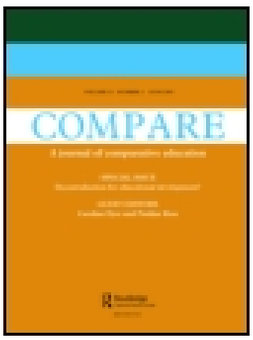

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Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education

ISSN: 0305-7925 (Print) 1469-3623 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccom20

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To cite this article: Stuart James Cameron (2016): Urban inequality, social exclusion and schooling in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, DOI: 10.1080/03057925.2016.1259555

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2016.1259555

COMPARE: A JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION, 2016
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2016.1259555

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Urban inequality, social exclusion and schooling in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper asks whether education is a viable route to better livelihoods and social inclusion for children living in poor urban areas in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It uses qualitative interviews with 36 students aged 11–16, living in slum and middle-class areas, and also draws on data from a larger, mixed-methods study to provide context. Many children from slums are excluded altogether from education, while others are incorporated into the system but on unfavourable terms. The paper identifies three principal ways in which this adverse incorporation can happen: through differential access to different types and quality of school; through obstacles that prevent children from poorer households from progressing through the system and reaching higher levels; and through subordinate power relations in the school, embodied in systems of assessment, labelling of students and discipline. These are likely to limit the potential for education to be a socially transformative institution.

KEYWORDS

Education; urban poverty; slums; inequality; Bangladesh; South Asia

1. Introduction

Urban poverty has risen on international development agendas in response to population trends that, to differing degrees, are taking place across the developing world: urban population growth and rural-urban migration result in lower overall poverty rates, but higher inequality and poverty within urban areas (Ravallion, Chen, and Sangraula 2007). Many of the urban poor live in extremely poor conditions, in informal settlements with limited access to services (Baker 2008). A small but growing literature has focused on the extent of educational disadvantage for children from poor urban households (Ejakait et al. 2011; Härmä 2016; Mugisha 2006; Tsujita 2013).

This paper explores the experiences in school of children living in Dhaka, Bangladesh, focusing on the types of disadvantage faced by students who live in slums. Around one-third of the population of Dhaka has been estimated to live in slums (CUS, Niport & Measure Evaluation 2006). Earlier research (Cameron, 2010, 2011) has shown how children living in these areas face multiple barriers in accessing education and have radically different prospects in education depending on their family's economic status, location and migration.

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That research suggested that, although inability to pay the expenses surrounding school and private tuition was the main reported reason for dropping out, there were also issues within the school that may have helped precipitate drop-out in some cases, including unfair treatment, corporal punishment, slow progress in learning and risks of violence and sexual harrassment, with an associated fear of damage being done to girls' reputations.

The present paper examines what happens inside the school in more depth. Much of the research on education in developing countries portrays the school as a black box, looking at inclusion or exclusion without considering what happens inside. For example, researchers have used production functions to analyse how inputs (money, teachers, students) translate into outputs (completers, examination scores, higher wages) (Jimenez and Cox 1989; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2002), or have looked at students' socioeconomic backgrounds to evaluate competing explanations for how growing class sizes may lead to worsening examination scores (Ahmed and Arends-Kuenning 2006). A substantial and growing literature has examined differences in learning outcomes between school types (e.g. ,Alcott and Rose 2016; Azam, Kingdon, and Wu 2016), which in the Bangladesh context includes a wide range of school types: government schools, registered non-government schools, private schools at a range of different fee levels, religious schools and non-governmental organisation (NGO)-operated schools (see, e.g., Asadullah and Chaudhury 2010; FMRP 2006; World Bank 2006). Classroom observation (e.g., Hossain et al. 2003) is one way of understanding what happens inside schools. But teaching practices are often examined through simplified categories such as time students spend listening to the teacher. Despite a growing concern for children's participation and citizenship (e.g., O'Kane 2003), relatively few studies in developing countries have talked to children themselves as a way of understanding what happens in schools.

This study draws on children's own accounts of school to understand how what happens in schools can lead to inequalities in outcome. The participants were children from both low-income and middle-class areas. Although there is some common ground in the experiences of the different groups, middle-class students bring with them the social and political resources to overcome problems in school, including the ability to change school if necessary, while students from slum areas are made constantly aware of the precariousness of their inclusion in the education system.

Section 2 explains how the ideas of social exclusion and adverse incorporation can help to frame different forms of educational disadvantage. Section 3 briefly describes the methods used in this study and the participants. Section 4 examines the ways that children from slum areas can be excluded from school altogether, while Sections 5, 6 and 7 examine different ways that they can be included in the education system, but on unequal terms. Section 8 concludes.

