between home and school.

Discussion

Images give researchers and participants a way to include others who did not participate in the experience to come to an understanding of real life settings. Therefore, images provide an integral bridge from the field to academia. They give participants a key with which to unlock their memories, trigger the emotional states and vicariously relive their own school experiences. It is not only an individual phenomenon but also a group phenomenon. Students spoke together as they interpreted the images from their past. Therefore, nostalgia generated vivid recollection in the interaction.

‘Childhood memories... clearly form part of broader narratives about the self, family, society and culture, [yet] they are often treasured as wholly individualistic and irreducible to cultural codes and meanings’ (Moran 2002). This tendency to individualise explains why a framework such as Bronfenbrenner’s is useful; it helps to focus back onto the connections which are not always acknowledged. Images, it seems, can help elicit memories, feelings and conflicts forgotten or perhaps never acknowledged; and in particular, the connections between the personal and the elements of context at different systems.

Nostalgia exists because of the discontinuity between past and present. Images stimulate narrative explorations of the past, and the construction of these narratives connects us with feelings of mourning, imagination and desire. As Boym (2001) describes, ‘restorative nostalgia’ recreates the past as an ideal, or a ‘value for the present’ (p.49) whilst ‘reflective nostalgia’ does not attempt to search for a perfect completeness in the past (p.41). It is significant that both types of nostalgia were found in the narratives of nonformal students. Memories of both pleasure and pain are narrated; if this were not the case, it would greatly reduce the validity of the method in this particular context.

Using image data to develop theoretical understandings

What starts to emerge is the way in which the *informality* of nonformal education (the legitimate connections made with the home, and with family roles, for example) is highly valued and meaningful to students, providing them with an effective context for making sense of themselves and their environment. So for example, I saw how teachers acting (as it were) in the role of mother could lead to activities in the home which strengthens the mother’s role in the education of the child, and raising the value of schooling as perceived from within the home. In another case, I saw how the visits of the NGO officers were appreciated by students, indicating the supportive and informal style that is adopted on these occasions to make nonformal system effective.

The nonformal primary school environment is not look like a formal primary or secondary school (Shohel and Howes, 2005). Informality is the main feature of the

community-based nonformal primary school. Interactions among students, teacher and NGO workers are very informal and cordial (Shohel and Howes 2008). The following figure is showing the nature of interaction:

Figure- 02: Picturing the informality of the school environment

In nonformal primary schools, it seems, the links between home, school and street are many and various, operating at many different systems in the consciousness of the children who experience them. These links are not only understood and acknowledged in the nonformal school; they are also valued. Some of the content of conversations between those meso-system elements pictured in Figure- 02 is suggested in the data discussed in this paper. I can picture a child having conversations with the teacher about the flowers made at home; or with the NGO workers about their motorbike, or with their peers about the map on the wall.

In the formal secondary schools, by contrast, links are not acknowledged, and neither are they valued. Home is often seen as a source of problems, and there is no sense of the potential of mutual influence for the better. Seen through the lens of nostalgia, from the position within the formal school, the qualities of the nonformal primary school are brought into sharp focus, and articulated in a very rich way in the conversations that the images provoke.

Conclusions

Using photographic images in interviews can be extremely useful and powerful in stimulating dialogues with the students. It offers educational researcher an entry point to the views, perspectives and experiences of research participants. My study suggested that this is a research tool that encourages active involvement from the participants in an emancipatory and democratic manner. This technique allows the students to unfold their meaning to the researcher as ‘images invite people to take the lead in inquiry, making full use of their expertise’ (Collier and Collier 1986, 105). It involves contemplation and reflection on experience. It does not seem like a traditional interview but rather a reflective conversation. Images can be a powerful tool for personal growth, learning and for creating connections with memories.

Through this methodology I was able to access some of the more profound meaning of the participants’ experiences, as participants explained what particular images meant to them. Each image acted as a memory anchor for the research participants as he or she recalled the school experience of their early days and the affective context surrounding the images. Images also enabled them to try to find the words to embody the meaning of

their experiences. Therefore, images can be used as a part of field research to bridge the gap between oral and literate cultures, the researcher as an adult and research subject as a child. Using image in the research enabled the conversation to proceed to a deeper and more collaborative level of understanding and meaning. This innovative technique helps us to understand the relationship between words, texts and images as dynamic interaction. Therefore this experimental approach contributes greatly to both the understanding of the challenges of school transition and to the ways in which images facilitate participation in interviews for collaborative research.

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