

“Less is not Enough” Dilemma of Alternative Primary Schooling Opportunities in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract. This paper focuses on urban working children of low-income families in Bangladesh, and non-formal primary education (NFPE) programs that are available to the children. Through highlighting a few elements of one NFPE program in Dhaka, the paper examines its dilemma, as the nature of the program generates the unintended consequence. The NFPE program unintentionally perpetuates the constructed notion of “working children,” distinguish their students from those in the formal school, and continuously prepares them for the subordinate segment of the society where they are today.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on low-income rural-urban migrant children and their families in Bangladesh, living in a severe poverty-stricken environment in the capital city, Dhaka. Specifically, it deals with the dilemma of so-called non-formal primary education (NFPE) programs aimed at providing alternative schooling opportunities to children who do not attend regular school but are engaged in labor in the city. It describes how such programs do not necessarily help children integrate into the country’s formal school system, but instead continuously prepares them for the subordinate segment of the society.

Today, in Bangladesh, around eight million or 17.5 percent of children between seven to 14 years of age are engaged in economic activities, and an estimated two to three million children (twelve to eighteen percent) among a total 16.4 million primary school aged children are not enrolled in school or have left school before completing the full five-year course of primary education. Of the two to three million children, approximately 14 percent are in urban cities, living in *bosti* (slum), while others live in geographically remote, isolated, and disaster prone areas (e.g. floodplain, costal belts, temporary land masses, eroding riverbanks and tidal basins) [1, 2, 3].

The Government of Bangladesh, with a number of foreign donors, international and national NGOs, has sought a different educational approach for such out-of-school children, and design NFPE programs specially to fit the children’s convenience and “educational needs.” Since the independence of the country in 1971, non-formal education programs have been a recognized educational scheme, are widespread in the country. At present, several hundred NGOs run approximately 50 thousand small-scale NFPE schools called “learning centers,” and more than one to two million children are believed to be participating or have participated in NFPE programs [1]. With respect to the number of

children, NFPE programs comprise approximately ten percent of the primary level educational enterprise in Bangladesh.

The primary purpose of the NFPE programs is to make “in-school learning” opportunities available for children. NFPE program sponsors often rationalize their programs by assuming that the “education” will help such children gain and achieve “upward mobility,” and ultimately “break the cycle of unskilled-employment and child labor” [2]. In terms of providing an “educational” opportunity, regardless of their quality, I believe that NFPE programs have accomplished their objectives. A large number of children enrolled in NFPE programs is telling of this accomplishment. In addition, during my twenty one-month fieldwork, I observed hundreds of children attending NFPE programs that learned to write, read, and calculate, and moreover were simply enjoying being in a place called “school.” On the other hand, however, some NFPE programs do not necessarily or directly support low-income children emerge out of the particular social position where they are today. It is, for example, still extremely difficult for the children, having participated in NFPE programs, to even complete the full course of the program, or for those that stay until the end of the program to further pursue institutionalized educational opportunities, and eventually become employed in the formal sector, which was also never possible for their parents.

This paper particularly addresses the state-sponsored Basic Education for Hard-to-Reach Urban Working Children (BEHTRUWC) project, and examines its three elements: 1) the making of “working children,” 2) disjuncture in the meaning of schooling, and, 3) implementation practices that reflect Bangladeshi social structure. After briefly explaining the background of the study, it first looks at how the BEHTRUWC project labels its participating children as “working children.” As a result, children *become* “working children,” not only learning the concept, but also acquiring customs to “act out” as working children. Second, the paper problematizes the unique approach of the BEHTRUWC project that ultimately draws distinction between its children and formal school students. Finally, the paper examines how the basic pattern of interpersonal relationships so common in Bangladesh is reflected in the daily practices of the BEHTRUWC project. The project’s learning centers remain similar to any other places in Dhaka where children feel morally obligated to teachers and others, and thus, through the project, the children gradually recognize their assumed existing position in relation to other people in society.