2. Linking education, livelihoods and exclusion

In advocacy for educational expansion, drawing on the returns to education and related literature (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2002), education is often portrayed as a route out of poverty for poor and marginalised groups in developing countries. Against this, a large literature, largely from developed regions, portrays education as a mechanism for social reproduction (see Weis, Jenkins, and Stich 2009), maintaining inequalities across generations rather than doing anything to transform them. This paper suggests that a way through

these competing visions is to ask two different sorts of question when describing how children from marginalised urban households are deprived of meaningful education: how are they *excluded* from educational institutions and on what terms are they *included*?

Denial of access to education can readily be seen as a form of social exclusion – a way in which people can be alienated or shut out by the monopolisation of scarce resources by more advantaged groups (see Davis 2011). But not all processes through which people can be disadvantaged can be cast easily in terms of inclusion versus exclusion, and social exclusion approaches have been accused of ignoring the ways in which inclusion can be 'problematic, disempowering or inequitable' (Hickey and du Toit 2007, 3; see also Davis 2011; Dyer 2012). As Beall (2002) argues, social exclusion *can* signal a focus on 'causes of poverty and inequality as well as outcomes' and encourage 'exploration of macro-micro linkages' but when applied in practice has often ignored the question 'inclusion in what, on whose terms and in whose interests' (14).

The idea of adverse incorporation (Bracking 2003; Wood 2000) is useful in such circumstances to describe the ways that marginalised groups can be included – in state provision, civil society, markets – but in ways that disadvantage them; the terms of their incorporation are unfavourable. It is helpful to think in terms of *both* exclusion and adverse incorporation in relation to educational institutions in developing countries. As Hickey and du Toit (2007) explain, there are a number of processes that can be described using either type of language, and social exclusion approaches can be useful, for instance, when they focus explicitly on institutional processes and social practices giving rise to exclusion, as in Kabeer (2000). Indeed, education researchers and campaigners have sought to frame the position of children who are in school but not learning, well as 'silent' or 'hidden' exclusion (Lewin 2007; Save the Children 2013), emphasising that children can be included in the formal education system in a bureaucratic sense – registered and attending at least some of the time – yet still excluded from the valued outcome. In the context of urban Bangladesh, Blanchet's (1999) work evokes links between social exclusion and school, describing how middle-class families see slum dwellers as outside of society (*samaj*) and expect schools to keep children within the moral bounds of society and honour by containing them and protecting them from the threatening and uncontrolled urban environment outside.

Focusing on the ways in which children from different types of background are incorporated into schooling, in the context of international drives to extend access to all, pushes towards a greater consideration of what happens inside schools in terms of pedagogy, assessment and relationships. Social exclusion and inclusion on unfair terms can operate both *through* education – for instance, where literacy or qualifications govern one's terms of inclusion in civil society, politics or labour markets – and *within* education. In order to maintain their inclusion in a system governing access to jobs as well as social prestige, poor urban people may submit themselves to, and legitimate, the institutional rules under which better-off groups can maintain their long-term economic advantage.

To understand how adverse incorporation can work in education it is important to see schooling as an institution, which, following Leach, Mearns and Scoones (1999), I define as 'regularised patterns of behaviour that emerge from underlying structures or sets of "rules in use"' (238). The school system is based on a set of working rules that governs its behaviour, defines it and gives it meaning. Those rules will depend on whether schooling is a public service for everyone, a business run for profit or a charitable act for the poor; and also on whether education is seen as a right, a commodity or a privilege. Different individuals,

households and social groups are accorded different rights with respect to institutions like education in a way that reflects the interests vested in those institutions. The institutional rules actually in use are often 'unruly' (Kabeer 2000) – reflecting local interests and power relations as well as, or instead of, the norms defined at national or global level.

These institutional rules govern how the resources children and their families bring to school – money, time, support from parents, the social and cultural standing needed to feel confident in talking to teachers – translate into learning outcomes. Households may invest in education to try and strengthen their future livelihoods by using a part of their present portfolio of assets, including time and money (see Rakodi 2002), but educational investment is limited by the amount of resources the household possesses and by other pressing demands on those resources, such as to pay for food and healthcare. Investment in education may involve conscious strategising in the hope of improving future livelihoods, but may also develop within a livelihoods 'style' consisting of 'a specific cultural repertoire composed of shared experiences, knowledge, insights, interests, prospects and interpretations of the context; an integrated set of practices and artefacts … a specific ordering of the interrelations with markets, technology and institutions; and responses to policies' and defined by social class and structural constraints (De Haan and Zoomers 2005, 40).

The social reproduction literature (Bernstein 1975; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976) draws attention to ways in which students can find themselves disadvantaged in schooling, depending on the financial, social and cultural resources they and their families can bring to it. More recent work in sociology describes how students' identities as learners can be dominated by the labels applied by others (see Lee and Anderson 2009; Sfard and Prusak 2005), while parallel – if theoretically divergent – work in psychology has examined how students' 'self-efficacy' (Schunk 1985) or their self-perceptions and ideas about others' perceptions of them (Hoff and Pandey 2004) affect their motivation and performance in academic tasks.

