Trajectories of Children Living in Poverty: A Life Course Perspective

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Abstract

This study aimed to understand the factors influencing the trajectories of children aged 15-16 years using a life course perspective. Through a qualitative design that included case studies, interviewing and observation yielded information attempt was made to obtain an insider’s perspective. The results of this study revealed that out of the total sample of 23 children, 15 were continuing in a education trajectory while the remaining were in work trajectory. Factors such as family migration, distance to school, sudden death of a family member, illness in the family and inability of children to manage work and school put them in a work trajectory. As regards children in the education trajectory, home environment, parental involvement and support, and their academic interest were the major influences. The findings in this research are useful for educators; in the formulation of child policy, and for future studies.

Key words: life course, adolescence, life events.
Introduction
Life-course perspective which examines individual lives as sets of interwoven pathways or trajectories that together tell a life story (Wells & Lekies 2006) has been a topic of research across several disciplines; it provides a theoretical model that looks at how chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change shape people’s lives from birth to death. While Elder’s (1998) pioneering review of longitudinal studies of children of the Great Depression added a theoretical meaning for life course study and developmentalists in general, Tamara Hareven (2000) a social historian played a key role in developing the sub discipline of history of family by studying how individuals and families synchronize their lives to accommodate to changing social conditions. Since individuals and families lives involve multiple spheres, their lives are made up of multiple intersecting trajectories –such as educational trajectories, family life trajectories, health trajectories and work trajectories.
Life course perspective has been applied to examine issues related to poverty (Rank and Hirschl 2005), health (Wethington 2005), career (Kim and Moen 2001; Wethington 2002) and family life (Moen and Erickson 1995) but it has not been employed to examine pathways of children (aged 15-16 yrs) living in poverty.
This paper uses data from the case studies of 23 older cohorts aged 15-16 yrs (11 girls and 12 boys) and their caregivers, drawn from one urban (Polur) two rural (Katur & Poompuhar) and a tribal site (Patna) in Andhra Pradesh, India drawn from ‘Young Lives’ a long-term international longitudinal research study on childhood poverty. The selection of communities and children for the qualitative study was based on criteria such as diversity of region (urban, rural, tribal) and caste (including Schedule Castes and Backward Classes), parental existence (e.g. whether children were orphans or living with both parent or one parent or the other caregivers) whether children were attending school or not (for the older cohort) whether children had attended school or not and the type of school children attended (government or private).
In depth interviews with the caregivers and the children, and a group activity on ‘life course’ that focused on the current status of the children and their future expectations comprised the tools of data gathering activity This study explores the life course (educational and non-educational) trajectories of children (older cohorts) drawn from the qualitative research sub sample consisting of all the 23 children in the older cohort and the factors that have shaped those trajectories.
FINDINGS
This section examines in detail the experiences of the children in poverty in their respective trajectories against the backdrop of the factors that influenced their entry into those pathways. During the analysis and coding of responses several themes emerged that provided an insight into their life trajectories. Prominent themes that emerged as part of the children’s life trajectory are presented in the following section.

**Trajectory 1: Entry into Work**

Longitudinal research points out that significant occurrences in individual’s life may produce long lasting effects (Settersten, 2003). Further, these events have different meaning to different individuals and can result in a substantial change or discontinuity in direction in one’s life course; In this study, in the older cohort it was found that out of the 23 children, 6 children (2 girls and 6 boys) had dropped out of school during the third round of the qualitative data gathering activity.

Researching the reasons for dropping out from school has been a topic of concern for various authors (Mirza & Mahmood 2011; Khan et al 2011; Okumu et al 2008; Reddy & Sinha 2010; Hunt 2008; Maertens 2011; Hunt 2008) who depending on the country specific situations point out common factors such as rural-urban divide, gender bias, and distance to school as the most common elements while the other reasons cited for drop out of girls from school are the opportunity cost of sending girl child to school, early marriages, educational status of the parents, sibling care, domestic work, distance to high school, limited transportation facilities and the risks associated, and access to school either up to grade 7 or 10. Other reasons could be that high school level education is considered adequate by parents as a minimal level of education because of the Government norm of free and compulsory education up to 14 years, policy of children being allowed to work in non hazardous occupations after 14 years, and jobs being available after completing grade ten, etc. Also, shocks at the household level, such as death of the caregiver for instance, often pressurises children, boys in particular to get into work. The above apart, in depth interviews with the children and caregivers brought forth the following events/factors underlying children’s entry into a work trajectory which hitherto have not been mentioned by many authors.

**Family Migration**

‘Family migration’ is one of the factors that has received little attention. Smita, (2008) cites evidence which indicates that migrations are large and growing, and the number of children below 14 years involved may be close to 9 million. She also mentions that due to the lack of livelihood options after the harvest of the monsoon crop (kharif) in most rain fed parts of the country, which gives rise to indebtedness and food insecurity, the entire family is forced to
leave home in search of work in order to survive. Children, who have no choice but to accompany their parents, drop out of schools and are forced into hard labour. (Smitha 2008)

Most often during such circumstances girls manage the household chores and the young siblings to release their parents for paid work.