Data for this study was generated from twenty-one months of field research in Dhaka (between 2007 and 2010). The data collection methods include participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, household surveys with 1,176 children, and literature review. Besides children, my informants consist of children’s families and employers, NFPE program-related government and NGO officers, teachers, foreign practitioners and experts, and local leaders. This paper does not intend to “judge” or “evaluate” the BEHTRUWC project or any other NFPE programs in Bangladesh. Through shedding light on the relationships of the people involved in the BEHTRUWC project, the paper focuses on different aspect of the BEHTRUWC project, in order to understand how these elements of the project influences on the quotidian lives of low-income migrant children in Bangladesh in a way that prepares the children to continue playing their particular subordinate position in society.

2. Background

2.1 Migration and Living Arrangements in Dhaka

Every day, in Bangladesh, thousands of men and women of low-income families migrate from villages to urban cities where they can find more options and opportunities for income-generating activities, such as labor, trade, and business. The combinations of traditional practices of livelihoods, individual and family decision making, views and expectations toward earning opportunities,

interpersonal ties and networks, and changing social realities in both rural and urban areas are the reasons they migrate from their natal rural villages to urban cities. In addition, due to constant natural calamities and hazards (e.g. floods, cyclones, and land erosion), many low-income, landless agricultural laborer families leave their village for Dhaka. Most children participating (or having participated) in the NFPE programs were also born outside Dhaka in their father's village, except those who were the younger or youngest among their siblings. Many of the children in the project are either the first or second-generation family migrant: children migrate together with their families; and, children who were born in Dhaka as second-generation migrants, or were taken to Dhaka immediately after birth in a village and grew up in Dhaka. For some cases, family members do not migrate at the same time, yet the ultimate goal is for the whole family to settle in Dhaka either temporarily or permanently.

Prior to moving to a city, migrants make pre-arrangements for a place to stay and work with their relatives or those from the same village, and upon arrival, they maintain close contact with their kin [4,5]. In such an urban poverty-stricken environment like Dhaka, the social and economic resources available are mostly generated through formal and informal social networks. Livelihoods in Dhaka depend foremost on those social ties and channels they have and maintain. The Bengali notion of "entitlement" assures that the "poor" feel the moral rights entitled to and "legitimately" depend on others' wealth [6,7,8]. A typical low-income migrant household in Dhaka usually consists of two or three generations. The household income and expenditure of male-headed families (both father and mother are present) is relatively higher than those of families with a single parent or female-headed households. They spend their income mostly on house rents and food items [9]. Most of these families have meals once or twice a day. Inside the house, there are one large bed, a few small cupboards, dressers, and cabinets, in which they keep dishes and clothes.

In Dhaka, men work as rickshaw pullers, seasonal fruit or vegetable vendors (traders), construction workers, transportation workers (drivers and helpers), garment factory workers, security guards, peons (helpers) and cleaners in offices, or workers (assistants) in factories and workshops (garages). Men's employment status varies, from those that are employers themselves to those laboring on a daily basis. Women, on the other hand, are mostly engaged either in domestic work (servant) or garment factory work. Not many women of low-income migrant families are self-employed or are employers; but they are rather working as "employees" and "laborers." Few women are engaged in the home-based business (with or without their husband), such as making pita bread, delivering and selling them in the neighborhood or on the street.

More than half of migrant children participating in the BEHTRUWC project also said they were engaged in labor to contribute to their household's income, or to have an individual income of their own. Many boys work as employees of a shop, or are self-employed street vendors; on the other hand, the majority of girls work as domestic workers or factory workers. Each child has a unique work routine, purpose, responsibility, and commitment to his or her work. Some children's "work" is to help their family members and not necessarily earn an income (e.g. taking care of younger siblings while parents are away for work), while others are hired as "laborers," and contribute to their family's earnings. In addition, some elder children (mostly male) operate their own vendor business on the streets, in order to become financially independent from their household. The nature and types of children's "work" in Dhaka are informal and diverse, and supplement adult workers.