Some of these processes may be better described as exclusionary, others as unfair forms of inclusion. They include teaching, curriculum and assessment that favour some students over others; the relationships between teachers and students, possibly reflecting differences in power and status beyond the classroom; and ways that students are labelled by teachers and other students. Acts of negotiation or resistance by students may be able to disrupt these processes, or may ironically end up reinforcing them (as in Willis 1977). Do the accounts of children in Dhaka resonate with the largely Western literature on reproduction of inequalities in education? In the following sections I briefly describe the methods used in the study before applying the perspectives discussed above to analyse children's descriptions of their lives in school.

3. Methods and participants

This study is based on interviews and focus group discussions with 36 students (19 female and 17 male), aged 11–16 and living in Dhaka, in 2012. The participants were drawn from three groups: groups A (9 participants) and B (10 participants) lived in two different slum areas, while group C (17 participants) were from various middle-class areas. The participants attended a variety of school types, depending on which group they belonged to (Table 1). Interviews were conducted in Bengali and English by the author with a Bangladeshi research assistant, producing detailed written notes and audio recordings. The notes were analysed

Table 1. School type and characteristics of participants.

	Group		
	A (slum)	B (slum)	C (middle class)
Government primary	3	–	–
Government secondary	–	–	2
Private primary	1	2	3
Private secondary	2	8	12
Registered non-government	1	–	–
Non-governmental organisation	2	–	–
Mean age	12.4	13.6	13.1
Mean grade	5.2	6.7	7.3

thematically using a coding system based on 11 domains in which possible barriers to learning or differences between slum and middle-class students were anticipated.[1] The audio recordings were used to provide verbatim quotations of particularly illustrative points. The aim is not to achieve generalisability to other historical and social contexts, but to make warranted assertions (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004) about the participants in order to map some of the forms of disadvantage, marginalisation and exclusion within Dhaka's schools experienced by children from different backgrounds, and understand how these arise. I add context using a larger study of 1600 households in four slums in Dhaka conducted in 2008 (Cameron, 2010, 2011, 2013).

4. Exclusion

The Bangladesh school system involves five years of primary education, with children officially entering at six years old, and seven years of secondary education.[2] Only primary education is compulsory (UIS, n.d.). There are a bewildering 13 types of primary school, although a large majority of primary students in the country as a whole are in either government or registered non-government primary schools. Some schools, particularly in the private sector, have both primary and secondary grades, while government schools usually offer primary and secondary grades in separate establishments. Secondary education is mainly provided in privately managed schools, but the majority of these schools are 'government-aided', receiving most of their funding directly from the government but charging tuition and other fees for the remainder (see Chaudhury et al. 2004).

School enrolments in Bangladesh as a whole grew rapidly in the 1990s, although it is not clear if that progress was sustained in the 2000s. The assumption often made that educational access is better in urban than in rural areas no longer appears to hold in Bangladesh; in both rural and urban areas the most optimistic estimates suggest that around 14% of children remain out of primary school (NIPORT, Mitra and Associates, & Macro International 2009; UNICEF 2010).[3] There is a bottleneck at the transition between primary education, which is free in government or NGO schools, and secondary education, where both government and private schools charge fees; many children are also enrolled over-age in primary school and many drop out during the earlier grades of secondary school. The result is secondary school attendance rates no higher than around 50% (UNICEF 2010).

As in other areas of life – such as housing, work and access to electricity or water (Baker 2007; Grant 2010) – people residing in slums have difficulty making claim to government

or officially sanctioned services, and instead rely on informal channels such as NGO schools and unrecognised private secondary schools, where continuity of provision is not assured. (Private schools not officially recognised by the government's regulatory bodies are of varying quality and costs, but their unrecognised status puts them at a disadvantage particularly when it comes to entering students for public examinations.) A large proportion of the out-of-school children in urban areas live in slum areas, which accounts for around one-third of the population of Bangladesh's major cities. The slum population is thought to have doubled between 1996 and 2005 (CUS, Niport & Measure Evaluation 2006), and school attendance rates in slums are only 65% at primary and 18% at secondary level (UNICEF 2010). Exclusion from school among poor urban children in Dhaka is determined by households being unable to muster the needed financial, social and cultural resources, and by shortfalls in both government and non-government provision. An earlier (Cameron, 2013) study of four slums found lower enrolment and educational expenditure among households that were less wealthy, had fewer social connections, were recent migrants or had lower parental education.

