

Purpose of Education from the Context of Urban Deprived Communities with a focus on People's Perceptions and Experiences

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Introduction

Universalization of education and the idea that all children should be in schools have overpowered most of us working in the field of education and development. The progressive ideas of the world have made schooling compulsory from the perspective of child rights. According to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, the broad aims of education are to develop in children independence of thought and action, sensitivity to others' well-being and their feelings and to help children learn to respond to new situations in a flexible and creative manner. Education also must develop in them a predisposition towards participating in democratic processes, in creative expression and a capacity for aesthetic appreciation as well as the ability to work towards and contribute to economic processes and social change.

As formal education brings into its ambit the groups who were hitherto surviving through their own mechanisms (the working class, adivasis, dalits and other marginalized groups), it is important to place the discourse on education in the context of their realities. A critical question is what 'education' really offers to the working class.

The Missing Voices in Education

There is a gap in education studies in India and elsewhere that examine how formal schooling is fitting into the lives of the working class with an absence of parents' and children's voices. Children's lives outside schools, their parents and communities have all been discussed largely as part of the problem of low learning and retention of children. Beatrice Avalos in 1987 touched upon community-teacher-student relationships briefly in an ethnographic study across four countries in Latin America. In India, studies have engaged with enrolments, retention issues, school infrastructure, learning levels, sometimes classroom processes, but have rarely engaged with issues of learners' lives and their community issues. Development interventions have also by and large limited the interface of community and education.

In this paper we explore the real purpose of education primarily from the lens of working class urban communities. We do this primarily by discussing the results of a research study conducted in the slums of Bhopal, to answer some important questions such as: What do the urban poor believe education will bring for their children? What does becoming 'educated' imply for people who have themselves not experienced 'schooling' but whose children are now being subsumed into the system. We also rely on direct observations of school experiences of children of urban poor backgrounds (gained through working with these children) to understand what schooling entails for children of marginalized communities.

A total of 228 adults and 154 children from 18 slums in Bhopal were interviewed in the mentioned study. The slums were selected on the basis of critical attributes of urban poverty (slum location, size, land rights, social groups, religion, occupations and disaster-affected) to be able to capture a range of realities and views.

Parent's/Adult's Perceptions about the Role of Education in their Lives

The educational background of the respondents was as follows - 65% of the 145 women and 46% of the 83 men interviewed had no experience of schooling; 18% of women and 23% of men had schooling under class 5. Despite having little schooling themselves, almost all these parents were sending their children to schools.

Here we present the responses of adults to direct questions such as – why they were educating their children, what did they feel 'education' would bring to their children's lives? We had also asked probing questions such as what they thought a person would get by studying.

We found that the parents associated education with different values. We have categorized their responses as below, along with examples in each category.

Education for Literacy

Parents often saw the school as the place where children would learn to read. Living in a city surrounded by a literate environment, many people recounted situations in their daily lives where they had themselves felt at a loss because of not being literate.

Bank ka khata kholne mein madad ho jaati hain. Pehle sign karna seekho, tab jakar khata khulta hain.
(man, Vishwakarma Nagar Basti)

Koe kagaz pada ho to abhi pada rehta hain. Kuch padhna aata to uthakar padh lete.
(woman, Manjhi Basti)

Court mein kaam aata hain. Udhari likhne mein kaam aata hain.
(man, Dholak Basti)

The need to read was voiced more predominantly than the need to write. Writing was considered necessary in their daily lives to note a phone number or a loan amount to document how much they owe.

There were many people who felt that education, especially numerical skills would have helped them in their work

Silae ka kaam karti hu; kitab mein naap nahi likh paati kyuki padhi likhi nahi hu. Badi dikkat hoti hain.
(woman, Vajpayi Nagar)

kabadi ka kaam karte hain. hum bhi hisaab to kar sakte hain lekin kabhi zarurat padti hain.
(man, Annu Nagar)

Agar padha likha hota, to achchi tarah se baat karke jari booti bech sakta. Kyuki jo bahut zyada padhe likhe hote hain, wo hamari baato ko samajh nahi paatein.
(man, Gond Basti)

These are not drastically big gains that people are hoping for through ‘education’. Upward mobility in jobs, even within the same skill, has been restricted because of literacy and numeracy, and they hope to overcome these hurdles. People have also perceived the value of education in functional terms.

Education to avoid the negative experience in asking another to read for you

Having to ask someone to read things out has been a demeaning experience for many. The interaction between the ‘non-literate’ and the ‘literate’ to help him/her out by reading out anything is marked by inequality. In the experience of those interviewed, the literate have used the skill of literacy as another tool to put down the marginalized, and be on the stronger side in the discussions, conveying to them a sense of ‘being lesser’ than the literate.

