Learning from the Voices of First Generation Learners in a Remote Community of Maharashtra, India

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Abstract

This paper reports the opportunities and challenges faced by first generation learners, all of whom were designated as being from scheduled tribes and scheduled castes, accessing education in a rural community in the state of Maharashtra, India. The design of the research and the methods used for this child-centred study aimed to generate data to enable reflection on the real-life complexities experienced by children in this situation. Ten case studies based around individual children who shared common experiences were developed. These children had attended the local Zilla Parishad School (Government funded school) in the past and were enrolled at a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) funded school at the time of the investigation. The ten case studies focused on those antecedents, contextual factors, perceptions and attitudes towards education that had shaped the experiences of the children. Their personal circumstances, opportunities and challenges emanating from their social, economic, cultural and political environments are discussed.

Keywords: First Generation Learners; India; Scheduled Tribe; Scheduled Caste; Inclusion

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Inclusive Education in the Indian Context

In common with other South Asian countries, the Government of India has introduced legislation aimed at improving the educational opportunities provided to previously marginalised groups of children. In adopting the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009), education administrators within India have stated their intention to instigate reforms to address the demands of the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2015), and other international agreements, including the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). The term 'inclusive education' has been adopted within India and has been the focus of both an increased corpus of literature and the implementation of initiatives at national and state levels (Hammer 2013; Jha, Ghatak., Mahendiran, & Bakshi, 2013). However, it has been suggested (Singal, 2006), that in many instances research in this area has given attention to single issues, such as disability, or gender, and that a more nuanced approach may be required.

The RTE acknowledges that a more holistic interpretation of inclusion is necessary. The Act recognises that many children have been disadvantaged and states that all children, regardless of their status should be provided with compulsory education in a recognised school between the ages of six and fourteen years. The term disadvantage is defined within the Act as meaning a child with a disability or belonging to a scheduled tribe (ST) or scheduled caste (SC), or those from poor socio-economic circumstances, and others who may have difficulties accessing formal education as a result of remote geographical factors or linguistic challenges. In addition, there is an acknowledgement that in many instances girls have been placed at educational disadvantage and that their rights should be assured.

In passing this Act, the Government of India recognised that within Indian society there are many children whose educational opportunities have been negatively impacted by a combination of these identified disadvantageous conditions. Amongst these influences, the most marginalised groups include those who belong to scheduled tribe and scheduled caste communities. In India the categorisation of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes has been officially sanctioned by the state since 1935 (HMSO, 1935) and these two groups have been recognised as comprising significant numbers of disadvantaged indigenous people. This includes those belonging to the lowest levels of the hierarchical Hindu caste system, and tribal

peoples who are characterised by lifestyles, language and cultural practices considered to be a challenge to the major conventional religious mores of India, and who live mostly in remote areas of the country (Panduranga & Honnurswamy, 2014). Several researchers who have been involved in monitoring the implementation of this legislation have considered how issues such as caste, poverty and gender interact as causal factors in educational disadvantage (Singh Kainth, 2014; Soni & Rahmann, 2013).

India has made significant progress towards achieving universal primary education and school enrolment figures have increased significantly over the past twenty years. However, figures provided by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF (2005) indicate that despite a net enrolment rate of 98%, India still has the second-highest number of children out of school among countries from which data is available. Between 2000 and 2011 the number of children out of school decreased by almost 16 million, but this still leaves approximately 1.4 million Indian children who are known not to be receiving formal education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). This population of out of school children continues to be characterised by low caste or tribal status, poverty and geographical disadvantage (Borooah, Sabharwal, Diwakar, Mishra, & Naik, 2015; Sedwal 2015). There are however other factors which may have a significant influence upon school enrolment.

The largest group of children who have dropped out of school are those described as first-generation learners (Dreze & Sen, 2003). This population may be defined as those who come from households with no tradition of attending school or formal education. Many such children live in an environment that is not conducive to study and in situations where knowledge about how to access and negotiate schooling is limited (Madhumita Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Reddy, 2004). Poor facilities for study at home, illiterate parents and the requirement to engage in work essential to the economic well-being of a family are factors that create challenges for first generation learners in many Indian communities. The difficulties of providing education for this population are therefore evident, and the need to investigate those approaches being adopted to improve the lives of children and their families in these circumstances is important if the aspirations of the RTE are to be met.

