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Agency, aspirations and citizenship: Non-formal education from the perspective of children in street situations in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper explores an NGO-based non-formal education (NFE) intervention in Pakistan from the perspective of its recipients, children in street situations. Recognizing children as agential beings, we draw on participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 children, aged 10–19 years. Young people discussed the impact of the intervention on their self-worth and future aspirations. They also reflected on their growing awareness of civic issues and citizenship rights. The study emphasizes the importance of NFE in providing opportunities to the most marginalized and those without adequate documentation, particularly in a context when state support can be lacking.

KEYWORDS

agency, child rights, children in street situations, non-formal education

INTRODUCTION

The presence of 'street children' in urban spaces is neither a recent phenomenon, nor is it limited to a particular geographical setting (Connolly, 1990). In part, this is due to the growth and expansion of global cities and a corresponding rise in migration towards them (Islam et al., 2014). Karachi, Pakistan which forms the study site of this project, is no exception. With an approximate population of 20 million, it is not only the largest urban centre in Pakistan but also home

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to the highest number of street children in the country, many of whom have inadequate or no access to education (Arifeen, 2017). In this paper, we investigate the role of NGO-based non-formal educational interventions for children in street situations in Pakistan using the example of Initiator Human Development Foundation (IHDF). By non-formal education (NFE), we mean informal schooling, outside the framework of formal schools which aims to prepare children for enrolment into formal schools (Hoppers, 2006). The IHDF also assists children in street situations with the acquisition of key documentation, such as birth certificates, to support their applications to formal schooling. We are interested in how children discuss their experiences of the intervention in relation to their sense of self-worth and future aspirations, but also whether it caused an awareness of civic issues and their citizenship rights.

We use the term *children in street situations* (CSS) as coined by des Hommes (2010). CSS refer to a particular type of street child—who beg or work on the street during the day and return to their families and homes at night. Importantly, the term recognizes that children continue to maintain links with family members. Poverty has been identified as a key cause for children to turn to the street (Manjengwa et al., 2016) along with abuse, neglect at home (Schaffner, 2013), migration from rural-to-urban areas, orphanhood and abandonment (Abebe and Kjørholt, 2009). A desire for financial independence, recreation and the excitement of city life are other noted causes (Ali et al., 2004). Earlier research often attributed blame on families for children taking to the streets. However, more recently there has been an acknowledgement that children make tactical decisions leading them to the streets (O'Kane, 2003). Given this, in our paper we foreground children's voices through presenting findings from our qualitative interview-based study with 20 children (aged 10–19 years) based at the IHDF. This is a prominent non-formal educational-based NGO in the field which works directly with CSS.

Children in street situations in Pakistan

Children in street situations in Pakistan occupy the non-formal economy engaging in rag picking, begging and sometimes prostitution (Abdullah et al., 2014). A qualitative health-based investigation of 19 CSS between the ages 10 and 19 years in the city of Rawalpindi found children witnessed hostility from the public when begging, but less so when working on the streets, signifying a tacit acceptance in Pakistan of street child labour and their contribution to the non-formal economy (Abdullah et al., 2014).

In Pakistan, CSS are a heterogeneous category, varying across ethnicity and religion. The children in our study hail from the Hindu religious minority group, and religious minorities in Pakistan such as Hindus and Christians are often treated as 'second-class' citizens, subjected to violence and oppression (Naveed et al., 2014, p. 49), facing discrimination during admissions in educational institutions, employment and access to basic health care (Azad, 2004; Malik, 2017). Importantly, due to their faith, social class and minority status they can face issues acquiring formal identity documents, specifically computerized national identity cards (CNICs) and child registration certificates commonly known as a B-forms (used to register children under 18, before they are eligible for CNICs).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 80% of unregistered children are situated in South Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa (Idris, 2021) while UNICEF reports that one in four children under the age of 5 do not officially exist due to the absence of birth registration (Van der Straaten, 2020). In Pakistan, there are different reasons for the lack of registration. These include lack of understanding of systems and processes for obtaining registration,