Child work may also be a factor preventing access to education, although the evidence is mixed on the extent of it. Baker (2007), using data from 2000, finds that 20% of children aged 5–14 in Dhaka were working, and in the poorest households with child workers, child earnings represented around one third of total income. More recent sources (UNICEF 2010) have reported lower levels of child labour, especially among younger children.[4]

In the present study a few of the children had been working, mostly at tea stalls, as domestic workers or in the garment industry. Some children worked in their own small businesses, such as selling stickers from a stall, while some, particularly girls, had to spend time helping their mothers with domestic chores. Work and higher study were not necessarily incompatible; for instance Mukti[5], a grade 10 student, was able because of her education to offer private tuition to young children. But for some children there was a direct relationship between their work and absence from school. For example, Samir missed school as a result of his work and avoided or ignored the admonishments of his father and teachers:

> Teachers beat Samir because he misses classes. Samir intentionally works in a tea stall of his own choice. His father asks him not to work in the tea stall and to go to school but he doesn't listen to him. If Samir sees any teacher on the road he pretends not to see them. – Mona

The participants could also give many examples of peers who had left school to work. For example, Mona's sister dropped out of school at grade 8 because her father was ill and they needed her to earn money; she went to work in a garment factory. While in some cases a direct causal link was made from insufficient income to parents asking a child to leave school and work, in other cases children chose to work despite their parents' wishes, and some left school for other reasons prior to starting work.[6]

On the supply side, there appeared to be far too few government school classrooms in Dhaka to cater to the number of students, and there was little government provision in or near some of the slums in the earlier study. There are serious constraints to delivering services such as education in slums, including a lack of policy providing specifically for the urban poor; frequent evictions of slum residents by government or landowners; and the role of criminal gang leaders in controlling what people can do in the slums (Rashid and Hossain 2005). Government is often unwilling to take account of households who are residing in an area illegally; but the insecurity of land tenure in slums and constant possibility of eviction also creates problems for NGOs, who stand to lose their investment if they set up permanent

structures such as schools. Teachers employed locally may also have to move in the event of an eviction. Ultimately, these problems can be seen as symptoms of the lack of political power of poor urban households (see Banks, Roy, and Hulme 2011).

As well as being at greater risk of being excluded altogether from education, children from slum areas are often incorporated into the system but on unfavourable terms. The present study identifies three principal ways in which this could happen: through differential access to different types and quality of school; through obstacles that prevent children from poorer households from progressing through the system and reaching higher levels; and through subordinate power relations in the school, embodied in systems of assessment, labelling of students and discipline. The following three sections use participants' accounts to illustrate how each of these mechanisms can work to place students living in slum areas at a disadvantage.

5. School types, quality and differential access

The lack of government provision in slum areas has led to heavy reliance on NGOs and private schools. Around one-third of the children in the earlier Dhaka slum study were attending NGOs at the primary level, and around 10% were in private schools. Earlier studies have found that learning outcomes, controlling for children's backgrounds, may be better in NGO schools than government schools in Bangladesh (World Bank 2006). According to parents in the present study, NGO schools had the advantage of being cost-free and generally seen as good quality, but for the most part they only offered a condensed primary cycle. Perhaps for this reason, as well as because they explicitly target disadvantaged children, they were seen as schools for the poorest. Even within slum areas – often seen as homogenously poor by outsiders – there was a degree of social stratification into different school types, with the poorest attending NGO schools and the richest in private schools. Where government schools were available, they were used by a broader cross-section of students. As well as this variation by wealth or income, those with better social connections and more highly-educated parents were more likely to be in private schools and less likely to be in NGO schools (Cameron 2011).

In the present study, middle-class students (group C) were in a mixture of government and government-aided private secondary schools, generally paying much higher fees than the two groups living in slum areas. The children in the slum areas were diverse: children from the first slum area (A) were mostly in a government primary school, an NGO school or in relatively cheap private secondary schools. In the other slum area (B) there were no government schools nearby or NGOs with secondary grades, so the students were all in private schools, and had mostly been to NGO schools for their primary grades.

Affordability and distance were among the main reasons behind parents' choices of school. Parents from all three groups expressed their unwillingness to send their children long distances to school. There are both safety and (for girls, especially) reputational issues connected to sending a child a long distance, and a time problem caused by severe traffic jams. Earlier studies have shown that a perceived risk of harassment on the way to school, which would result in damage to girls' and the family's reputation, is a major concern for parents (Raynor 2005). Travel within slums can be difficult due to flooding and poor roads, and dangerous particularly for girls (Baker 2007; CUS, Niport & Measure Evaluation 2006; Rashid 2004). Unsurprisingly, affordability dominated the choices of parents from slum

areas. For example, Sohana's parents tried to bargain with the school over the fees of around US$3 per month, which they had great difficulty paying.