Listening to the voices of children

The advantages to be gained from listening to the voices of children when conducting research have been well documented (Lewis & Lindsay, 1999; Rose & Shevlin, 2004). Much of the justification for adopting this approach has been couched in the language of human rights (Castelle, 1990; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011), with a proposal that children should be

collaborators in research rather than simply the subjects of investigation. It has been suggested that participation of children in all aspects of the research process can be a means of ensuring that they gain agency and feel valued and respected (Alderson, 2001; Murray, 2011). Recently however, there has been an increased focus upon the recognition of children as having a unique perspective upon their lives and experiences, which can be more effectively communicated through their involvement in the research process than through the interpretation of a third party (Cook-Sather, 2006; Lewis & Porter, 2007). Some researchers have suggested that investigations that enable children to express opinions of their experiences in critical situations may be an empowering process in which those whose views are sought become collaborators in research (Bradbury Jones & Taylor, 2015; Grover, 2004). Planning investigations that enable children to become part of the research team, whilst seemingly challenging, may be regarded as part of a process of research democratisation (Doveston & Kenaghan, 2006).

Ruddock and Fielding (2006) propose that whilst listening to the voices of children has become a more common feature of education, doing this effectively is not an easy option. They believe that in order to be honest and effective in taking the views of children seriously, we must shift from a traditional perception of the professional and student relationship in which the child invariably plays a subordinate role, to one where the child recognises that their views will not only be taken seriously, but may enable individuals in positions of power to better understand their situation and needs. This demands that adults, including those wishing to fairly represent the views of children in research, are clear about the parameters of their work and honest in conveying the purpose and limitations of the potential for impact that accessing the voices of individuals may have on effecting change. A simplistic approach that perceives the collation of pupils' opinions and ideas as part of a democratic research process, without considering the means through which authenticity and trustworthiness can be verified, is at best naïve and in some instances may lead to a misinterpretation of data gathered during fieldwork. If children's voices are to be represented in research, this must be through a process that is transparent and which ensures fair representation and substantiation. Komulainen (2007) and Spyrou (2011), are critical of claims that use of children's voices in research ensures autonomy, rationality and intention when insufficient attention is given to the context in which their opinions are sought, and provision made to ensure verification of meaning and authenticity. These reservations are valid and it is essential that researchers embarking upon investigations that draw upon data from children, clarify the processes to be adopted to justify their approach.

Whilst the corpus of literature discussing access to children's voices in research has increased significantly in research reported from western countries in recent years (Dunn, 2015; Tangen, 2008), less attention has been given to this approach within Asian contexts. Waterson and Behera (2011) believe that given the rich diversity of cultural experiences of children in Asian countries, we should attend to what they may be able to tell us about their lives. However, Balagopalan (2011) suggests that in much of the research conducted in schools in poorer communities, children are expected to assume a passive role signalling a denial of their agency. Whilst advocating the provision of greater opportunities for children in India and elsewhere in Asia to contribute their experiences, Balagopalan recognises that there are many cultural challenges related to the ways in which childhood is perceived that require additional consideration if the voices of children from marginalised groups are to be fairly interpreted and represented in research.

The Research Site

Research was conducted with a purposive sample of children in an NGO run school for rural children in a town a hundred kilometres away from Pune in the state of Maharashtra. The pupils who attend this school live in villages around the town and belong to scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities. Their family income is less than Rs.5000 (£50) a month, which is an indicator that they live at the designated below the poverty level set by the Indian Government (World Bank 2017).

The NGO managing the school has a philosophy of providing education to underprivileged children and has schools in several parts of India and elsewhere. It has adopted a holistic approach to supporting children, which in addition to providing education ensures the social welfare of children through the provision of meals and health care. The school is financed by a corporate house, which has business interests and has undertaken intensive construction in the area. The land for this construction was acquired from some of the families of the children attending the school. Many other families who did not own land have lost their traditional way of livelihood, which revolved around fishing and food gathering from the local forest. This situation has created some negative publicity for the corporation and to mitigate this, they have established a school for the children in the community. Although, the surrounding villages have many more school going children, they provide funding for only 100. Other children attend the Zilla Parishad School (Government funded school).