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discriminatory policies towards minorities, restrictions around movement, lack of resources and statelessness (Idris, 2021). Importantly, B-Forms and CNICs (registration documents) are crucial for access to fundamental rights such as the right to education for all (Hashmi, 2021). Their absence means that these children are unable to enrol in formal schools or sit for examinations, receive any health care or legal protection that they may be entitled to. The issues around the acquisition of identity documents further marginalize CSS and their families (West, 2003), affecting group empowerment, preventing them from leveraging their rights for provision of basic amenities or electing candidates of their choice (Hunter, 2019) and exacerbating the discrimination against these children and the negative perceptions about them not being legitimate citizens (Consortium for Street Children, 2013). Therefore, recognizing the intersection of poverty with other identity characteristics held by CSS is important as they can influence social and educational experiences.

Non-formal educational opportunities for CSS in Pakistan

According to UNICEF (2017), globally Pakistan has the second largest out of school population (approximately 22.8 million children, aged between 5 and 16 years), constituting about 44% of the total population in this age cohort (Durrani et al., 2017). This is despite the fact that in 2010, the government introduced Article 25-A in the Pakistani Constitution, which declares that the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children aged between 5 and 16 years old (Pakistan, 1982). A study conducted by Jumani et al. (2011) attributed children being out of school in Pakistan to a shortage of formal schools and the high costs of formal education. They further advocated the need for more non-formal systems of education to cater to the rising demand for education currently not being met by the formal education system.

Non-formal education constitutes a type of education which takes place outside the framework of formally organized schooling. It can include various types of structured learning situations but unlike formal learning does not have the same level of curriculum, syllabus or accreditation (Ngaka et al., 2012). The curriculum is flexible, and learning is intentional and organized with the needs and requirements of the students placed at its core (Grajcevci & Shala, 2016). Providers of NFE can include non-profit organizations such as NGOs and trade unions, as well as profit-making institutions (Carron & Carr-Hill, 1991). NFE is often organized with particular target group with a clearly defined purpose meant to address problems faced by communities these groups belong to Ngaka et al. (2012). While formal education can often require legal identification as a pre-requisite to enrolment, this may not be the case for NFE organizations, particularly in Pakistan.

Non-formal education is often a key resource for CSS. Gebretsadik in his study on CSS from Southern Ethiopia (2017) highlights that ground realities of the lives of such children require flexible approaches towards education allowing them a combination of education and work. This is because enrolment into full-time formal primary or secondary education may be unsustainable, undesirable or unbeneficial for them. In Pakistan, non-formal NGO educational interventions can be more widespread than educational facilities offered by the government (Ulleberg, 2009). However, there is no mechanism to evaluate their effectiveness (Hyder & Malik, 2007). The case we focus on it this paper, namely the IHDF is a medium-scale NGO founded in 1988 and officially listed as a non-profit organization in 2004. Its central remit is the assistance and reintegration of CSS into mainstream society primarily through the introduction of educational opportunities. IHDF's NFE programme can best be categorized as supplementary, providing support to a disadvantaged group of children with the goal of preparing them for enrolment into formal education

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schools (Hoppers, 2006). As this NFE programme is tailor-made for CSS, alongside preparation for admission into formal schools, this programme also provides child rights awareness and assists children and parents with acquiring their CNICs and B-Forms, a pre-requisite for enrolment into formal schools. Children do not require identity documents for enrolment into IHDF's programme but once enrolled the organization works with them and their families, to obtain their documents.