These schools offered very different learning environments to students from different backgrounds. At the secondary level, the differences are not best conveived of in terms of a private-public division, as a wide range of quality exists within both sectors, not to mention the NGO sector. The main dividing line, within this complex range of possible schooling experiences, is arguably that between larger, longer established schools on the one hand, and smaller schools with less developed infrastructure on the other. The former are usually not located in slum areas, although they can be found nearby; may be either private or government-run; and sometimes have impressive facilities such as laboratories and computer rooms. The latter category includes the cheap private schools and some NGO schools found in slums, operating out of small buildings or apartments rather than purpose-built school buildings.

However, it was not always clear that the former category of schools necessarily offered better learning opportunities. They often had very high pupil-teacher ratios of 65 or more, while the smaller private and NGO schools typically had classes of 30 students or fewer. They were preferred partly for their location, history and for serving students from a 'civilised' (*shobho*) family background, rather than better quality of learning and teaching, *per se*. As will be described below, in order to be sure of passing examinations, middle-class parents had to supplement their children's schooling extensively with private tuition.

6. Progress through education and drop-out

The second way in which inclusion could be on adverse terms for students from poorer backgrounds was in the institutional rules governing progress through the system. The adolescent participants in this study were already hampered by their different prior experiences of primary education. Many children in urban Bangladesh appear to reach the end of primary grades with quite limited ability to read and write. It has been suggested that the rapid growth in primary enrolments was associated with a worsening in learning outcomes in Bangladeshi schools. Chowdhury, Nath and Choudhury (2003) report that the proportion of children nationally aged 11–12 achieving basic learning competency was generally low (30% nationally), and lower for girls than boys, especially in urban areas. Chowdhury et al. attribute the drop in urban achievement to increases in slum populations and failure of educational facilities to keep pace with population growth; primary teachers' subject knowledge may also be insufficient (FMRP 2006).

For students from slum areas, learning time was reduced by their occasional or regular absence from class. Some students apparently avoided classes because they were unprepared, did not have the correct uniform or arrived late. A few were working; in other cases, they had gone to their home towns, or simply did not want to go to all of their lessons, preferring to play or 'roam around' (*ghure berano*). Some students from the slum areas had left school for periods of several months to spend time in their families' villages or because their families had financial problems. Students whose attendance or performance in school was poor were often avoided by other students, a process that may have hastened their alienation and eventual drop-out from school:

> If students miss their class then the teacher asks the reason. But if they are late they don't come to school. They stay at home. There are two or three students who come one day then don't come for two or three days.
>
> [Is there anyone who misses class often?]
>
> Yes there is a one boy who doesn't come. He is very irregular. He plays cricket throughout the day.
>
> [Is he your friend?]
>
> No I am not friends with him. We do not talk to him. If we talk to him he invites us to go to the playground. (Rashid, B)

High-stakes examinations were the key mechanism governing students' progress through the school system. They drove movements between schools, shaped the type of learning that was delivered in schools and shifted a large part of the burden for ensuring academic progress onto households' own resources. Examinations required students to memorise and repeat large numbers of set pieces of text, and so involved a form of intensive, repetitive learning that could not easily be achieved within the relatively short hours of active teaching. Lessons were based around presenting material to be memorised, and understanding was limited to that required to answer examination questions (exactly the situation described in Blanchet 1999). Learning in schools was detached from students' lives and placed no value on knowledge gained outside the school. Formative assessment – assessment that takes place during the learning process and is focused on providing feedback to teachers and learners – is thought to be instrumental in improving learning outcomes (Black and Wiliam 1998; Harlen and Deakin Crick 2002). For these students, however, assessment was largely summative – concerned chiefly with awarding certificates and the distribution of further education opportunities.

Students and their families had to ensure that the material was covered, through private tuition or with help from family members. Notwithstanding the hard work that some teachers put into preparing students for tests, in general it was seen as the student's own responsibility to prepare for each class by learning the previous lesson, complete the syllabus and pass tests. Consequently, outcomes were heavily influenced by the amount of support that students could draw on at home:

> If the students do not finish their syllabus then teachers tell them, the exam is coming. You have to study at home to complete the syllabus. You have to do well in the exam. … If they don't do well then they call the guardians and tell them your son couldn't finish the syllabus. (Sharif, A)
>
> In our school we have to work hard. We have to study ourselves. Our teachers do not play any role. If we follow our teacher's guidance we cannot do well. We have to make our own effort to do well in exams. We can get very little help from our teachers. Most of the schools are like that. (Nadia, C)

As in previous studies (Ahmed et al. 2005; Cameron, 2010), most students had private tuition. It was often recommended by teachers and in some cases was nearly compulsory. Participants from slum households needed private tuition partly because their homes were prone to heat and power cuts, making it hard for them to study. In private tuition they also had opportunities to ask questions beyond what was possible in class, resonating with the view expressed by parents in Nath's (2008) study that private tuition is an outcome of schools not delivering.