At the time of the fieldwork there were approximately 100 pupils enrolled at the school. These pupils were taught by eight well-qualified teachers and additional specialists who

provide lessons in music, physical education and art and support pupils with learning difficulties. Additional classroom support was provided by local community members, trained at the school. The school is well equipped with facilities including computer labs, playgrounds, art studio, music room and a medical room. They follow the Maharashtra State Board examination syllabus and prescribed curriculum. The majority of children from the district attend the local Zilla Parishad School, which has fewer teachers, is poorly resourced and only accommodates primary school children. To access secondary school, children have to travel a significant distance or live in boarding schools. This makes it difficult for them to continue beyond the primary years.

Methodology

The rational while planning the research strategy for this study was to adopt methods that would enable children to reflect on their real-life situation as first-generation learners. A flexible qualitative case study design was adopted to observe and study children in their school and home environment. Hammersley (1990) suggests that this approach is advantageous to educational researchers, as it "is not far removed from the sort of approach that we use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings" (p. 4). It is however, the formalising of research through adopting methods of observation and the gathering of qualitative data that ensures that this approach gains insights seen as trustworthy and generalisable. By spending intense periods of time in the field in order to both understand the research context and collect data, opportunities were provided to gain an appreciation of the lives of children and their families from inside their community. The data that informs this paper is part of a larger set including that provided by parents, teachers and children through interviews and observations. For the purpose of this paper only data collected from children is used in order to consider the ways in which children's voices may inform our understanding of their experiences.

Collecting Contextual Evidence from the Research Site

Understanding the social and cultural conditions of a community is important when analysing data, as drawing on contextual information and evidence assists in developing an appreciation of influences upon the data. Documents from the study school regarding their policy on inclusion, individual education plans or extra help/tuition records, teaching and learning policies, attendance register and health records were collected. Photographs from around the school campus were also collated. In addition, the local government office (Panchayat) was visited to collect information about the socio-economic status of the

community, the availability of government aid for education and health provision, and to ensure that an accurate picture of the community was presented.

However, one needs to be careful while using such contextual information to explain features of the research, because cause and effect are not always straightforward. It was important to consider when drawing upon contextual information that it should be used appropriately, ensuring that it was relevant to the issue being studied and contributed to the development of the research. This consideration was addressed when interviewing children by enabling them to confirm or refute the interpretation of contextual information gathered through the research process.

Participant Profiles

For each of the child participants a profile was developed, which included details of their background drawn from staff, parent and child interviews. These profiles provided information about their experiences, family situation, personality characteristics and current educational status, and enabled the researchers to gain important insights into the lives of each child (see Table 1).

Table 1

Child Profiles

Student	Gender	Age	Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled caste	Siblings N=
Student A	Female	11	SC	6
Student B	Male		ST	1
Student C	Female	10	ST	3
Student D	Female	12	ST	3
Student E	Male	11	SC	2
Student F	Female	11	SC	1
Student G	Male	10	SC	3
Student H	Male	12	ST	2
Student I	Male	10	ST	1
Student J	Female	12	SC	4

Mean age =10.9

Ragin and Amoroso (2010) propose that due to the complexity of some topics, the work required to adequately study a single case increases exponentially. When considering how many participants can be included in a qualitative study, this factor needs to be taken into account. They observe that comparative case studies should include no more than 12-15 cases. For this study 10 children from classes 5 and 6 of the school (ages 10 to 12 years) were interviewed. These children had previously attended a Zilla Parishad School prior to transfer to the NGO school and were selected because they had attended this latter institution for sufficient time to allow for reflection on their experiences in contrasting school provisions.

The interview questions were open ended and deliberately broad in order to enable the pupils to respond in any way they wished. They were piloted and revised to maintain a focus on the community studied (see Appendix 1) (Huberman & Miles, 2002). As the concern in this study was to understand children's perspectives, questions were developed to address issues from general to specific to follow a progression of participant's experiences. This open-ended approach to interviewing was successful in enabling pupils to take some control of the interview by responding with as much detail as they wished.