2.2 Non-Formal Primary Education Programs in Bangladesh

Childhood experiences in Bangladesh, where more than ten to 15 percent of primary school aged children do not regularly attend school, and where more than half of primary school students do not

finish five years of the primary education, is extremely diverse, depending on what a child does everyday in his or her circumstances. When planning a NFPE program, the program providers first assess: why children do not go to school (“access barriers”) and what makes it easier for such children to go to school (“educational needs”). The “access barriers,” for example, include: the nearest primary school is too far, and a child does not have time to go to school due to his or her work commitment. The “educational needs” are: school should be located within walking distance from the children’s residence, and shorter (flexible) school hour is more preferable as it suits the children’s daily schedule (e.g. avoid time conflict with work, etc.).

Many NFPE programs in Bangladesh find similar “access barriers” and “educational needs” of their select group of children, and apply, for example, 1) a short commute (locating learning centers close to children’s residence); 2) flexible timing (shorter school hours and shorter course duration); 3) increased teacher-student contact hours as well as continuous schooling without the long holiday (to keep children accustomed to schooling); 4) a “friendlier” learning environment (a small number of children per teacher (center), colorful wall decoration, etc.); 5) the development and provision of original (unique) additional (supplementary) materials other than the government textbooks; and, 6) locally recruited teachers. Most of the NFPE programs share the substantive features; however, every NFPE program is implemented independent from each other in their management, designed and planned by different organizations. Despite similar or identical features, the ideas and experiences of NFPE programs are usually not exchanged among the program providers.

The Government of Bangladesh is currently responsible for two NFPE programs: the BEHTRUWC project in the six urban cities (total 166,150 students, and 6,466 learning centers), and the Reaching Out of School Children (ROSC) project (total 491,171 students, and 22,752 learning centers) in rural areas. The full course of the BEHTRUWC project is 40 months (that of the formal education is 60 months). The learning centers are open for two and a half hours a day, six days a week, covering five subjects (Bengali, mathematics, English, integrated science and social studies, and life-skills). The number of children per teacher (per learning center) is 25, of which more than sixty percent must be girls. The teachers are recruited from the neighborhood where the potential students reside. The role of teachers include beyond teaching in the center, but to look after their students inside and outside of the center, to make their students’ home visits, to communicate with the guardians, and to ensure children regularly attend classes. The BEHTRUWC project develops its own textbooks, activity books, storybooks, as well as teaching guidebooks, in order to make those materials more relevant and attractive to its particular project participants. Many posters on the walls do not contain many words, but colorful drawings of familiar scenes for the urban child residents.

3. The Making of “Working Children”

While formal primary schools are theoretically open to any primary school aged children, NFPE programs indeed always *exclusively* select children appropriate and suitable to their own program objectives (e.g. children not enrolled in or have left formal primary school, etc.). The program providers have full authority over which children can be admitted to which learning center, and which children are not. Children and their parents may refuse to participate, though they usually cannot voluntarily apply or recommend themselves to the program (unless they are selected by the program providers), even if they meet all criteria and are willing to attend the NFPE program learning center. The selection procedure is, in this sense, not entirely an open-to-everyone practice, but *exclusive*. The BEHTRUWC project limits their participants by the labor status (e.g. whether the child is engaged in labor), and highlights children’s responsibility for work. It only provides the limited coverage and level of the country’s primary schooling curriculum, exclusively to what they call “hard-to-reach urban working children” in urban cities. The ultimate goal of the BEHTRUWC project is not

eventually to integrate urban working children into the formal education system. It is instead to provide already busy working children with the “basic” level (part) of schooling opportunities.

Throughout the implementation of the project, the BEHTRUWC project providers emphasize the participant’s criteria as “working children.” The term “working children” is generally acknowledged in the sense that working children are vulnerable and their fundamental human rights are deprived; they have disadvantages in accessing formal schools; they are subject to economic exploitation; their work is unsafe, unhealthy and even dangerous; and they become trapped in such low skilled and low return work [2, 10, 11]. These constructed notions often appeal to international donors to fund projects for such children. Though the BEHTRUWC project does not clearly define “working children,” it upholds these constructed concepts of “working children.” For example, on the annual “Child Labor Day” event, hundreds of children participate in a rally calling for the rights of the “working child.” After the rally, they get congregated in a large auditorium, and join the singing and drawing competitions. They are encouraged to express the contrast: “tough” situations of work (labor) and “fun (joyful)” experiences of schooling in the BEHTRUWC learning centers.