(Padhe likhe hote to) Kisi ki khudamad nahi karni padti; abhi kuch padhne likhne ka hota hain to dusre ka muh dekhna parta hain, kaun madad kar dega. (woman, Arjun Nagar)

Bus mein jaate samay sharm bhi mehsus hoti hain – poochna padta hain kaunsi number ki bus hain.
(woman, Gehukheda)

Unpadh jan se kahi bhi angutha lagwa lete hain. Batate bhi nahi hain ke kya likha hain.
Sub ke haath ped jorne padte hain. Jab angutha lagana padta hain, tab padhae ki bahut yaad aati hain.
(man, Indira Nagar)

By getting them an education, parents from many communities wanted to spare their children from these forms of rebuke suffered because of their own dependency on the literate.

Education to beat the fear

Many responses showed that people felt that their children would not feel diffident in front of an ‘educated’ person if s/he was able to gain formal education.

Padh likh jaenge to Char aadmi ke beech baatcheet kar sakte hain. Apni baat rakh sakte hain. Anpadh hone par thoda sankoch hota hain.
(woman, Jaatkhedhi)

subse zaruri baat hain, ke (Padhne likhne se) dur kum ho jata hain. Kisi dusre ka sunna nahi padega, hamare jaise kisi bhi baat ka dur nahi lagega. - (woman, Indira Nagar)

Dar khatm ho jaega. Phir kae kaam aasan ho jaenge. Hum kaam karte hain phir bhi paise maangne mein darte hain. Office mein badi himmat karke he andar jaate hain.
(man, Gautum Nagar)

In society, irrespective of one’s age or life-experience, a formally schooled person assumes confidence when s/he interacts with the poor. Field experiences show that many teenagers of

high-end schools feel sure of advising even middle-aged people much older than them, who have been surviving on the street for years, on how they can improve their lives. An otherwise timid middle-class person exhibits strength and coolness in their (limited) interactions with a person of a marginalized background. This confidence comes across in the ways a person relates to, or chooses not to engage with a person of a 'lower' socio-economic order. This 'confidence' creates an opposite effect on the other person.

The working classes in the cities living in the slums constitute those very communities (dalits, adivasis and Muslims) that have been marginalized through generations in the Indian society. In the present world-order, caste / class / religion biases are masked in the pretext of abilities and skills. It is thus seen that even the marginalized aspiring for dignity consider that the attitude of supremacy of the 'higher' classes can be challenged if they themselves acquire the abilities associated with schooling. At one level, this thought assumes a desire for equity, and a belief in it.

Education to imbibe the bourgeois culture

The school was seen as the place where children would learn to behave as the elite. Many felt that 'formal education' would bring a change in their culture and mannerisms.

Uthne bethne ka tareeka alag ho jata hain Kaam karne mein farak aata hain.
(woman, Bhadbada)

Padhna seekh jae, to baat theek se kar paenge; wo log alag tarah se sochte hain;
(woman, Balaji Nagar)

Sundar dikhte hain – sub padhe likhe log.
(woman, Gehukheda)

Ladhae jhagda kum karte hain. (woman, Gehukheda)

School jaate hain to unke taur-tareeke seekh jaate hain. (woman, Ahmedpur Basti)

In an urban area, the continuous interface of working class people with the elite has resulted in many experiences where the working class people are ridiculed for their ways. The deluge of corporate propaganda, television, press and the whole media, with images of the fair, the rich, the 'civilized' has seeped into people's lives. Subjected to disdain from the 'progressed middle class', there was a feeling of irrelevance and self-denigration directed towards oneself; the communities have learnt to accept the treatment meted out to them and blame themselves for this attitude, rather than to question this discrimination. In the absence of 'critical consciousness', the working class has also accepted the notion that aping the middle class culture will lead to them being accepted in society. In both overcoming a general diffidence as well as what they see as their limiting culture, school and thereby education is therefore perceived by many of these communities as a tool to build dignity and respect for oneself through a cultural change.

Education for choice and control

The interviews showed that it was widely thought that to some extent education would bring a semblance of control over their circumstances. The possibility of getting a job or choosing work because of being educated was brought up by parents in many of the interviews. Education, they felt, would also provide a way out of the drudgery of physical labour and having to submit to others (swallowing one's pride repeatedly day after day). It would also bring some economic benefits that would in turn improve the quality of their lives.

Agar padhe likhe hote, to kaam jaldi badal jata hain. (man, Vishwakarma Nagar)

*Mein nahi chahta ke jaise hum ghoom rahe hain, vaise wo bhi ghoomte. Dusre ke gharo mein kaam karna acha nahi lagta lekin majburi hain.
(woman, Gond Basti)*

*Anpadh insaan mazduri ke sawae kuch aur nahi kar sakta.
Paise ki baat nahi hain, shareer toot jata hain. Jab tak hath-pau chal rahe hain, tab tak theek hain. Kaam se laut rahe insaan se uski halat poocho. (man, Gandhi Nagar)*

Dusro ke liye kaam kar rahe to do baat bhi sunni padti hain; padhe likhe hote to sunna nahi padta.