In order to facilitate discussions about the challenges and opportunities the school provides, a fictitious situation, though one often experienced by first generation learners, was described and pupils asked to analyse or interpret this and where appropriate discuss the scenario in relation to their own experiences (see Appendix 2). The interviews were conducted over a two-day period in Marathi or Hindi as determined by the individual pupils. In addition to the interviews informal interactions with pupils, recorded through observation field notes, assisted with interpretation of the experiences of those in the sample.

Group Work Observations

Following principles developed by Delamont (2002), every child was observed in three contexts:

1. Where pupils were free to choose both their activities and their companions (e.g. Playground)

2. Where large groups of pupils were relatively free to mingle within broad categories (e.g. assembly, lunch settings,)

3. Where small groups of children were in close proximity (notably in classroom, art and music lessons)

In addition pupils were observed after school every evening and in their homes to collect additional data and formulate an understanding of their life outside of school. Observations

were conducted as unobtrusively as possible and field notes maintained noting verbatim speech that assisted analysis and interpretation of the data.

During the fieldwork a number of safeguards were established to ensure fair interpretation of the data obtained from children. A process of multi-methods triangulation (Patton, 2001) was applied whereby it was possible through observation and interviews with other sources to verify information provided by children. Similarly, analyst triangulation which encouraged verification of interpretation by more than one researcher ensured that only data for which consensus was achieved was used in reporting findings. We contend that this approach to establishing the trustworthiness of data is not only important in terms of justifying the interpretation of findings, but also as a means of ensuring respect for the voices of children who are prepared to share their experiences.

Emerging Themes

A number of key themes emerged from the data. In particular four recurring issues can be seen to have had particular significance for the children in the study, these being:

- Previous experience of schooling
- Feelings about their current NGO School
- Aspirations
- Support and obstacles to learning

Previous experience of schooling:

The data suggests that student's experiences at the Government funded Zilla Parishad School were characterised by low expectation and a lack of ambition for what they might achieve. Pupils described situations in which at this School teachers sometimes failed to attend, had not prepared lessons, did not give feedback or mark pupils' books, and where they believed that little worthwhile learning occurred. There was little teacher accountability, resulting in pupils sometimes doing menial tasks or running errands for teachers.

For example, one child said:

> *On most days, I had to sweep and clean the classroom or on some occasions go to the shop in the next village to get things for the teacher.*

Whilst another stated that:

In my old school our teacher would get angry if we did not attend school regularly, but there were so many days when he stayed absent, sometimes even 2-3 days a week. We used to play all day long with friends.

In a study of over 3,000 public primary schools across 19 Indian states Kremer, Muralidharan, Chaudhury, Rogers, and Hammer (2005), reported that over 25% of teachers were likely to be absent from school on any working day, a situation that has not greatly changed in the intervening years (Muralidharan, Das, Holla & Nohpal, 2017). The statements made by the children in this study indicated that although teachers were frequently absent, pupils were expected to attend. Lack of accountability in government schools leading to teacher absenteeism and negligence are amongst the main reasons cited by pupils for the deterioration in the quality of education received by children from the village.

The reasons two children gave for being out of the Government School for more than a year, before the community liaison officer from the NGO School persuaded their parents to send them back were expressed as follows:

At the Zilla Parishad School my teacher used to get upset if I stayed absent from school, but he did not come to school every day he would get upset. We ended up playing with friends in school two or three times a week.

I left the Zilla Parishad School because I could not understand the lessons teacher taught us. I used to make mistakes and when I did something wrong the teacher used to get angry and hit us.

Almost all children spoke about the use of corporal punishment in the Government School. Corporal punishment is outlawed in Indian schools, though studies suggest that parents and indeed children are often ambivalent about its use (Morrow & Singh, 2014). The impression given was that being treated in an abusive way at their previous school had an alienating effect and they gradually lost interest in studies and dropped out. Drop-out rates from primary schools in India remain high, particularly amongst first generation learners many of whom live in circumstances that do not provide effective support or infrastructure to enable them to study. However, as Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008) state; "it is the responsibility of the school system to make the experience pleasant and interesting to the children, so what is required is to reform the contents and processes and make them more relevant to the lives of the children and linked to the environments in which they live" (pp. 38-39). Staff in the NGO school recognised this and had taken action to ensure a learning environment that was both

welcoming and supportive.