Children in street situations and agency

The notion of childhood agency centres around the capacity of children to achieve physical, cognitive and emotional impact within society and thus facilitates the rearrangement of existing social structures (Oswell, 2013, p. 42). Glauser (2015) discusses how childhood should be viewed as socially constructed, meaning it varies across cultures and societies and that children should be seen as social beings with diverse needs and rights and active agents who construct their social lives. Our paper advocates such an approach, in accounting for the distinct experiences of CSS (White, 2002), particularly in relation to NFE interventions designed for them. Given that our study is set in Pakistan, we recognize that the concept of 'agency', when applied as a framework to study children in the global south, needs to be carefully considered (Spyrou, 2018, p. 95). Agency as a construct originates from ideas in western philosophy, aligning with the notion of an independent self, reflecting Western individualism, which is not always applicable to constructs of the self in the global south where a more interdependent self in relation to family can be especially important (Abebe, 2019, p. 5). We are also mindful that children in our study have had unique childhood experiences on the street and have faced social inequality, stigma and deprivation from a young age. Given this, we turn to the idea of tactical agency in our work. Tactical agency originated from scholarship by de Certeau (1984) and was further developed by Honwana (2005) on their work on child soldiers in an African context. de Certeau (1984) defined this space of tactics as being the space of the other or the 'art of the weak' (de Certeau, 1988, p. 38) contrasting it to 'strategies' which are employed by those in powerful positions to further secure their positions in a space that is already controlled by them. Tactics, he elaborates, are a mode of resistance to strategies' and are used by the marginalized or powerless actors to challenge and appropriate the space of the other and affirm their free individuality. In other words, tactics are forms of anti-establishment and spontaneous ways devised by the marginalized to assert their collective freedom and resist the dominant order (de Certeau, 1988).

Honwana describes how a tactical agent acts from a position of weakness and, despite having extremely constrained choices available, still attempts to find strategies to cope and to improve their lives and survive. Tactical agency recognizes that certain groups of vulnerable children can be faced by constraints imposed by adults and global and structural processes yet they still try to express agency. Langevang and Gough (2009, p. 752), within their research, apply the concept of tactical agency to urban youth in Ghana, explaining it as actions that are an attempt to adjust to their conditions as opposed to an attempt to have complete control exerted over their lives. Bordonaro (2011, p. 144), draws on this concept in their study of CSS living in constrained environments, who exercise their agency to move beyond narratives of 'victims-or-heroes'. Applying the concept of 'tactical agency' to CSS, which we do in this paper, enables the introduction of an alternative way to understand their decision-making process, moving beyond these binaries (Ungruhe, 2019, p. 41). In a Pakistani context for CSS, tactical agency can be considered in relation to family expectations but also constraints such as structural inequalities, minority status, discrimination and societal challenges

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(Punch, 2007). Here, children negotiate and renegotiate their individual agency alongside fulfilling familial and social expectations and obligations (Robson et al., 2007, p. 135).

THE PRESENT STUDY: METHODS, SAMPLE AND DATA SOURCES

The present study uses an evaluative qualitative research design to explore the experiences of Karachi-based CSS enrolled in a NFE-based intervention by the NGO, the IHDF. Methods include participant observation, semi-structured interviews and non-formal dialogues with 20 children and young people (aged 10–19). Data collection was divided into two phases: phase 1 comprised participant observation and informal dialogues, and phase 2 involved interviews. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee at the associated institute in which the researchers are based. All data were collected just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study site

The study site consisted of IHDF funded school, founded in 2017, located in a neighbourhood in Jamshed town in Karachi called Azam Basti. This NFE school was also referred to as the 'temple school' due to its distinct location inside a Hindu temple. At the school (named Chand Academy for the purposes of this study), children who are CSS are enrolled into a NFE programme. IHDF prepares them for admissions into formal education schools and guides them through the complex process of obtaining identity-based citizenship documents a requirement of formal schooling. Chand Academy is the first school established by IHDF and its success prompted IHDF to expand this model to other localities. Access to the school was granted by the IHDF, following a series of meetings with one of the researchers and the director of the organization and an explanation of the purpose of the study.