Although private tuition was near-universal, students in groups A and B usually had only one source of private tuition, while those from middle-class areas often rushed between two or three, each with a different specialisation. They spent more, and presumably were able to access a better quality of tutor. They were thus much better prepared for high-stakes examinations, the results of which could be crucial in determining future life outcomes. While recent changes to national curriculum had tried to introduce more 'creative learning', and this was mentioned by a few middle-class students (not always in positive terms), there was no pretence of having made such a shift in the schools attended by students from slum areas.

Most NGOs working in education in Bangladesh have long emphasised the creative and child-centred nature of their curricula and teaching methods. Students who had been through NGO schools said they had enjoyed aspects such as greater use of story books, group learning activities and caring teachers. But on the other hand one NGO school was appreciated especially because of its emphasis on examinations; its teachers worked particularly hard in the run-up to examinations, and students were proud that they and their classmates were among the highest-scoring in public examination centres. High stakes examination appears to be quite strongly embedded as the institutional mechanism governing progress through the education system, and is resistant to attempts by individual agents to change it.

Six of the participants in this study were graduates of a UNICEF-supported programme, 'Basic Education for Hard-to-Reach Urban Working Children' (HTR), which ran from 1997 to 2012 and provided informal education with a shortened (two-and-a-half hours) school day so that children could continue to work (Barkat et al. 2010; Cameron 2002; UNICEF, n.d.). This programme had met their needs for primary education that would fit in with their working schedules, but their transitions to higher stages of education were far from straightforward. Students were unable to sit the primary completion examination in the HTR school and so had entered private schools to do so, which sometimes meant repeating grade 5. Hassan had joined another NGO school but left after some time because it was too far away, and eventually entered a private school at grade 4; when we interviewed him he was repeating grade 5. He had thus not made any actual progress for several years. Sohana's progression through the grades was also taking a long time; she had been sent back to grade 3 upon entering the private school, because she was perceived as having low ability. She had been held back further because she was suspended when her parents were unable to pay school fees. Many of their peers had apparently finished their education and started working.

For other participants living in slums, too, transitions between schools were not easy, with the risk of dropping out or repeating grades. Some had been to other NGO schools but failed the primary school completion exam, and were made to return to earlier grades. Entry to private schools – which usually covered both primary and secondary grades – was a response to a lack of government secondary schools and problems following examination failure. Others had to switch schools in examination years (grades 5, 8 and 10) because unrecognised private schools were not usually able to enter their students for public examinations.

7. Power and relationships in the school

The third way in which students from poorer backgrounds are disadvantaged within the education system is through power relationships within the school. Slum households are likely to be in a subordinate position when it comes to their relationship with mostly middle-class school teachers and headmasters. Institutions of public accountability are generally

weak for the urban poor in Bangladesh (Baker 2007; World Bank 2001), and past studies have found that parents feel uncomfortable and embarrassed about interacting with the school because of their own lack of education (SIDA Bangladesh 2010), or have difficulty judging the quality of teaching and learning practices in the school (Ahmed et al. 2005). Teachers in the latter study said that first-generation learners often lost interest in school, and that these children were likely to be verbally and physically abused for lagging behind and 'not behaving properly'. Parents also felt that teachers had a bias in favour of children of the well-off, and told their children in some cases that they should leave school because they did not have the 'brain' to study (Ahmed et al. 2007, 38). Similarly, in the 2008 slum study some families reported discriminatory treatment of children from slums both by teachers and in the form of bullying by other students (Cameron, 2011). More broadly, social differences between teachers and students may affect teachers' motivation and attitudes towards children (e.g., Dee 2005; Rawal and Kingdon 2010).

The present study identifies a number of ways in which the broader social position of children from marginalised urban groups reaches inside the classroom, influencing relationships and the rules in practice of the school as an institution. The examination system is again central to this process. As has been argued in developed country studies, high-stakes testing ends up defining many aspects of students' school lives, to the extent that other educational objectives fall by the wayside. Teachers tend to emphasise transmission of knowledge in a way that favours some students over others, especially through effects on the self-esteem of lower achieving students (Hall et al. 2004; Harlen and Deakin Crick 2002; Reay and William 1999).

For the participants in the present study, examination and test results did not just affect progress through the system, but were kept salient at all times through labelling and positioning of students within the class, shaping the day-to-day interactions among students and teachers. Students were assigned 'roll numbers' based on their aggregate performance in the previous year's annual exams, which then influenced seating, treatment by teachers and division of the grade into sections in larger schools. Students repeating a grade were labelled as failed, using the English word 'fail' or sometimes *kharap kora* (to do badly). In sociological terms, these labels can be understood as dominating students' learner identities (see Sfard and Prusak 2005), while in psychological terms they can be seen as reducing students' self-efficacy (see Hoff and Pandey 2004). In either account, the result is likely to be reduced future academic performance.

