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Commitment to Change Lives: Teachers' Experiences of Living in Dhaka City and Working with Disadvantaged Children

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Abstract
Teacher education and training are in a crisis in countries like Bangladesh where the State failed to provide basic education for its citizens. Understanding teachers' lives and school contexts are vey important for exploring teachers' professional development. This paper is based on three ethnographic case studies of teachers' lives. In the context of problems and difficulties of everyday life, any simplification fact leads to inappropriate blaming and unrealistic solutions, because it ignores the interrelationship of highly significant factors.

The analytic framework used in this study is from Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992) theoretical work on the ecology of human development to place the teachers at the centre of the research focus. This framework suggests that the development of a person cannot be effectively understood without paying attention to the connections between micro-level (within person), meso-level, exo-level and macro-level factors. Understanding teachers' professional development from the teachers' perspective is a means of exploring the validity of Bronfenbrenner's framework too in this context.

The challenge for this kind of study is to develop methods that generate data of sufficient richness and depth. Therefore, data derived from a mixed method research strategy was adopted for the study. This paper has through some lights on teachers' professional and personal lives as well as their work patterns while they are living in a metropolitan overcrowded chaotic city and working in disruptive school environments. This paper has presented teachers' own voices about their professional understanding of those disadvantaged children too. Finally, this paper has raised some questions worthy of further research and made an effort to contribute to the emerging debate about teacher education and training in Bangladesh.

Keywords:
Teachers' professional lives, everyday experiences, disadvantaged children, school context.

Introduction
Teacher education and teacher training are in a crisis in developing countries like Bangladesh where the State failed to provide basic education for its citizens. Supplementing the lack of qualified English language teachers in Bangladesh, English in Action (EIA) project is running a secondary teaching and learning programme for the teachers who are teaching English in secondary schools. Understanding teachers' lives and the school contexts where they are working, are vey important for exploring teachers' professional development. In the context of

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problems and difficulties, any simplification fact leads to inappropriate blaming and unrealistic solutions, because it ignores the interrelationship of highly significant factors. Therefore, by exploring three ethnographic case studies of teachers' lives in UCEP schools, this paper demonstrates how personal and professional contexts are inter-related and impacting on teachers' professional development.

Theoretical framework

This paper focused on English language teachers who already took part in EIA intervention for their professional development. The framework for this study adopted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical work on the ecology of human development. This framework suggests that the development of a person cannot be effectively understood without paying attention to the connections between micro-level (within person), meso-level, exo-level and macro-level factors. In this framework, teachers' professional development is linked to personal, cultural and economic factors through meso-level factors of school, home, family and religion, and connected with 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. Understanding teachers' professional development from the point of view of the teacher is a means of exploring the validity of Bronfenbrenner's framework too in this context.

Methodology

A mixed method research strategy was adopted to understand teachers' lives in Bangladesh. The methods used included, using a questionnaire, classroom observation, semi-structured interviews with school administrators (SAs)[3] and teachers, as well as researcher diary. Six SAs and twelve teachers were interviewed about their professional development and different aspects of school-based training. Fieldwork was carried out for data collection in four phases of fieldwork from August 2009 and August 2010 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Six UCEP schools were selected purposively for doing first three phases of fieldwork, but forth phases of fieldwork only done in three schools. In this final phase, three teachers' lives were explored as ethnographic case studies. In every case, interviews were recorded and conducted in Bangla. All research participants gave their verbal consents to the recording of their interviews, as well as having them used for research purposes by following research ethics.

UCEP Bangladesh

The Underprivileged Children's Educational Program (UCEP) is a leading non-government organisation (NGO) in Bangladesh which provides general education and vocational training for working children living in urban areas. Currently over 30,000 poor working children, who have generally missed out from mainstream formal education, are studying in UCEP schools. Pupils are accepted into the programme at no younger than age 10 for girls and 11 for boys. UCEP schools operate 3 shifts per day, each of 3 hours duration. As the children continue to work and earn while attending school, this allows a child to choose a shift which is convenient for him or her. This is decided in consultation with their parents, to minimise the opportunity costs i.e. economic loss to the family. Each three- hour shift is focused on general education, but where possible, examples are drawn from a technical context. For example, the English alphabet is

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[3] The head of the UCEP school is called School Administrator, though the head of the school in the mainstream education system is called Headteacher.

taught by naming craft tools – D for dividers, H for hammer. Stories in the Bangla language are linked to the discovery of inventions and the use of agricultural and other techniques. After grade 8 UCEP continues technical education training for 16 professional trades (see UCEP, 2008 for more detail).