Participants

A total of 20 young people (10 boys, 10 girls), aged between 10 and 19 years, subject to the intervention for at least a month, were interviewed. Convenience sampling was used for recruitment and children who were available and willing to participate were interviewed. The participants belonged to the minority Hindu community, often subject to dual marginalization, based on religion and class (Dilawri et al., 2014). Seven of the 10 female participants were between 10 and 15 years old (Saanjh, Meera, Roma, Dia, Kaamini, Aanchal and Bhavya); the remaining three (Sapna, Padma and Rani) were between 16 and 19 years. Of the male participants all 10, were between 1 and 15 years old (Kabir, Rahul, Ram, Amar, Shivesh, Shahrukh, Rohan, Aryan, Siddharth, Sooraj). Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Data collection and analysis

One of the researchers (N.K.K.) spent 2 weeks at the Chand Academy, observing the children in their school setting and getting to know them. During these initial visits to the schools, the

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researcher engaged in informal dialogues with the young people and observed their daily routines, which provided in-depth information about their experience of attending the school and their everyday lives (Beazley, 2000). The informal dialogues allowed for trust rapport building and were often led by the young people (Musante and DeWalt, 2010). These dialogues informed the interview schedule (Murchison, 2010). To ensure further validity of measure, the interview questions were also discussed with the IHDF Director.

The interviewer positioned themself as distinct from the teachers and other members of the organization. Each of the researchers was from different social class and faith backgrounds from the children and throughout the research process extensive field notes were taken and reflexive team discussions held around positionality within the research (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). All conversations and interviews were conducted in the local language (Urdu) and later translated to English.

Parental consent was obtained before conducting interviews with young people, and it was emphasized to everyone that participation was voluntary. Although written Urdu consent forms were developed using clear language, often recorded oral consent was obtained, following an explanation of the study, when the parents were unable to read.

Semi-structured interviews which explored children's motivations, expectations and experiences of education were conducted after school hours at the school premises, allowing the interviewer and participants some privacy. Our small-scale but intensive design allowed us to develop an understanding of the nuances of children's life both within the street and their experiences within Chand Academy. While the larger study involved interviews with the IHDF staff, teachers and the Director of the organization, here we present children's data only. However, the different sources of data did allow us to corroborate findings across our different data sets (Eisner, 1991) thus enhancing the validity of our findings.

Transcribed qualitative data were analysed thematically through hand coding and was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Data were transcribed and read repeatedly; initial codes were generated separately but then reviewed together as a team. While our initial theoretical categories drew from existing literature on CSS and NFE initiatives, our code book developed based on team discussions following an initial sample of transcripts (Flick, 2018). The codes continued to be refined following ongoing discussions and study of the transcripts.

We now move to the findings from our intensive analysis process. Data presented demonstrate typical but, in some cases, exceptional accounts of what children shared with us.

FINDINGS

In our wider study, children were asked about their experiences of the street prior to their engagement with the NFE intervention. All 20 participants were from strained financial circumstances and reported involvement in street begging often against their parents' wishes. They described how street life granted them a degree of financial independence but was also a means of recreation. This act could be viewed as an act of tactical agency, or micro resistance (de Certeau, 1984), as the children were attempting to improve their lives and survive in the face of structural inequalities. In the absence of access to public spaces and limited means of recreation, they developed a form of alterity to the social reality in their search for spaces of individual expressions and asserting their collective freedom (de Certeau, 1988).

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Initiator Human Development Foundation recognized the desire for recreation by children and thus opted for a NFE model where games and learning through play were incorporated to appeal to these children. The children who were also still living with their families revealed during interviews that the decision to join the NFE intervention programme was a result of parental intervention, and not always their own choice. It appeared that the children had less power when it came to enrolment in the intervention, but once enrolled, they chose to stay there. The choice to stay reflected a more interdependent sense of agency, in which familial concerns were centred. In our findings section, we consider the experiences of children once in the programme. Two key themes are presented, associated with firstly how CSS discuss the influence of the intervention on their sense of self-worth and future aspirations and secondly how the intervention has raised their awareness of civic and citizenship issues.