Socialisation with failed students was seen as risky, as if their failure could be contagious. For slum students there was the added risk of being influenced by local children who had dropped out or who did not take their studies seriously, a fear that appeared to be driving a divide between parents in the community. Parents were acutely aware of the potential effects of the environment on their children:

> I don't socialise with my neighbors and nor do my children. I don't allow them to socialise with neighborhood kids. They don't study. They are not serious about their school. If they [my children] do [socialise with neighbourhood kids] they can get spoilt. (Rashid's mother, B)

> If children live in a good environment, they become good human beings. (Rashid's father, B)

Students were also sorted within the classroom through the appointment of students as 'class captains' charged with overseeing the behaviour of the others when the teacher was not present and with tasks such as handing out exercise books. Class captains were appointed

variously based on their roll number, performance in a particular class, the teacher's discretion and by a class vote. The class captain system created a direct meritocratic link between academic performance and power in the classroom, casting the worse-performing students as responsible for their own powerlessness. Being class captain conferred a closer relationship with the teacher and was seen as an honour, but it was also seen as divisive and creating conflict between students.

In one school, the head teacher had gone a step further in his surveillance efforts, installing a closed circuit television (CCTV) camera at the front of the classroom, allowing him to monitor the class from his office. His feelings about this parallel those of the participant in the UK study by Archer, Hollingworth and Mendick (2011), who felt that CCTV made his school feel 'like a prison' (27):

> There was a CC [closed circuit] camera in our class. Our classmates were very naughty. They used to fight, roam around, skive … I feel bad about it. I was very worried all the day. If I make any mistakes the head teacher would see it. Now every class has the camera. (Kabir, B)

Kabir's friend later sabotaged the camera. The consequences were severe; he was beaten in front of his parents, and did not come to school for several weeks afterwards.

In managing their classes, teachers also made use of violent and humiliating punishments. In previous research, 91% of children in Bangladeshi schools reported physical punishment (UNICEF 2009). In the present study, teachers in almost every school, whether private, government or NGO-run, reportedly beat students using a bamboo stick or ruler, or slapped them. Some students would reportedly be beaten or otherwise punished by the teacher on a repeated or even daily basis. Such students were also ostracised by other students, and their behaviour was associated with failure, grade repetition and the risk of expulsion. Violence inside and outside of school was a problem for students from both slum and middle-class backgrounds in this study, but past research has shown how the situation is worse for students from slums (Kabeer and Mahmud 2009; Rashid and Hossain 2005; UNICEF 2009).

Each of these ways in which students from slum households were included on adverse terms in the education system could eventually lead to early drop-out and exclusion. Past studies have documented how difficulty in lessons and dislike of schools can precipitate drop out (Ahmed et al. 2007; SIDA Bangladesh 2010) and parents may have little control over this (Kabeer and Mahmud 2009). Withdrawal and covert forms of resistance (see Ray 1988) may have been natural responses to lessons that students could not follow and in which they had no control. But even these behaviours put them at risk of failing examinations and consequently dropping out or being lastingly labelled as failures. Students from poor households had few support mechanisms in case they were doing badly and, unlike middle class students, could not take it for granted that they would pass their secondary school certificates (SSCs) one way or another. As Sohana's (group B) grandmother explained, 'We want her to study up to matric [SSC] if she has it in her fate. If she cannot do it then we will not send her to school.'

8. Conclusion

This paper examined what 11–16-year-olds living in slum and middle-class areas in Dhaka had to say about their experiences in school. It aimed to identify processes within the school that would support or undermine the possibility of education being a route out of poverty

by placing students from slums on an equal footing or at a disadvantage relative to their peers from better-off families.

Participants mostly studied a common curriculum, with learning overwhelmingly geared towards assessment. Relationships between teachers and students varied from the supportive to the abusive, with beating and humiliating punishment commonplace in all types of school. There was little sense of being able to discuss a child's education with teachers or to hold schools or teachers to account. These aspects were found in both slum and middle-class areas. However, there were at least three ways in which students from slums are included in the education system on terms that may be unfavourable for them.

First, they attend different sorts of school. The difference is not simply one of public versus private sectors, but for the most part, secondary school students from slum areas were attending relatively cheap, fully private schools, while those from middle-class backgrounds were attending more expensive government and government-aided schools. This was reflected in large differences in terms of their size, facilities and location, although it is not clear that the quality of learning and teaching was much better in the middle-class schools.