The curriculum of UCEP is basically prescribed by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), at both primary and lower secondary level (grades 1 to 8). This curriculum has, however, been carefully abridged for the target student population. The curriculum covers Bangla (mother tongue), English, mathematics, social environment and hygiene but contents are more related to vocational trades. Therefore the students learn in a highly vocational and practical way, using English where necessary as technical vocabulary (EIA, 2009). At the end of their training they are guaranteed a job. In contrast to those in the formal government 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).

Normally UCEP teachers do not have a teaching qualification. They get some basic and subject-based training (for details see, Shohel and Banks, 2010). After each training session teachers go back to their own schools to carry on with their jobs (Howes et al, 2009). Sometimes teachers attend training outside their organisational setting in Bangladesh. But sometimes SAs and ASAs get opportunities to attend training abroad. There is no refresher training for UCEP teachers in terms of continuous professional development (CPD).

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.

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 (Shohel, 2008 and 2010). By contrast, in UCEP 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 the main stream education system typically focuses on the characteristics and skills of the individual teacher, 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.' [Interview-SA]

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

Lessons Learned

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.

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. [1.1.3]

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.

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. [1.2.5]

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.

In the following section, three unique case studies has been presented: first one- she very motivated and want to go further on their career ladder; second one- demotivated as he would like to do so, but there is no scope to make that happen.

Case study-1:

The teacher is a female teacher. She has been working for UCEP-Bangladesh nearly 8 years. Recently she was promoted to Assistant School Administrator position. She is living in an apartment very close to her school. It takes her less than 2 minutes to go to school. The school is situated in a congested place and has land dispute with the donor's descendents. School environment is not healthy at all. There is very little natural day-light and air circulation inside the school building. At the first place she started to work with UCEP as she needed a job. Now she likes working in the UCEP school as she thinks that she is contributing to society by teaching working children and providing them education for better lives. She is not regretting to start her career here. She is enjoying her teaching and working with working children. She has been living in Dhaka city for 25 years. She born and brought up in the city. She has a son and a daughter. Her husband is a lawyer and supporting her in her career.

Case study-2:

The teacher is a male teacher. He has been working for UCEP Bangladesh nearly 10 years. He tried to get the Assistant School Administrator position twice, but did not get through the selection procedures. He is living in an apartment 15/20 minutes walking distance from the school. He is sharing the apartment with another family. He goes to school and back home on foot. At the first place he started to work with UCEP as he desperately need a job and failed to get one. Now he is regretting to join UCEP rather than finding a job in civil service or securing a government job. Therefore, he does not have a job satisfaction. He is doing his job as he needs to work for his living. He has been living in Dhaka city for the last 15 years. He born and brought up outside Dhaka city. He migrated to Dhaka for better employment opportunity. He has a daughter and his wife is working part-time in a medical centre.

Case study-3:

The teacher is a female teacher. She has been working for UCEP Bangladesh nearly 25 years. She does not have a career goal as she is very happy what she has been doing for long time in the UCEP schools. She is living in a posh area of the city and she has her own house. It takes her an hour to get to the school. At the first place she started to work with UCEP as she treats this job as social work. She goes to school by public transport mainly bus and rickshaw. She does not regret to work in the UCEP schools and she enjoy her job in the school. She born and brought up in Dhaka city. She has not got any children and her husband is a professor of emeritus at the University of Dhaka. She really tries to keep her busy with the disadvantaged working children

who are living in slum areas. She loves to think that these children are her own children and working for them is rewarding.

Comparisons between the case studies

The following table shows the key features of these three case studies for developing understanding the link between teachers' personal and professional lives.