Self-worth and future aspirations

Shift in perceptions

Following enrolment in the NGO programme, the children reported a shift in perceptions across a variety of aspects of their lives and self-worth particularly in how they viewed street work, how they viewed education and in how they believed others perceived them. All 20 participants had engaged in work/begging activities on the street. In conversations, many of them were self-conscious and initially denied street affiliation during informal dialogues, only to confide in the researcher later. When they did confide, it was accompanied by justifications like: 'I used to go because I was young and not sensible' or 'we did not know better' and 'our teachers taught us that we should not beg'. All participants reported having stopped begging activities on the street since their enrolment in Chand Academy. The perceptions of children regarding education also changed since they joined the intervention. Many of them had very little idea of what education was. As Sapna (female), age 16 stressed, 'first none of us understood school. The teacher would be exhausted trying to explain to us, but we would not retain anything ... but gradually we started studying and saw our lives improving'.

The interviews further revealed that their perception of education had evolved such that many of the children began associating education with upward social mobility. As Sooraj (male), age 12, remarked:

> Now I understand, studies are good. Without education we'll have to work for someone else, do their housework or beg. If we study, we'll get a job, a room, a car and buy clothes for our siblings.

The children also attached powerful moral connotations to education continually using phrases such as 'children studying is the right thing' or 'because of education we will become good'. Receiving education seemingly enhanced their self-esteem and self-worth and they appeared to believe that through education they could regain their identity as Pakistani citizens (Kaime-Atterhög, 2012, p. 29). Given that they belonged to the Hindu minority community in Pakistan, who are often marginalized and discriminated against (Dilawri et al., 2014), this was an important finding. As 16-year-old Padma (female) remarked:

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> Before the Initiator team came, people would threaten to displace us. The initiator team came and said these are our children and we are educating them. They provided us with a sense of security.

Participants also discussed various benefits and new learned skills from the NGO intervention. During informal conversations, several children mentioned that they were scheduled to start computer lessons which they all were looking forward to as none of them had ever seen a real computer. It was also observed that the children were being familiarized with technology and their teachers often played educational videos for them on a tablet. The children also spoke about developing communication skills and learning about environmental and community living. Shivesh (male, 15) discusses his learning about waste disposal:

> People in our community used to throw trash around. We learned in school to not litter, so we including our parents are more careful now.

Shivesh's words point to the emergence of behavioural changes within children enrolled at IHDF's intervention. As evident by the data, the intervention seemed to instil within them awareness and knowledge regarding social etiquette, health and hygiene and also positively influenced their daily routine, peer relations and academic performance, reintegrating them into mainstream society. The researcher witnessed a display of positive peer relations where the older children were often seen assisting the younger ones with classwork and helping their teachers in disciplining them. Padma (female, 16) further describes this:

> Before we wouldn't shower or clean up. We didn't know anything about cleanliness. Now we know that if we stay dirty, germs attack and we may fall ill so we wash our hands before eating and shower everyday.

The learning of basic skills and self-care was clearly recognized by the young people as well as an acknowledgement that the school intervention enabled them to learn how to make friends and avoid fights on the street. Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2010) in their study on friendship as a survival strategy for CSS in Accra stated that attributes such as reciprocity, co-operation and mutuality are often missing from the literature on these children. Quoting Ennew and Swart-Kruger (2003) they further add that these attributes of sociability are central to understanding the lives of children. The development of these attributes of mutuality, reciprocity and friendships was observed at the IHDF Chand Academy and an active part of the teaching.

Changes in aspirations

The children's perception of how they were viewed by the public also shifted. Many had experienced and witnessed public hostility when begging where they were touched inappropriately, offered money for sexual favours, called 'ganday fakir (*dirty beggars*)' and sometimes called out for not going to school. However, participants felt this negative perception changing as they started studying. Bhavya (female, 13), stated:

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> Before we started school, the people living outside the community used to pelt us with stones and burn our houses because we are poor and Hindu. Since we started to study, they stopped.