It is, however, uncertain the extent to which the children recognize themselves as “working children” before joining the BEHTRUWC project, and distinguish themselves from other (non-working) children. Urban children working and assisting adults are a part of daily scenes in Dhaka; yet, this does not mean that they see themselves “working children.” They usually consider themselves as “workers,” and know their “(in) justice and entitlement” as laborers and employees [12], on the other hand, for many of the migrant children in Dhaka, the constructed notion of “working children” is new. They have probably never read or heard what kinds of notions outsiders often have toward children like them, or see themselves as “(working) *children*” or children with their entitlements until they participate in the BEHTRUWC project. After the NFPE program learning centers were brought to their residential areas, they begin to learn the implication of “working children,” and gain experience performing their “poorness” in the learning centers. In the workplaces, for example, children often ask visitors what kind of pictures the visitors want—posing to work sadly or proudly, or looking at a camera. A girl in a learning center also asks, “Do you want to take a picture of us studying (gesturing writing something on her notebook with her pencil), or our face up smiling?” The children have shown that they can flexibly act to be “ideal” working children who study and work hard.

This identification of children as “working children” also tends to emphasize, highlight, and exaggerate what children and their families do not have, rather than what children and their families have been doing, own, and want. This would make some children feel unnecessarily uncomfortable or realize even if they become “good students,” in the BEHTRUWC project they are always seen as “poor children” whose families are unable to afford “regular” and “ordinary” schooling. Some older children (approximately 13 years of age or above) gradually refuse to and oppose to be labeled as “working children.” Younger children usually say they like the BEHTRUWC project learning centers better than the formal school (if they know the difference), because of the colorful and sufficient materials, attractive events, flexibility, fewer exams, and no tuition; while others, usually more mature ones, say the opposite. The older children do not think that they have an alternating schooling opportunity because they are “children” with the “rights to education,” but instead, tend to consider and interpret that they are given such “free” opportunity because they cannot “afford” (or even are not considered to “deserve”) formal schooling with better quality teachers and better equipped facilities. They think and understand that such NFPE programs like the BEHTRUWC project are for “poor” children, while the formal schools are for “ordinary” children. One teenage boy who has completed the full course of the BEHTRUWC project still says, he would prefer to go to a formal school,

because it is more “ordinary.” The exclusiveness of the NFPE programs, as well as strict distinctions from other children make some children feel uncomfortable.

The BEHTRUWC project is one of the means for low-income migrant children in Dhaka to become familiar with the constructed notion of “poor Bangladeshi working children,” and how sympathetic foreign donors are trying to “help” them. The children recognize the BEHTRUWC project as a way to label them as “poor” children from “backward” and “rural” migrant families, and not necessarily lead to a path or opportunity for “upward mobility.” As a result of the BEHTRUWC project’s intention of helping “working children,” a group of children is defined as “working children.” Despite the diversity in their work, the project attempts to lump all of the children together as one constructed notion of “poor working children.” Through participating in the BEHTRUWC project, the children gradually learn to become and act out the imagined “working children.”

4. Disjuncture in the Meaning of Schooling

Living in a severe poverty-stricken environment does not mean that every child of low-income migrant families in Dhaka is engaged in labor to earn, or all fathers and mothers make all of their children engage in a possible-income generating activity, or neglect to send them to school. In the same household, some children work when their brothers do not, instead go to school. Parents do not force all of their children to earn simply to maximize their household income, but calculate the balance of securing immediate income through placing some of their older children in the labor force, while investing in schooling of their younger children. In addition, not working does not mean that the children are in school; on the other hand, working outside of the home does not necessarily mean that children are not in school. Some children work part-time and attend school, while others do neither. Some parents make one or more of their children go to school, while others give their children freewill to make a decision about schooling. Parents do not send children to any available school either only because they are free or less expensive, but choose a particular one for each child according to the child’s readiness (e.g. gained experiences and age) and gender, and their expectations for the child’s future. Children and parents carefully evaluate what schooling and work bring (or do not bring) to their households.