Table-2: Comparison between three UCEP teachers

	Very positive and receptive	**Very negative and rejective**	**Positive without understanding**
School	Land dispute, small school building without any space, very little day-light and air circulation, noise from outside	Large school building with space in the middle, situated in overcrowded market place,	Management and mismatch, bit large school without any space, medium day-light and air circulation
Student	Relationship with students is very good	Relationship with students better	Relationship with students cordial and motherly
Community	Comparatively better working and living conditions	Poor working and living condition	Better working and living condition
Family	Husband, a son and a daughter. Her husband is a lawyer and work independently.	Wife and a daughter. His wife is working part-time in a hospital.	Husband and no children. Her husband is a professor at a university.
Home	Very closed to the school she is working. Two minutes walking distance.	Closed to the school he is working. Ten minutes walking distance from the school. He walks to and from school.	She is living in a posh area. Minimum one hour journey to and from school by bus and rickshaw.
Educational background an training	MSS, BEd	MCom, No teaching qualification	MSS, a month teacher training
Position and responsibilities	Assistant School Administrator	Teacher	Teacher
Career orientation	Focused career goal- want to go further in career ladder- motivated	Frustrated- want to go further in career ladder, but does not see any scope- demotivated	No goal- happy with present position-

Conclusion

To understand classroom practice of teachers, we need to understand their personal and professional lives as well as their school culture. Our understanding of the change process within an organisational setting, teachers need to be involved decision making as well as implementing

them. Therefore, there needs to be an effort to create 'space' for the teachers so that they can have enough time and motivation to participate fully in their professional development programme. As an intervention effort, EIA needs to create space for the teachers within school and around their professional life while they are working for the UCEP-Bangladesh to establish the fact that student-centred participatory methods, techniques and strategies are workable in different contexts of Bangladeshi school systems.

To bring changes in classroom practice in an organisational context, there should be a greater attention to incorporate EIA methods and techniques with the UCEP lesson plan and teacher evaluation system. As far the Bangladeshi education system is concern, it is more assessment focused, changes in classroom practice will be impossible without changing the assessment systems. However, as an intervention, EIA is helping UCEP-Bangladesh to introduce a new assessment in the UCEP schools. It is assumed that this example of the new assessment mechanism could push the mainstream education system to adapt it. The concrete example of changes assessment systems can help the EIA programme to develop an advocacy strategy for assessment change, backed by a very strong piloting experience with the UCEP schools.

There is a general impact on classroom practice from greater educational culture of spoon feeding in Bangladeshi schools. The teachers interviewed in Phase-I to Phase-III were expected that teaching and learning materials as well as the techniques for using them in the classroom contexts to be prescribed in their prepared lesson plans by their organization so that they can use them properly. There is also a blaming culture still in existence in Bangladeshi schools. Teachers' had many excuses for why they did not work as they were expected to. For instance, regarding using the iPod Touch the teachers expressed the following excuses:

- there was no charge in iPod;
- difficulties of not being able to stop it when it should be stopped;
- speakers were not working;
- sound from the speakers disturbing nearby classes;

Additionally teachers commonly complained that there was no material related in the iPod to the particular lesson which that teacher did that day.

The teachers perceived that the EIA intervention to be like other training programmes. Usually in other training programmes when a timeline for training is completed the training is over. Consequently he expects that he will not need to worry after the completion date of his involvement with the programme. He thinks that at the end of the year of training when he will have finished all 12 modules from the teacher guide he does not need to worry about using these things or experimenting with new ideas and techniques in his classroom.

This is a very common in human nature that we are excited about new things. In this case, using new methods and materials by using the iPod Touch was very exciting for the intervention teachers. However, when such a 'honeymoon stage' was over the teachers have reverted to their traditional methods, techniques and classroom practice. As a result the 'wow factor' disappeared and as we were busy with mainstream pilot intervention, we failed to boost the 'wow factor' to a certain level which would have enabled them to carry on. In the case of UCEP intervention, teachers are very busy with their everyday duties. They are engaged almost all day. It is important for the intervention teachers to have a 'space' around their personal and professional

lives so that they can sit down, do some work and think about what they were doing for their professional development as well as their students' learning.

I was bit shocked by the findings of the Phase-III fieldwork in the UCEP schools. Evidence suggests that the notion of the 'wow factor' needs to be viewed cautiously and efforts need to be taken to maintain teachers excitements in using the materials so they can remain motivated, engaged and empowered beyond the 'honeymoon stage'. I learned that when the 'honeymoon stage' is over and the 'wow factors' has gone, wider contexts of personal, social and institutional reality hinder the 'change process' and aspirations of individual teachers to make progress in their professional practices. By careful thinking and consultation with my data, I have now begun to understand that without 'creating space' for the teachers, no teachers' professional development initiative can work as too much external and institution pressure is faced by the teachers in their everyday lives.

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