It was clear that these children believed that through attending the school, they had experienced a positive impact on both their own and families lives across different contexts. As corroborated by Padma (female, 16):

> We did not know how to write our name till the teachers at Chand Academy taught us. We learned more about our rights through the child's rights club here, things our parents should have taught us.

Children also discussed a shift in their future aspirations. As Sapna (female, 16) illustrated:

> Before I used to think that my life will just pass by, and I would continue living like a dog. But as I came here, I started to feel like my life was improving and I know that it will continue to improve further.

Other children expressed similar views where prior to joining school they had no future aspirations. However, now they had career ambitions, such as wanting to be soldiers, doctors, policemen, teachers, artists or pursuing higher education. They appeared optimistic and manifested hope of a better future through this goal setting (Kirst et al., 2014). As stated by Rani (female, 18):

> I did not know anything about school before I came here. We would just beg, play, gamble, some would even use drugs and eat gutka (a form of drug). But after coming here we changed. I want to be a doctor now. Before, I did not even know who a doctor is. Now we all want to work hard and make something of ourselves.

These shifts in perceptions appeared to be the intervention's strength whereby children, were now aspiring towards a better future, associating education and access to citizenship rights with improvement and upward social mobility. They expected that NFE would lead them towards better schools, a better quality of life, grant them access to their basic rights, better jobs and standard of living. However, it is important to note that while such aspirations facilitate increased self-belief in young people, structural inequalities and social disadvantage continue to exist acting as barriers for progression (Spohrer, 2018).

Civic and citizenship issues

Citizenship and belonging

An important intervention made by the organization was support in the acquisition of birth certificates and national identity cards for these children, enabling them to continue with education or engage with important institutions (such as health-based ones) following their departure from school. Ram (male, 15) discussed:

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> I tried enrolling in a school before but they did not give me admission because I didn't have a birth certificate. Initiator arranged them for us and enrolled us in schools.

In countries such as Pakistan, there can be limited support and guidance to navigate one's way through citizenship registration offices, particularly for marginalized groups who often as a result simply do not acquire basic identity documentation (Hunter, 2019). As confirmed by Kamini (female, 12),

> Before even our parents did not know what B forms [a type of identity document] or school admissions were. Now because of Initiator, they know and have worked with the Initiator team to get their own and our documents made.

This lack of awareness and access to documents undermined their right to identity and access to services, exacerbating the exclusion of already marginalized groups who are omitted from the identification database altogether. Added to this Pakistan is home to one of the most sophisticated biometric and digital kinship-based systems of identification in the world, making the process more complicated (Hashmi, 2021). IHDF, assisted the community, guiding them and educating them through the complex process arranging for birth certificates for children in the programme before enrolment into formal education schools and fulfilling their right to identity before their right to education. Having a birth certificate would allow for these children to have early contact with the state and the chance of socioeconomic mobility and formal education (Hunter, 2019). Moreover, Jerome and Starkey (2022) reflect on child's rights-based approaches to education in recent work and particularly highlight the central role citizenship can play in fostering a sense of belonging. They view citizenship in a broader way linking in creating feelings of connectivity to 'a neighbourhood, school, city or region, nation humanity' (p. 440). These feelings can encourage young people to develop a sense of agency and control over the structures within society that they are a part of. This sense of empowerment is described further in the next theme.

A sense of empowerment linked to civic values

Discussions around feelings of an empowered sense of self emerged in conversations with the young people. As part of the associated school—Chand Academy, IHDF established a Child's Rights Club (CRC) with children appointed as community leaders, to exercise their civil liberties. The CRC raised awareness amongst these children regarding their rights. Researcher N.K.K., attended one of the CRC meetings and observed that the children were aware of their fundamental rights, expressing concerns regarding issues such as child marriage and child labour. For instance, Sanjh (female, 13) stated that she had worked as a cleaner but still had not been paid. She further added, 'I am not begging. I am asking for something that is my right, something I have worked for'.