Children's beliefs about the Focus NGO School:

Most of the children's comments about the NGO School centred on teaching and learning. They spoke about how this school offered better facilities, an interesting choice of subjects, regular teacher attendance and teachers with more relevant experience and qualifications. An important issue was creation of an ethos that differed greatly from that previously experienced. Children felt safe in school because teachers were willing to accept their limitations and work within the confines of what they were capable of delivering. As one boy said:

> *At this school teachers don't get upset if we don't do work at home. All they want is for us to come to school.*

This comment did not indicate a lack of interest on the part of the teacher, but rather recognition of the difficulties of working in the home environment. Another factor in motivating children to attend school, was the provision of free meals. Although teaching and learning are key factors in determining academic outcomes and were valued and discussed by the children, free meals were important because for some they provided the only source of nourishment which they could guarantee on a regular basis. We get an insight into this from the comments of children:

> *When we go to school in the morning we are very hungry because most nights we don't have dinner. We really look forward to our breakfast and lunch, they give us as much as we ask for and the food in school is tasty.*
> *I can't wait to come back to school after holidays because I love the food they give us.*

Mander (2015) in a study of tribal communities in India emphasised that children in this population are more likely to be hungry than those in other groups. There is, he suggests, a direct correlation between poor school attendance and inadequate nutrition. When children who are hungry attend they often lack energy and are less likely to perform well. They are also more prone to illness which impacts negatively upon school attendance. The Government of India (1995) instigated a National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) in 1995 and research suggests (Drèze & Kingdon, 2001; Jayaraman & Simroth, 2011) that the provision of meals has encouraged increased enrolment and attendance, a finding that equates to that from evidence gathered during the study reported in this paper. Whilst the free school meal scheme is available to all in India, including the Zilla Parishad School previously attended by children in this study, the NGO school had extended this to

provide meals for children on arrival in the morning, believing that this was likely to improve attendance, and academic performance.

The NGO School have a playground the importance of which is summed up by a child's comment:

I like to play in school because after I get home I have to do work and, I never get to play. Another child also recognised the importance of the social aspect of school:

This is the only place where I can laugh.

New experiences including field trips were important to children and they enjoyed the opportunity to extend their horizon beyond their immediate environment. From their comments, it was evident that if circumstances would allow, they would have liked their siblings who were not at the school to have similar opportunities. For example, one child suggested:

My brother would love to sit on a bus and go to a new place with friends.

Aspirations:

The NGO school instilled in pupils a belief that they are capable of achieving anything they aspire to do or be, and will have support from teachers to reach their goals. At this school staff believe that each time a student finishes school, the family wins and the community gains too. All children interviewed had a goal and were zealous in their belief that education was the only way to realise this. One ten-year-old girl said:

> *When I think that I might have to leave school, I get upset because I want to go to a university in the city and learn to be a teacher. That is why I want to come to school regularly.*

A pupil who helps his father keep accounts for the family tea stall said,

> *My dad is pleased that I am so good at doing numbers. That is why I can do accounts for him and no one can deceive him.*

During these interviews, it was apparent that parents value education. As one child said,

> *My siblings and I have to study hard or my father gets upset. He wants us to do better than him and be able to read and write. He knows how essential it is to be literate.*

The school talks to pupils about junior college and university. This strategy changes pupils' aspirations. For instance, when asked about future goals, a year five student said he wants to be an astronaut. The interviewer challenged this by saying:

> *That's brilliant but have you thought of a plan 'B' if that doesn't work out.*

His response was one of determination:

> *No I have not because I know I am going to be an astronaut.*

This level of self-belief coming from a child whose family may not even be aware of India's space programme, is a testimony to the school's success in raising aspirations and helping pupils build their confidence to believe they can achieve their ambitions, as long as they work hard and progress to higher education.