The low-income migrant families in Dhaka do not usually consider children’s primary schooling either as a right or entitlement assured for free, but as something they negotiate, work, and pay a certain amount of expenses to obtain. They sometimes choose a tuition-based “expensive” local school run by a local middle-class owner, rather than free public schools or free NFPE program learning centers, no matter the financial burden, or the extent that the school is equipped. Parents seem to consider social and political relations in and around the school, as well as the reputation, popularity, and safety of the school zone. Sending children to a local school run by a local elite possibly would imply investing in the significance of human relationships in the local society and neighborhood. Regardless of whether children go or not go to school, or what school they attend, children and their parents foremost and generally believe that schooling opportunity is a means for social advancement and economic upward mobility. Some parents that have never been to school also consider that schooling will have a positive influence on their children to improve their skills and have a better job in the future, and that the better jobs eventually lead to economic and social advancement of the family (e.g. a family where elderly parents do not need to earn, but stay at home to be looked after by their son(s)).

On the other hand, the approaches the BEHTRUWC project takes eventually distinguish children of the project from students in formal schools. The formal school system in Bangladesh is, like other countries, structured as one continuous system like a linear rail, whereby, once a child enters and

completes one level of schooling, he or she can follow the rail and move up to another level to meet his or her requirements and goals; whereas, the BEHTRUWC project is one-time independent scheme not linked to other similar programs or formal schools. The BEHTRUWC project is, for example, especially unique in its limited coverage of the primary education curriculum and no ties to formal schools. While the other major NFPE programs in usually Bangladesh cover the full national curriculum, the BEHTRUWC project offers only four subjects, plus one original subject, “life-skills.” The “life-skills” covers a wide variety of topics, such as food and nutrition as well as disease and prevention. The other topics include a discussion about what types of children’s work are considered as “hazardous,” and when children can (or should) say “no” to their employers’ physical punishment. These everyday lessons of “life-skills” presuppose children participating in the project are “working children.”

The BEHTRUWC project does not coordinate with any formal schools either, even though it is run by the government. It has no mechanism for its students to take the Primary Education Completion exam, which is a requirement for any primary school students to continue to the secondary level of formal education. The government’s vertical administrative structure (vertically-segmented system) and relationships draw a clear distinction and sets boundaries between the government’s formal and non-formal school programs (entities), through which children of the BEHTRUWC project cannot easily modify their educational path (e.g. to transfer to and enroll in a formal school). Institutional gaps and barriers, as well as the complicated branching and hierarchical management structure of the BEHTRUWC project seems to be one of the reasons that makes it extremely difficult for children to become integrated to the formal education system.

Due to those distinctive features, children having participated in the BEHTRUWC project are gradually drawn into a “non-schooling” path, unless the children and their families pursue the other formal means of schooling. Such diversification in the provision of primary education could further make clear distinctions among children in the same neighborhood (e.g. those in the formal “ordinary” schools and those that are not), and does not help the integration of low-income migrant children into the major educational system of the country, or enable them to have better job opportunities, and to emerge out of the poverty-stricken environment in Dhaka. For low-income migrant children and their families, the BEHTRUWC project is a new form of institutionalized educational opportunities. Some children take the project as their first and only schooling opportunity, while others utilized it as a “supplementary school” in addition to their formal primary school. Though expectation toward the project might be higher in the beginning, by the time the BEHTRUWC project course is completed, the children and their families realize that the experience in the NFPE program would not assure the same level or experience of formal schooling, lead them to continue or transfer to the formal primary or secondary schools, or provide them with the better skilled employment opportunities. They also understand that the BEHTRUWC project does not intend to incorporate the children into the formal school. The NFPE program helps children learn to write, read, and calculate, and experience the quasi-schooling environment; yet, it is not necessarily an efficient or effective means for children to continue further schooling in the formal “mainstream” education system. Without having formal schooling opportunities, it is still extremely difficult to gain stable and better-paid jobs in the formal sector of Bangladesh.