(bucha ko) Dhoop mein nahi ghoomna padega, jaise inke abbu ghoomte hain.. (woman, Bluemoon colony)

*Humein bina galti ke he char baatein suna denge, par bade logo se galti par bhi nahi bol sakta.
(woman, Gehukheda)*

Hum to apne bucho ko achche school mein nahi padha sakte aur na unki saari zaruratein पूरी kar sakte hain, par yeh padh jaenge to apne bucho ki zaruratein to पूरी kar paenge. (woman, Arjun Nagar)

hamari tarah jhopri mein nahi rahenge; kabhi bhi ghar toot jae. (woman, Jaatkhedhi)

Padhae se jeevan mein khud ko lagega ke ha, main har nirnay ko le sakta hu.. (woman, Vajpayi Basti)

By and large, education was perceived as being able to bring in something different to the lives people were presently leading. There is a hope that situations will improve in some way by becoming part of the mainstream.

Zindagi badal jaegi (agar padh likh jaenge) - woman, Jaatkhedhi

woh (padhe-likhe log) gaadi se chalte hain; hum paidal chalte hain; man, Vishwakarma Nagar)

*padha likha insaan zamane ke hisab se pehle taiyar ho jata hain.
(woman, Krishna Nagar)*

Aajkal padhe likhe logo ka he zamana hain. (man, Sewania Gond)

Examining the above perceptions

People's beliefs about what education would (be able to) do for their children seems to be emerging from their own and their community's interactions with the middle class and the state. Surviving on a daily basis with meager resources, continuous experiences of rebuke and disrespect, insecurity of land and food, have led to a loss of own self-esteem amongst the marginalized communities. Living in the slums of a city, following migration and a disjoint from their traditional lives elsewhere, has probably further broken the sense of identity and social grouping. Social exclusion has been documented to be a critical dimension of poverty, impacting self-esteem of people.

This study (in Bhopal slums) also looked at parents' experiences in schools. Nine out of ten people said that they went to the child's school regularly, to either drop the child or because of some other issue such as to pay fees or to explain why their child had been absent for a few days. Two in three parents said they went to the school because they were called by the school. Complaints of children playing or talking in class, or not studying well were the main reasons for parents being called to the schools. It was also evident from the interviews that the parents felt that they had gone to the school to hear something from the teachers rather than share something of theirs. Across the survey, it was voiced that the teachers spoke more than the parents in any one to one conversation or in a meeting with teachers.

The present functioning of the state and the middle class has thus ensured that people lose their spirit. This can be seen in the content and attitude transmitted not just through the education system, but also the public distribution system, health systems, media and in the content and attitude of all interactions between the marginalized and the ruling class. A Bangladesh study found that most slum dwellers said that the rich do not regard them even as human beings.

Sadhna Saxena in her study on community participation in literacy 2003 has analyzed the character of the people's movement in the total literacy campaign. She refers to the statement of the first Director-General of the National Literacy Mission, 'such programmes would make learners perceive and internalize their plight and predicament, correlate that plight to illiteracy and innumeracy, and discover the wherewithal for liberation through literacy.' The literacy programme functioned within its boundaries, with an underpinning belief that illiteracy is the cause of the people's life conditions, and did not question the oppressive social, political and patriarchal structures.

The ruling class has thus succeeded in protecting itself by ensuring that marginalized people themselves blame their illiteracy, their ways of speaking, their culture, their number of children, their ways of life to be the cause of their deprivation and impoverishment.

Parents and communities have accepted that their lot can be improved only by aping the dominant classes. Becoming 'like' the ruling class is every individual's aspiration. There is a problem here - while it fulfills the emotional needs of a person to be accepted, it is against people's power, a critical consciousness. It furthers the objective of becoming an apt consumer in the market. But it does not give space to relate to the other and is an anti-thesis to questioning social inequities.

Another critical expectation from education (seen in earlier section) is the overcoming of fear. The confidence being sought here is not associated to the confidence emergent from knowing oneself, one's abilities and a pride in one's identity. In this case, it has been expressed as the desire for fearlessness to overcome the negativity imposed upon by those who have the power. It is another matter altogether that even after finishing school, many would become more submissive than earlier, and would not be treated with respect unless they belonged to a certain class and clout.

It can be seen that besides the aspect of functional literacy brought up in people's expectations from education, marginalized communities have voiced issues that should have been possible outside the ambit of education. If the 'schooled' were really 'educated', their responses to the marginalized would not be full of derogation and repression. People would not have had to look for school certificates to be respected as fellow human beings. When communities are sending their children to schools, it is primarily because they do not want their children to suffer the hardships they associate arising due to 'illiteracy', being 'unschooled' and 'poor'. Education has therefore been perceived more as a protection mechanism than an enabling tool.