Support and obstacles to learning:

All children participating in this research came from homes where parents were illiterate. A lack of access to resources to assist them with their studies, and limited support networks to help them negotiate an education and social system that is beyond the experience of earlier generations, can impact negatively upon their opportunities to progress. Haque (2015) drawing upon evidence from the Indian National Sample Survey for 2007/8, identifies financial constraints, an inability to cope with studies, commitment to activities essential to family income and participation in household chores, amongst the main causes of children from impoverished rural communities failing in education. This assertion was in evidence from the data collected in this research.

Girls talked about looking after the family and responsibilities in the house, although some did work outside the home. For example, one said,

> *I have three sisters and one small brother who is six years old. We girls in the family have to look after our brother and do all the work in the house.*

The children interviewed take these roles seriously and such tasks are prioritised, as exemplified by a girl who said,

> *My mother does not keep well after my father died. My uncles have told us that we must take care of her. So we always look after her when we are back from school. My elder sister looks after her during the day.*

Other children while recognising the negative influence of one parent, feel responsible for the other, and declare a need to share the burden with them. Comments made by one student reflect this:

> *If you have a father who drinks a lot and is sick its hard to study. He does not work and nobody wants to give him work. My mother has to work in brick factory to earn money. Its very tough for her because he is violent. So I have to help her and do work to make sure she has less to worry about.*

Others indicated they do not have a choice about their role in household management. For example two pupils who said:

> *Somebody has to look after my grandmother when she is unwell. When that happens I have to stay at home.*

> *According to my mother it is crucial to keep my father happy, so when he is ill one of us has to be around if he needs anything and take care of him or he gets furious.*

It was clear from one girl's comments that girls are often withdrawn from the school to support their mothers in household duties.

> *Because my sister failed she now stays at home to help my mother because my father said it's no use going to school if you can't pass.* (Her sister was 14 when she dropped out).

Observations conducted alongside interviews suggest that girls are more disadvantaged than boys and more likely to be engaged in household work when compared to their brothers. As evidenced by a ten-year-old student's comment:

> *My grandmother says that helping our mother to carry out domestic chores is important because it prepares us for our future role as house wives and caregivers.*

When questioned about why her older brother had dropped out of secondary school, she said,

> *Which parent would not like to send his child to school? Everyone knows education gets you more respect and better jobs but my parents are very poor and they could not afford to send him. It costs a lot of money to stay at the boarding school and you have to buy stationary and uniforms.*

With limited time and little understanding at home, it was apparent that the support provided through school had a positive impact on educational achievements. One child said:

> *If there is someone who can help you study when you don't understand it makes it easier. At the Zilla Parishad School very often I would feel like shutting the book and not opening it again because it was so tough.*

The comparison between support provided at the study school and that from the previous school was stark.

> *Very often I would feel like shutting the book and not opening it again because it was so tough' and 'There was no one to help my brother (secondary school student) at home and the teacher does not have time in school. So, I think he is going to fail and stay in the same class.*

Such comments show that children find it difficult to cope with the pressures of schoolwork. Some spoke about the obstacles to their desire to attend secondary school and circumstances,

which might prevent them from progressing to higher education.

> *After this school if I want to go to junior college I have to go to Pune city. It takes two and a half hours by S.T bus (State transport) and the ticket is expensive. My parents cannot afford it. The only option I have is to go and stay with my aunt who lives there, but I don't know if she will agree to it'*

Verification of data

This paper has drawn exclusively upon data obtained from interviews with children and observations of their school and home contexts. To ensure trustworthiness of the findings reported it was essential to verify what we had heard through a process of triangulation. Choices about the excerpts from transcripts used in this paper were made on the basis of being able to verify what we were told through both observation of the school and home contexts and additional interviews with parents and teachers. Einarsdóttir (2007) states that an aim of research with children should be to contribute positively to their wellbeing in both the short and the long term. She suggests that keeping this in mind research which seeks children's perspectives can yield valuable data and contribute to the work of those who wish to bring about change. However, in common with other researchers (Crivello, Camfield, & Woodhead, 2009; Spyrou, 2011) Einarsdóttir recognises that depending solely upon the views of children is unlikely to provide a wholly reliable picture of an educational or social situation. We concur with this conclusion and emphasise that when referring to children's voices to discuss any situation it is necessary to only make use only that data which can be effectively verified through other sources.

