

PROGRAM "ECHANGES UNIVERSITAIRES", founded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Education as a tool to rehabilitate street children - Cases from urban slums in Ahmedabad, India

The project in brief

Division

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Partner

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Introduction. Education acts as a major tool of development and its positive impact on economic growth and socio-economic factors is widely accepted. It constitutes a basic human right and depicts one of the most crucial ways for achieving overall human development. Universal primary education therefore has been set as one of the major targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by world leaders in the year 2000. However, particularly in developing countries, as India, there is still a long run to go in order to achieve this target. Although significant progress has been made towards universalizing primary education, there are still millions of India's children who do not have proper education. Even though enrollment rates are high, there are low attendance and completion rates to be found as well as high incidences of school drop-outs. Official numbers indicate that only 66% of the school-going children reach grade 5 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2005). Therefore illiteracy is still relatively widespread, especially among the most vulnerable groups such as: Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and women and children living in extreme poverty.

Objective of the project. This project addresses the reasons why children drop out of schools. It holds the notion that two main determinants must be addressed in order to understand the phenomenon of dropping out of schools:

- sociocultural milieu factors which are represented by household characteristics (such as caste, personal assets or educational levels of the household) and the immediate environment of a child, and
- institutional factors dealing with teachers' performance, the school setting and the children's perceptions thereof.

Both sets of factors are addressed in the two Master's theses, using the same data set the authors Sophia Voelksen and Marisa Fricker generated in urban slums of Ahmedabad during a two months research internship in India. A third part of the project deals with both these sets of factors in a rural context. This project was carried out under KFPE-finances by Esther Gloor and will be part of the 2011 annual report to the KFPE.

The empirical survey in urban slums of Ahmedabad. The survey included 255 of school attending children and school drop outs in slum communities of the City of Ahmedabad carried out in July-August in the year 2009. Additionally expert interviews and a focus discussion group have been conducted in order to supplement the research with valuable comments on the topic. The two target groups, drop-outs and school attending children were distinguished by gender, religion (Muslim/Hindu), caste (SC, ST, OBC) and age group. The composition of the sample ensured an equal sex ratio, mixed age groups and caste membership among the children. Furthermore, the research settings were broadly selected to represent children

from different religious groups (Hindu and Muslim) and children from different backgrounds (orphans, street children, working children and others). Regarding the educational institutions visited, government, private as well as institutions for disabled children have been taken into consideration.

Theoretical embedding. A core part of the theoretically-based analysis in the MA thesis of Sophia Völksen is the concept of sustainable livelihoods (Chambers 1989, Bohle 2007). According to this approach, the vulnerability of children towards dropping out of primary school was examined on the basis of livelihood assets, the immediate environment and wider society. With regard to the second MA thesis of Marisa Fricker the capital theory of Pierre Bourdieu as well as theories on the reproduction of social inequalities through the school system were of particular importance.



Figure 1 Authors conducting fieldwork in Ahmedabad, India

Household structures, personal assets and socio-cultural aspects as determinants of school drop-out rates. Cases from Urban slums in Ahmedabad, India.

Master's thesis, Sophia Völksen

Objective and conceptual background. The study holds the notion that the phenomenon of dropping out of primary school is related to biography-related factors and to family-related structural factors in connection with the particular cultural and social milieu. This phenomenon is examined based on the structures of the joint household the child lives in and through the given, structural, individual (i.e. biographical) characteristics of the child (such as gender, caste, religious affiliation) analyzed against the backdrop of the child's larger surroundings (e.g. community, society). Because the Indian context involves several specific cultural features, such as the caste system and prevailing gender perceptions, these subjects call for more detailed investigation.

Key research questions. Core dimensions of the study with corresponding research questions were the following:

- **Immediate environment of the child.** The household and its (structural) assets: Do household assets show influence on the risk of school drop-out? What structural assets play a crucial role in securing sustainable livelihoods?
- **Background of family members.** The immediate social surroundings of the child have great impact on childhood development: How far is the impact of the educational and occupational background of the parents/grandparents on the child's vulnerability to drop-out of school? What relations can be observed and how can they be interpreted?
- **Cultural and social factors.** Prevailing social structures in interrelation with biography-related factors of the child. This dimension is foremost analyzed along three prevailing socio-cultural phenomena of Indian society: gender perceptions, religious affiliation and caste membership. Key questions are: Is there a gender bias regarding education to be found? Does religious affiliation have an impact on school drop-out? Does caste membership increase the vulnerability of children regarding school drop-out?