5. Practices In and Around Learning Centers

While the “conceptualization” of the NFPE programs may be new and foreign, and introduced from outside of the country, their “implementation” is always undertaken by the Bangladeshi people in the context of Bangladesh; and thus, the “normal order of things” [13] in Bangladesh, such as the basic pattern of hierarchically structured interpersonal relationships and imbalanced opportunities, are

further underscored and validated through the daily practices, interactions, and communications in and around the learning centers. The children, for example, may feel socially and morally vulnerable and obligated to teachers, and teachers feel the same to the authority of the program (e.g. NGO coordinators, government bureaucrats, and foreign sponsors, etc.). As a result, the NFPE program learning centers would not be a place to help children emerge out of the severe poverty environment with the limited choices of employment, but remain as a place to prepare the children for their already-expected social position in society.

The NFPE programs involve and connect different actors, and each actor plays a certain role at the different tier of project implementation. The foreign government agencies fund the BEHTRUWC project, and an international organization works with the Bangladeshi government to manage the project. The government entrusts 20 NGOs to operate learning centers, and each NGO coordinator is in charge of a few hundred learning centers and several thousand students. The NGOs recruit teachers and supervisors: each supervisor looks after ten learning centers, and one teacher takes care of one or two learning centers (25 to 50 students). The NGO coordinators are a permanent staff, whereas supervisors and teachers are temporary employees specially appointed for the limited time of the project period.

Many of the government and international organization's officials (especially those in higher ranks) come from the affluent and elite families in Bangladesh. The lower rank government officials, NGO coordinators, and some supervisors are from the middle class families. The other supervisors and most of the teachers come from lower-middle class families, either housewives or young university students, and reside in and by *bosti* (the neighborhood where the students live). Landlords of the learning centers are also often family members of teachers and supervisors, and informally determine whose children can have access to the facility. The children and their families can be involved in the local political games of multiple landlords, supervisors, and teachers; for example, via arguments about whose family obtains the most rent and salaries from the project, and frequent changes in a learning center's locations.

In Bangladesh, interpersonal relationships are "characterized by a foremost of rights and responsibilities, social pressures and conventions, detailing what is due to and from whom" [12]. While the wealthier families are considered to have the obligation of care to their "own poor" (e.g. close relatives, relatives in other districts, then neighbors, etc.), the "poorer" have social and moral obligations to the wealthier, because such cares and social protection always "comes at a cost" [14]. The "poor" can occasionally receive the assistance of their patrons, including food, clothes, shelter, employment, and access to land on holy days as well as ritual occasions. Nevertheless, such assistance can be only provided for the "own poor," and this implies over whom the wealthier patrons maintain their power and authority. The people are always fully aware that who provides the assistance due to whom. This patron-client relationship also applies to adult-children relationships; "children are identified not as ... a distinct social group, but in categories of belonging," and "[t]here is a radical difference between 'my [own] child' and 'your child,' between one who belongs and one who is an outsider" [12]. The ways by which teachers, supervisors, local landlords, NGO coordinators, and the government officials are involved in the NFPE programs are also embedded and molded in this basic interpersonal relationship of power which is common throughout Bangladesh [15].

NGO coordinators claim that they sometimes feel difficult to directly and honestly tell to the authority of the NFPE programs "what is going on" in their learning centers. They want to maintain the "good" relationship with the government, to secure a "good" impression, and to obtain a "good" evaluation for their future contracts with the government; because the NGO sector in Bangladesh is

highly competitive. For NGOs, the NFPE programs are financial resources to maintain their organization, as well as political and social resources to establish close ties with the central and local governments, and to assure their continued and safe presence in the area with local leaders. For local leaders, the NFPE programs can be another political resource to give some kind of “charity” to their “poorer” neighbors’ children and subsequently increase their authority in the neighborhood.