Conclusion

In 1995 The United Nations adopted as a definition of absolute poverty, "A condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services" (p. 38). The children who contributed to this research live in circumstances that fall within this definition. For researchers who come to the field from a situation of comfort, security and relative wealth there are challenges in gaining insights into factors that impact upon educational opportunities and achievements.

We believe that children are uniquely positioned to provide insights into their experiences of school and those determinants within their lives that affect their potential for making progress. The honesty with which they express opinions and their abilities to reflect

upon experiences and events can make a significant contribution to understanding the educational systems provided. Researchers who are motivated to conduct investigations in the hope that their work may serve to improve the lives of marginalised learners through an understanding of the causes of exclusion, may gain useful critical insights through listening to the voices of children.

Through the involvement of children in this research it was possible to gain an understanding of the experiences that had shaped their views of schooling. The data collected suggests that the children who attend the NGO School recognise that they are in a position of educational privilege when compared to their peers who attend the Zilla Parishad School. As a result of their experiences their aspirations have been raised and they believe that they will achieve more than their peers who they see being left behind socially and academically. The data indicates that girls in this community may still be disadvantaged by a belief that they should have a distinct domestic role in their families and that an academic education is of less importance to them than it may be to boys. This is an area in need of further investigation as has been discussed by other researchers working within India (Haridarshan, 2015; Mukherjee, 2013).

Having had their aspirations raised it will be interesting to see whether their ambitions are realised and the degree to which systems put into place by the NGO school are sustainable. These children will carry the label of being from a scheduled tribe and scheduled caste into adulthood and may continue to face prejudices associated with these designations. It is important to recognise that the situation created by this school in Maharashtra is not the norm within the state, or indeed across India. However, by conducting a study of this unique situation we have gained insights into the advantages and challenges that accrue from an initiative of this nature, which can be used to further enhance the provision being made by the NGO school.

The investigation reported in this paper aimed to provide children with an opportunity to shape the views of the researchers about a unique provision being developed to improve educational opportunities. Whilst it would have been possible to gain insights and make observations about the provision made and the changes in the lives of children through other approaches, listening to their voices provided unique perspectives, which would not otherwise have been gained. As researchers we contend that the challenges of interpreting children's voices remains critical in the research works of this nature. The use of other data sources, including observations and document scrutiny and seeking the perspectives of other service

users and providers is essential to verify data and to ensure that the voices of children as presented provides a fair account of their experiences.

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Appendix 1

Interview questions

- Do you enjoy playing with friends in the playground?
- Do you enjoy the meals at school?
- Is it convenient to have a school bus pick and drop you from school?
- Do you have to take cattle out for grazing during school time or work in the fields during harvest or plantation season?
- What happens if you come to school with your homework not done?
- Who helps you with your schoolwork?
- How do your parents react if your report card shows bad grades?

Appendix 2

Scenario: the researcher met a child when visiting a family in the village of Satpathy in Maharashtra and I wanted them to write down my address so they could send me letters, but none of the elders in the family could read or write so they called their nine-year-old son who could write. He told me he had a very good teacher at school who taught him how to read and write.

The presentation of this scenario was followed by a series of questions:

- Do you think the child in the scenario felt proud of the fact that he could read and write? Why?
- Do you have good teachers at your school? Who do you like best?
- What do you like about the teacher and what they do?
- Do you like any particular subject? Why?
- How do you know you are good at that subject?
- Do you have lots of friends at school?
- Is there any child you look up to? Why?
- What do you like/dislike about school?

Themes to explore with the children (1): Relationship with friends and their parents, experiences, lack of opportunity due to financial constraints and other reasons.

- What makes you want to come to school every morning?
- What would be your ideal job when you leave school?
- What kind of education would you need to get there?
- Do you think all children have these opportunities? Why/why not?

Themes to explore with the children (2): Lack of support at home, finding external support and parental support.

- Can you tell me if children who come to school are better or worse off than those who don't get to come? Why?
- Do you think it's sometimes difficult for parents to send their children to school? Why?

Themes to explore with the children (3): financial pressure and attitudes to schooling.