Findings. The findings of the study presented below are highly context specific. Therefore, results are not to be taken as general statements. The results presented are valid only against the backdrop of selected slum communities of Ahmedabad City. The findings of the study can be summarized as followed:

Background of family members

Household structure and family assets. The study clearly shows that household structures, such as the type of housing, the availability of basic facilities and the living space differ considerably between school drop-outs and school attending children. School drop-outs are clearly more likely to live in small size and unstable housing structures without access to basic facilities. School attending children however, indicate relatively better living conditions. Therefore, it may be assumed that children coming from considerably poor households are more likely to drop-out of school than children from households that are marginally better off. Although there exists a free primary education system, economic restrictions may be a reason for parents not being able to send their child to school or to ensure successful schooling.

Parental education and occupation. The study reveals that the education level of the parents has greater influence on the child's risk of school drop-out than the status of occupation. Of particular importance is the education of the mother. Literate mothers have fewer children, better occupation opportunities, and live under better living conditions than illiterate mothers. Moreover, literate mothers are more likely to send their child to school and to provide better nutrition. Hence, educated mothers play a key role in ensuring a secure and sustainable childhood for their children. The father however, plays a greater role regarding the occupation status. As the father constitutes in the majority of cases the main bread winner his occupation status has greater influence than the one of the mother. If the father pursues regular paid work this enables the household to live under better living conditions and decreases the risk of school drop-out for the child.

Socio-cultural factors

Gender. Regarding the sex of the child, girls face disadvantages in terms of education. Although the sample of the study pursued gender balance, there are differences to make out between girls and boys. Hence, girls are more likely to drop-out of school once or multiple times. Furthermore, girls have more siblings and therefore may be more likely to miss out on education due to selective attitudes of the parents generally in favor of boys. Regarding household chores such as care taking for the sibling(s), boys indicate less regularity as well as fewer hours than girls. Particularly female school drop-outs are taking care for their siblings long hours daily. However, boys show a higher likeliness to pursue economic activities and work in average for longer hours than girls. Furthermore, parents living in poor housing structures are more likely to have boys than girls. This may mean that among very poor families with low living standard gender preferences are emphasized even stronger.

Caste membership. The study sample foremost includes children belonging to the so called 'lower castes'. Therefore, general statements on disadvantages as a result of caste membership cannot be made. However, for those castes which have been investigated different distribution pattern become evident. The study shows that children belonging to Denotified Tribes (DNT), Other Backward Castes (OBC) or Social and Education Backward Castes (SEBC) are most prone to dropping-out of school. Children belonging to these castes indicate as well the highest frequency among poor housing structures. ST's and SC's, Muslims and upper caste children show generally better living conditions, have fewer siblings and if they are working, they work for fewer hours. Therefore, it can be assumed that children of DNT, OBC or SEBC membership are socially disadvantaged which may increase the risk dropping out at the primary school level.

Religious affiliation. The sample showed a balanced representation of Muslim children attending school and Muslim school drop outs. Therefore, religious affiliation does not emerge as a statistically significant variable. However, Muslim girls appear to be disadvantaged in educational terms compared to Hindu girls, as shown in a sex-biased ratio of school drop outs. Higher drop out rates of Muslim girls appears to reflect a traditional female role model that prevails in Muslim communities.