Prior to the intervention, almost all participants had reported facing intense stigma and discrimination across many aspects of their lives. These included: being subjected to discrimination when trying to obtain ID documents, distrust by potential employees, hostility from outsiders including being pelted with stones and even threats of displacement. While the intervention could not cause an end to stigma directed by others towards these children and their families, it did help towards the change in behaviour and cognitions of the children. One particular incident

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narrated by three different participants at different instances points to the effectiveness of the intervention in empowering the children. Meera (female, 15) stated:

> ... Before we started school, when we would go out people would abuse and hit us. I could not say or do anything because they were 'Baray' (high-status) people and we, poor. We were not educated so would just get beaten ....

She continued that after enrolling at the NFE programme her outlook changed. Recently while Meera had been walking home, a man grabbed her hand forcing her to go with him. Meera responded by asserting herself physically and chasing him away. She added:

> I learned this through school. If people say something to me, I speak up now. If they call me dirty, I ask them do I look dirty to you? I say we all are clean now just like you. Do not tell me we're poor and you're rich, we will also be rich because we're getting educated too.

At first glance, Meera's confidence could be seen as a successful outcome of the NGO initiative, fostering a sense of empowerment and positive aspirations in children. The idea of a lack of aspirations has often been used to explain the enduring gap between the educational outcomes of youth from differing socioeconomic backgrounds (Spohrer, 2018). However, this theory has also been scrutinized for laying blame on marginalized individuals rather than structural inequalities, levying on them the responsibility of bringing about social change. While Meera's account, reflects optimism, higher ambition and hope for a better future, we argue that it could be seen as a form of what Berlant (2010) terms as 'cruel optimism'. This refers to the promotion (in this case by the NGO) of goals of upward social mobility without the provision of the actual possibilities required to achieve them (Spohrer, 2018). Although raising aspirations enables some children to 'escape' their current situation, the wider economic and social structures often remain unchanged. The fear here is that if such a promise does not actualize, this could defeat their capacity to be hopeful about anything (Berlant, 2007). It is thus essential that this optimism is oriented and organized in the present. In the case of Pakistan, being from a minority religious background adds to the challenges of such mobility.

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our study aimed to understand how a group of children in street situations in Karachi, Pakistan perceive and experience NFE interventions in their lives. No formal mechanism exists in Pakistan to gauge the effectiveness of NFE-based interventions (Hyder & Malik, 2007). This is problematic, as studies on NFE programmes have shown that there often appears to be a gap between the perceptions of the organization offering the educational services and the experience of its recipients (Southon et al., 1999). Through participant observation, non-formal dialogues and semi-structured interviews with 20 children, this study attempted to do this. We specifically focus on one case study—IHDF and centred the voices of children who were part of the intervention in our study. As qualitative researchers with a small sample we are mindful that it is beyond our work to make broad generalizations on the educational experiences of children in street situations in Pakistan. However, our study provides an in depth, contextualized and rich

contribution to the literature by highlighting the importance of NFE in Pakistan, particularly for disadvantaged populations such as minorities and those without documentation who may not have access to state education.

Initially, as was apparent from our wider study, most children did not have many expectations from this intervention. Working and begging for them constituted a way of life beyond which they could not conceptualize a future. However, following enrolment at the Chand Academy, the children began associating education with improvement and upward social mobility viewing going to school as an alternative to going to the street in pursuit of recreation. What also emerged throughout the research was the ability of children to exercise their agency, an agency that was shifting and varying within different context. A sense of independence emerged in their decision-making when on the streets. Indeed, their decision to beg on the streets seemed to be a means of them exercising a fluid tactical agency, challenging and appropriating the space of the other (de Certeau, 1984), in the context of few alternatives for recreation or survival (Abebe, 2019). However, at school and home, constrained by familial relations, this tactical agency had a more interdependent focus (Abebe, 2013).