Children's Experiences in Schools

It would be useful to briefly discuss real schooling processes and experiences to examine the possible objectives it is fulfilling.

As educationists, we are well aware that the schooling experience of thousands of children from diverse poverty situations has not been very positive. Nambissan (2000) has talked about studies in which children have been referred to as 'dullards', 'backwards' and 'uncivilized' by teachers. Sarada Balagopalan's study of adivasi children shows how overt discriminative practices are a result of a teacher's prejudices. Nine out of ten children in this study had suffered from physical violence in schools. The language used by teachers towards children from slums was also repressive. These discriminations get internalized in the psyche of both children and their parents. At very young ages, the child develops a sense of being a failure and of inadequacy in school. The child also loses interest in education and doesn't any longer trust the fact that 'formal education' exists for him/her.

If schools are considered social spaces to intermingle with children of other backgrounds, this also does not materialize for the urban poor as caste and social divisions persist within the school boundaries also. Even when all are coming from an urban poor background, only 17% children (boys more than girls) in this study had friends who were not living in their own bastis. Those who are 'socially more vulnerable' are often targeted by the others and insulted and humiliated because of their community identities. This seems to be the case in government schools as well as in small private schools. Such instances of discrimination in missionary schools and other larger private schools that run separate sections for the 'poor' were also mentioned.

Children further felt violated when the adults witnessing these scenes did not defend them. On the contrary, most times, the teachers carried a similar bias against a student (being ridiculed) giving more space for the other children to carry on the attack.

Interactions between girls and boys were discouraged from class 1. More than half the children said they never spoke to a child of the opposite sex, while about two out of five children said they spoke when they needed a book or wanted to exchange some school work. Ironically, teachers say that it is considered safe to seat a girl next to a boy during an examination as it is assumed that neither would help the other.

The author of this paper herself is of the opinion that in the absence of a positive socio-emotional-personal impact on a child, acquisition of literacy is not adequate reason for children to be in schools. Moreover, studies and field experiences continue to show the inability of the education system to facilitate learning of literacy itself. In the given time where schools are not able to deliver basic learning and have resorted to rote learning, acquisition of functional literacy (which has been considered important for the communities) does seem to be a challenge for many children. In another part of the interview, parents as well as children have vociferously defined a good school as a place which ensures learning.

The instrumentalist approach to education is achieved through meaningless exercises and activities in classrooms, a dumbing of senses, of curiosity, of enhancing competitiveness. Examples are plentiful in the teaching of subjects (mathematics, languages, science, social sciences, from grade 1 onwards), evaluation systems, expectation of reproducing facts and figures, depleting the creative potential of human mind. Textbooks are full of gender, caste and class biases. Children's lived experiences don't find a space in the classroom instead the children experience alien content which looks down on their lives and actively insults it. Change in textbooks and assessment systems will have only a minor impact until the class mindset against the marginalized communities are challenged in the present education structures.

Field experiences of this author's direct work in schools and slums have shown that happy and excited children tend to become more and more submissive as they are 'mainstreamed'. Writing becomes restricted to 'accepted knowledge' rather than intrinsic expressions. It takes several rounds of motivation and facilitation to have 'schooled' children draw out anything other than the national flag, pointed mountains or artificial looking flowers in a vase.

In contrast to education being a liberating process, Chomsky pointedly describes that mass education was designed to turn independent farmers into docile, passive tools of production. The freer the society gets, the more dangerous the great beast (namely the people) becomes and the more you have to be careful to cage it somehow.

Conclusions

The real purpose of education is in spirit and execution as far from the marginalized communities as it is from the schools. Is our education system gearing us towards social change and creativity? Is the state motivated for this?

For those of us who are concerned about the children of the working classes, it is taking us a long time to move from issues of access to quality in education. But is the term 'quality improvement' adequate?

Sadhna Saxena in her study of community participation has written:

“Can there be empowerment of people without disempowerment of the powerful elite? There is an inherent contradiction between the state and the community. The state and its patriarchal order stand exposed to some extent due to the existence of a non-funded, non-sponsored, threatened yet existent women’s movement. However, in the context of education, there has never been a strong counter-voice against the state forces.”

Is the real meaning of education an avoidable objective compared to schooling? Education cannot change many things to create a more just, equitable and humane world but it can contribute to this effort; or it can also be the tool for further enhancing class-division and become the basis for disregard and repression of people. Is civil society willing to take a stand?

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This article is based on the report (Insights on Education among the Urban Poor – A Case Study of Bhopal, Muskaan (2013)). For a complete list of references you may contact the author or the magazine editors.