Conclusions

The examination of household structures, personal assets and socio-cultural factors in relation with school drop-out does not allow clear conclusions, yet some trends emerge. First of all, the study makes clear that there exist a multitude of factors influencing a child's risk of dropping out of schools. Second, in order to find out more about significant correlations a higher number of respondents need to be addressed. Therefore, this study allows making assumptions only about possible factors influencing school drop-out rates in the given context of Ahmedabad City. However, the study shows clearly, that the educational background of the parents, foremost of the mother, plays a key role for more successful educational biographies of children. Although the economic situation of the household has considerable influence also, it may be concluded, that prevailing socio-cultural phenomena play a major role for the child's schooling opportunities too. The social construct of gender, leads to severe discrimination towards the girl child. Furthermore, the hierarchical caste system still means that children of certain caste membership (such as DNT, OBC, SEBC) face deprivation in daily life. Particularly in the context of Ahmedabad City special attention must be paid to the strict constraints religious affiliation may mean. Muslims constitute a minority which lives, due to recurrent violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims, under unsecure living conditions. Thus, the Muslim population lives clearly socially excluded from the Hindu majority. In particular Muslim girls are hindered to move freely out of their community. Thus, it can be assumed that prevailing unequal conditions pose major restrictions to the overall childhood educational development and schooling of Muslim children.

Children's school performance and perceptions on schools as determinants of school drop-out rates. A comparison of school attending children and school drop-outs in urban slums of Ahmedabad.

Master's Thesis, Marisa Fricker

Objective of the study

This study analysed children's school performance and their perceptions on teachers and schools using both school attending children and school drop-outs. The study is conceptualized entirely on the perspective of the child. Although children might still be limited in terms of decision power and their agency might be influenced and constrained by a number of factors and actors, they still represent the most important actor regarding their schooling and educational biographies. The study, therefore, investigated the children's perceptions regarding:

- The physical and institutional access to schools
- The provision of infrastructure and services at schools
- The general attractiveness of schools
- The attractiveness of school material and school lessons
- The teacher's performance and pedagogical practices at schools

Concerning the schooling habits of drop-outs and school attending children the following conceptual factors were investigated:

- The children's own school performance
- The children's regularity at schools
- The economic activities of the children in relation to their school attendance and performance
- The children's diligence with their homework
- The children's learning environment at home

With regard to the impact of the schooling institutions the following dimensions were explored:

- The children's awareness for the importance and perceived impact and relevance of education
- The drop-outs readiness to return to school
- The motivation to continue with higher education

Selected findings

School environment and institutional factors

Accessibility of schools. Results show that the physical accessibility of schools was generally satisfying. It can therefore be assumed that the spatial distribution of primary schools is only of minor relevance to the phenomenon of school drop-out in Ahmedabad. However, it has to be emphasized that if the daily trip to school was perceived as potentially risky (major roads, need to cross insecure areas) this could represent a substantial reason for parents to withdraw their children from school, particularly in the case of girls. The institutional accessibility of schools proved to be more problematic than their physical accessibility. The lack of official certificates (birth or school leaving certificate) represented a major obstacle for some of the children to enroll in schools, which in some cases resulted even in the denial to education.

Infrastructure and service provision. The study showed that non-availability of school infrastructure represents a minor problem in urban Ahmedabad. Only a very small percentage of the schools visited by the interviewees showed serious deficits. Improvements could be pursued regarding the equipment with libraries and the provision of extra tuition.

Teaching and teachers' absenteeism. The reported class sizes of the children were relatively high, with a median of approximately 42 pupils per teacher. In extreme cases the pupil-teacher ratios amounted up to 1:100 and more pupils. It is needless to say that classes of this size represent very unfavorable learning environments for young pupils. Another teacher-related problem that could be identified through the study was the relatively high rate of teacher absenteeism in the case of the drop-outs. Concomitantly, the performance of teachers was perceived considerably less satisfying by the drop-outs. Especially the boys and drop-outs that left school at the beginning of the school cycle had a negative image of their teachers. Considering that some of them were exposed to corporal punishment by their teachers this does not come as a surprise.

Attractiveness of schools, textbooks and school lessons. For all of the just mentioned factors a similar pattern emerged during the empirical analysis. Early drop-outs (lower primary) generally rated textbooks, school lessons and the school itself considerably lower than the rest of the sample. The attractiveness of schools was closely interrelated to the availability of infrastructure and the children's satisfaction with the performance of the teacher.