Second, progress to the higher levels of the education system is governed by institutional rules that favour some students over others. Parental support, particularly through private tuition and coaching, was centrally important to students' learning and examination results. Middle-class families also had the resources to change schools strategically, and often used these options in response to academic or non-academic problems their children were facing. Families living in slums also strategised about their children's education, but over a much more limited range of options, determined by affordability and proximity. In both contexts common livelihood styles set a high priority for education, but the resources that can be assigned to education ultimately lead to very different probabilities of success.

Third, local power relations cross the boundary of the school and shape relationships among students and teachers in ways that adversely affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This happened through in-school tests and public examinations, and the various ways that students' performance was kept salient afterwards. Students who initially struggled were enduringly labelled as failures and in some cases excluded from class or stigmatised by teachers or other students, reducing their scope for improvement. This is likely to have been particularly detrimental for first-generation learners and those whose families were not able to support them with private tuition and other help outside school. Previous slum studies have found self-reported adult literacy rates around 40% (Cameron, 2011), suggesting that many children are the first generation in their family to attend school.

Through these processes, students from poorer backgrounds were kept in a precarious position with regard to their educational inclusion, echoing the precarious relationship of the urban poor to other aspects of the public life of the city, including water, sanitation, electricity, secure tenure and labour markets (see Baker 2008; Grant 2010). Reaching a level where they could obtain valued qualifications or useful learning was far from assured. To what extent do these processes apply more widely, reproducing inequalities in urban Bangladesh? Taking the results of this study in combination with larger-scale studies gives some indication. The shifting of responsibility for learning from schools onto the students themselves and their families appears to be a widespread phenomenon, judging by the common use of private tuition found in previous studies (Ahmed et al. 2005; Nath 2008). Earlier survey research has shown how the educational options open to a household depends

on the range of resources – money, influence and education – it has, and how households in slums possess these in very short measure (Cameron 2013; Baker 2007; World Bank 2001). Ahmed et al. (2007) has described how first-generation learners often lose interest in school, lag behind and are labelled by teachers as incapable of learning.

There has recently been renewed attention within education and international development to quality and learning outcomes (UNICEF 2013), and the argument that the benefits of education in terms of national and individual development will only be achieved if learning outcomes are sufficiently strong (Hanushek and Woessmann 2008). This represents a shift towards greater focus on what is happening within schools when children enter education, going beyond mere access. But there is a danger that the emphasis on quality and learning outcomes can still obscure the more complicated business of how inequalities play out in the classroom to marginalise or put at a disadvantage certain groups. It is hoped that the current study shows the value of using children's perspectives to look at processes within the school, and using theoretical approaches that can bring out both exclusion and inclusion on adverse terms, linking schooling to the broader economic, social and political context.

Is education likely to provide a route out of poverty for poor urban households? It is clear from this and previous studies that there is high demand for education among families living in slums. Parents and children have high aspirations and, despite being severely constrained in their resources, are willing to devote a large share to education. In line with a global trend of 'more relatively-poor people in a less absolutely-poor world' (Chen and Ravallion 2012, 1), high demand for education may contribute to economic growth and to lowering absolute poverty, while the large and growing potential for differentiation in an education system that leans heavily on private provision and is strongly segmented by wealth and location, may provide a channel through which inequality is maintained or worsened.

Notes

1. These domains were: school environment, teacher presence, teaching methods, classroom management, teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, student emotional reactions to interaction in the class, curriculum, assessment, student motivation, homework and private tuition. See Cameron (2012) for further description and the full codings.
2. The seven years is further divided into three stages: lower-secondary (grades 5–8), secondary (grades 9–10) and higher-secondary (grades 11–12). Higher secondary is sometimes offered in separate establishments known as intermediate colleges.
3. Official primary net enrolment rates are, at the time of writing, only available for 1970–1990 (see UIS n.d.; UNESCO 2012).
4. However, the MICS survey only asks about work for someone who is not a member of the same household, and so excludes household chores or work for a parent's business, and the measure also excludes children who combine school and work.
5. All names have been changed.
6. SIDA Bangladesh (2010) similarly argues that children drop out of school because they do not like it or are failing, rather than for economic reasons.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written as part of a research fellowship at UNICEF's Office of Research at Innocenti during March-November 2012. I am extremely grateful to Hafsa Rahman who worked as research assistant for this project. I am also very grateful to the UNICEF Bangladesh office, and especially Nabendra Dahal, Shamima Siddiky, Shamima Pervin and Nuzhat Khalil Haque for advice and

practical help. I am also grateful to Karen Moore, Mahruf Shohel, Benjamin Zeitlyn, and Christy Sommers, Altaf Hossain, and Mohammad Abul Kalum for valuable discussion and advice; to Chris de Neubourg and other colleagues at Innocenti for support and discussion; and to Ian MacAuslan and other colleagues at Oxford Policy Management for suggestions in revising the paper. Any errors and omissions are my own.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by a fellowship from the UNICEF Office of Research.

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