Many supervisors and teachers also want to be seen as “good,” and try to demonstrate how seriously their students are engaged in learning activities and keep regular attendance, in order not to jeopardize their employment and income opportunity. For instance, especially when teachers have visitors (e.g. the government officials and foreign sponsors) in their learning centers, they cover the situation that many children have permanently left their center by replacing them with random children from the neighborhood. Instead of conducting a new assessment to recruit children, they simply ask their old students to bring their brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, or friends. Then, it is common to “manipulate” attendance of their students. Teachers tell all the children to pretend and act as if they are registered in the center from the beginning, thereby, enabling them to hide the number of children that have left the center. The teachers believe that the more children that have left their center, the lower their credibility would be. The new replacing students are given a “school name” (originally registered students’ names), and sometimes lie about certain things (e.g. their attendance). When I visited one center, for example, and asked all of the children to tell their names, it was odd that some of the children could not immediately answer their names. I thus asked, “Can you tell me your names again, the names your father and mother call you?” Their names were all different from the first ones, their “school names.” Observing what teachers and supervisors spoke and how they behaved in front of visitors, the children also gradually learn their obligations in the presence of such visitors.

In addition, many children are accustomed to how to express and explain “stories” about what they have learned at the learning center, and to exactly what the authority of the NFPE programs expect to hear from them. They learn to first mention how useful the BETHRUWC project is for their daily lives, and then always to appeal to their visitors what they need more in their learning centers. One girl spoke out and said, because she could read and count now, she would not be cheated out of change when shopping, and then suggested by the NGO coordinators, she added, how she was hoping to have desks, chairs, school bags, and uniforms in their learning centers. The children know how they are expected to be seen and interact with each other, as well as their teachers, supervisors, NGO coordinators, the government officials, and foreign sponsors. Since the NFPE programs are something given to the “poorer,” in these relationships and arrangements, the children (so-called “beneficiaries”) seem to feel socially and morally vulnerable, and obligated to help and follow in favor of teachers, local landlords, NGOs, and other wealthier actors. Teachers feel the same to the authority of the program. As a consequence, children are often drawn in such relationships and arrangements. The NFPE program learning centers remain as any other places in Dhaka where children realize and gradually learn their already-expected particular social position—where they are today in society.

6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to offer an anthropological insight and critical analysis of how the NFPE program, particularly the BEHTRUWC project, has a dilemma because the nature of the project generates the unintended consequence. The BEHTRUWC project produces “working children,” by encouraging children to *become* “working children,” to continue what they are doing (work), and sometimes even to act out “poor working children”—the image attached to and shared among the NFPE programs. The BEHTRUWC project is unintentionally, rather than deliberately, serving to systematically reproduce and perpetuate the constructed notion of “working children.” Among the various primary schooling

opportunities available and affordable in Dhaka, many of the participants do not consider the BEHTRUWC project as a regular (“normal”) schooling opportunity, and thus some even attend another school while participating in the project. For them, the BEHTRUWC project is indeed no more than a “free” and “informal” opportunity, separated from formal schools, where they learn how to write and calculate, and hang out with their brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, and close friends in their free time.

In Bangladesh where the possibility of having schooling has long been determined by which social segment they belong to in the hierarchically structured society, further diversification in educational opportunities will not transform the society. Many Bangladeshi see the inequality in schooling is part of their usual and ordinary orders. What would promote a change in the educational system of Bangladesh is thus, probably not another independent or temporary program, but to enroll all the primary school aged children to have exactly the same (or at least the similar) type of schooling with equivalently qualified teachers and facilities. Investigating the NFPE programs in Bangladesh has led to an understanding of the implications of such programs to society; in other words, how the NFPE programs rarely become a driving force for children to gain a path to “upward mobility” as the project intends, but, on the contrary, may play a role in keeping low-income children not emerging out of the particular position in society.

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