In centring children's lives and understanding their needs and agency within an ecological context, the IHDF demonstrates a child's rights approach to education. They developed a NFE programme tailor-made for CSS, with a play component to appeal to them as well as a child rights club. Similarly, IHDF also recognized the importance of family in decision-making and the role of interdependent agency. Parents were involved in the initial recruitment process and kept in the loop throughout their children's time at Chand academy. The organization also supported with acquisition of citizenship documentation. Such a child rights-based approach to education (see Jerome & Starkey, 2022) aligns with Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, which calls for the need for government and authorities to consider views of children in matters of state, including education. Yet, it is important here to recognize that the IHDF is a non-governmental actor, which makes the work and foregrounding of the children's lives in their work, particularly important. They work in an environment where the State does not offer adequate educational provision for often left-behind children who are unregistered at birth, but also from marginalized backgrounds.

The intervention importantly had an impact on participant self-worth and aspirations for the future. The children expected that NFE would lead them towards better schools, a better quality of life, grant them access to their basic rights, better jobs and standard of living. They also expected this intervention to fulfil their right to education and grant them access to other rights such as identity and recreation. Whether these aims would be materialized in the future remains to be seen but as Berlant (2010) argues optimism should be managed to avoid their life being compromised and then becoming hopeless if the life they were promised does not materialize. We did not find evidence of this form of 'optimism management' by the school, in our study, but as mentioned children discussed becoming more aware of their rights and feeling more confident to speak up when they had experienced injustice. The intervention then provided some tools for children to begin to understand and face wider societal inequalities.

The IHDF intervention did seem to positively influence the children's lives. Aside from two children, all are now enrolled in well-reputed formal education government schools, they witnessed positive behavioural changes amongst themselves and their peers, they reported feeling confident and empowered and were more ambitious about their future. Additionally, rather than individual empowerment, another way of thinking about the issue is by thinking of the collective. Indeed, Rocha (1997, p. 32) argues individual empowerment is not sufficient, there is a need for 'alterations in system, social relations or structural changes'. This points to the fact that community empowerment through education could be an important benefit of such initiatives.

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Furthermore, the NFE explained the complex process of acquiring citizenship rights to children and their families and supported them with obtaining documentation which constituted a pre-requisite to enrolment in formal schools. Formal schools in Pakistan in practice do not support citizenship issues although Article 25A of the Pakistani constitution makes it obligatory for the state to provide "free and compulsory education to all children, aged 5–16 years" (regardless of nationality) (Pakistan, 1982, p. 13). This amendment does not discriminate between citizens and foreigners, and legalized existing practices giving all the children equal access to education (Nicolle, 2019). However, in practice an implementation gap exists and children who are undocumented such as the Afghan refugees are unable to obtain access to education without facing bureaucratic hurdles (Ansari, 2019). Acquiring documentation for them is often a lengthy and emotionally taxing process and organizations such as NADRA and UN Refugee Agency are working intently on this in recent years (Nicolle, 2019). Therefore, NFE programmes such as the IHDF are paramount for those without documentation. It is also paramount for those citizens who are not formally registered, or without birth certification.

Our study is limited to research with a single community and school linked to IHDF. Yet, it has value given very little academic literature on CSS in Pakistan exists. We argue there is a pressing need for more research in this area. There is also a need to explore non-formal educational provision in relation to children's agency in the Pakistani context more generally (Edmonds, 2019). Further comparative international studies on educational provision for CSS would also help us to understand the complex needs of such children and their families across different ecological contexts (Abebe, 2019). In our study, it is clear from the discussions with the children and the retention levels at the school, that foregrounding distinct childhood experiences and recognizing children as distinct agents is important and necessary in order for such interventions to be successful. The study concludes the need for policy-makers and service providers to incorporate children's views when designing strategies influencing them. Moreover, we argue that in order to maximize short-term and long-term impact of interventions, a joint approach of working together by welfare practitioners, government, policy-makers and academics would be most effective (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 71).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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