Government vs. private schools. Beneficiaries of private schooling predominantly derived from economically stronger and better educated homes. Additionally Muslims and children from higher strata in the caste hierarchy were disproportionately overrepresented. Qualitative differences compared to government schools could be discarded with regard to the regularity of teachers and a greater satisfaction level of the children in terms of the school and the school lessons. Children of private schools further appeared to be more motivated and showed a higher level of awareness for the relevance and importance of education. However, concerning class sizes private schools presented an even more devastating picture than government schools.

Child's performance in schools

Learning attainments of drop-outs vs. school attending children. Both, drop-outs as well as school-going children pursued some kind of economic activities besides their schooling. This finding demonstrates that schooling and work are not necessarily exclusive choices. Nevertheless drop-outs were three times as likely to be engaged in economic activities and showed considerably longer working hours than their school attending counterparts. This suggests that the drop-outs economic activities might have negatively affected their school career. Although no direct influence of the economic engagement on children's performance could be established, work clearly affected the children's school attendance and the regularity, with which they accomplished their homework. By trend drop-outs were less regular in classes, skipped homework more frequently and showed poorer attainment levels than school attending children. The performance of the children was further highly related to their satisfaction with the teacher.

Learning environment, emotional and intellectual support of the parents. Children of uneducated or little educated parents proved to be more prone to dropping out. Especially the educational background of the mother appeared to be highly significant for school survival. For the largest amount of the children (and particularly for girls) the mother was the central person to provide them with (intellectual) and emotional support. A lot of the drop-outs were disadvantaged with regard to their parents' ability to assist them with their homework and their learning environment at home. Illiterate or little educated parents were less willing to support their children in higher education, especially in the case of girls.

Attitudes and aspirations

Perceived relevance, usefulness and importance of education. Drop-outs and particularly boys clearly perceived education to be less relevant, useful and important than the rest of the interviewees. Their negative attitude towards schooling could thereby represent either a cause or a consequence of the drop out. Illiteracy, even after several years of schooling, was one of the major reasons why education was perceived useless and inappropriate.

Future aspirations and ambitions. Roughly three out of four drop-outs regretted their school leaving and would like to re-enroll. Many of them were dissatisfied with their present situation and shared a feeling of exclusion and deprivation. Only those drop-outs who have found a satisfying job or associated negative experience with the school ruled out a possible return to the education system. Many of the drop-outs had no idea with reference to their future occupation. The teacher and doctor profession were most popular among those who possessed tangible ambitions. As opposed to school attending children who pursued to execute jobs which require higher education, drop-outs were more likely to seek after a job demanding no or only rudimentary schooling.

Conclusion

With enrolment rates amounting close to 100% in India, educational opportunities have tremendously expanded over the past years and educational inequalities have disappeared at first sight. Considering the low survival rates and disproportionate success of some sections of the society, inequalities have however persisted beneath the surface. This study shows that especially first generation learners struggle to complete the full cycle of primary schooling. They are confronted with worse starting conditions and lack emotional and intellectual support from home. The primary schools show little success in bridging the distance between the students home and school culture and fail to reduce these students' deficits. Low levels of attainment, which are themselves related to low attendance rates, have therefore pushed a rather significant amount of pupils out of school. Another share has simply lost interest in school and does not believe anymore in the importance and relevance of education. Drop-out rates have proved to be highly related to institutional parameters. The significance of access and infrastructure related factors in this particular urban setting could be reduced in the past. Yet teaching quality and the attractiveness of the curriculum and the school continue to exercise tremendous influence on young pupils' school behaviour and attitudes. With respect to the increasing fragmentation and privatization of the urban education sector it could furthermore be concluded that private schools contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities with regard to two aspects. First, through their conditions of access which clearly favour already privileged sections of society. And second through the enhanced quality of education they provide in comparison to government schools, whereby this aspect was less pronounced. The study has insofar demonstrated that while education could imply the promised social upward mobility for some, for other this promise does not materialize. Already before they have only completed the most elementary schooling, they drop out of the system. Without guaranteeing access to good quality education adequate to the specific circumstances of many first generation learners, there is a high risk that social inequalities will be reproduced exactly through the education system.