Case Study

Bhavana, a 16 year old BC, Hindu girl and resident of Katur has been migrating with her mother, brothers, and sister-in-law to Mumbai (nearly a 24 hours journey by train from her native place) for work for 6 months in a year since her childhood. She stopped her schooling after the second grade, (aged 6/7) as she could not be left behind, while the family stayed for long periods at Mumbai. She lost her father when she was around 9 years old.

During the first interview in 2007, at the age of 13, a shy and soft spoken girl, she mentioned that she took up the responsibility of cooking and cleaning while the remaining family members worked at a construction site (when at Mumbai). Her routine started with the household chores in the early hours of morning, followed by weeding cleaning in the groundnut farm while in the village. She occasionally watched the television serials in the neighbours house. Back at home, she did not move around in the village like the other girls did lest she got a bad name. She is very fond of her mother and feels like doing everything for her sake since she is not treated well by her brothers and sister in law. Bhavana talked at length about her sister in law who did not share the household work, and her brother, who did not do any work while back in the village, but spent the money earned while in Mumbai.

During the qualitative data round she mentioned that she actively involved in the construction/road works with her brother and sister-in-law during their trips to Mumbai. When back at the village, she is engaged in seasonal agricultural work, and NREGS works. Working though is hard, she feels that ‘one has to earn a good name’. She talked enthusiastically about her tips to Mumbai, the variety of Saris available there and the places to see. She described the nature of work in the paddy fields and constructions sites. She adds ‘one has to learn all kinds of work. Its good to learn a work and then forget it… so that it comes handy after marriage’. She is also of the view that one should be efficient in work since it is a prerequisite for getting married. She often expressed that she was the only one working hard in the family for her mother’s sake.

Thus as Smitha (2008) mentions dropping out of school leads to children getting absorbed into paid work. They continue in work (domestic and paid) until they are married and continue to engage in outside work depending on the household circumstances.
Case Study

Latha is 17 years old, also a BC Hindu child living in Katur. Latha stopped school after the 7th class (aged 11/12) Youngest of the three siblings (2 boys and she), she says that she would have liked to continue in school, but her parents stopped her, because there is no high school in the village and she has to walk a distance of 3kms to attend the nearest one. In the first round of interviews her caregiver mentioned that one of the son’s eloped with a girl of different caste and his whereabouts are unknown. This event shook the family and mother feared that Latha would fall in to bad company if she started attending the high school. For this reason she was made to discontinue her studies and work on the family lands.

Her family land is rain-fed: a poor harvest sometimes leads to borrowing money from the lenders and the amount earned from a good crop is often used for repaying loans. Latha, apart from the household agricultural work also takes on NREGS work, where she is in the company of others and earns Rs.100/- per day. She spends her earnings on saris, bindis, and other personal items apart from giving a major share of the amount to the household. She enjoys this work because it gives her an opportunity to interact with others, catch up with news, and share common concerns. Latha though not interested in getting married in the near future, is of the opinion that a girl’s life is smooth only if her family gives enough dowry failing which she will be forced to work hard while at the in-laws place.

Both Bhavana, and Latha see work during childhood as useful preparation for future life. These two girls left school at a young age due to reasons beyond their control.

Death of a family member

Poor households are vulnerable to a range of risks affecting them which can have a devastating effect on their livelihood and wellbeing. Health related risks, in the form shocks such as death, illness, injury, accidents, or disability can have a spiraling effect on the household’s economic conditions which pushes children to manage school and work or otherwise.

The plight of children who have lost parents has received considerable attention in the social literature (Gertler et al 2004; Cas et al 2009). Loss of a family member is harmful psychologically and in turn affects schooling and educational outcomes. The extent to which the further pathways operate depends largely on the age and sex of the child, sex of the head of the household and the nature of his or her contribution to the household and the existing conditions of the family. The stories of Akshay Khan and Rahmathullah illustrate the differential impact of similar events.

Case study

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Salman, seventeen years old, a resident of Polur, the third of five children (two girls and three boys) from a poor Muslim family lost his father at a very young age. A semi orphan Salman was not interested in studies, was into bad company and was irregular in attending school. His elder brother too dropped out from school and both of them were inducted into work at a very early age. His work varied with brief stint as a sales boy in a local shoe shop, as a soda vendor, a waiter in a café during the earlier two rounds of data gathering. By the third round he had learned to drive, which became his work. The child talked animatedly about his driving, his plans to migrate to a gulf country as a driver and the difference in driving in a country like India and Dubai. Salman has plans to make money and construct a house for his family, have fewer children and marry an educated woman. His caregiver said “Salman has become responsible for the past 8 months, because he got better work and has become much more matured in thinking and has developed awareness.” She added “Until two years ago it was not good; problems and troubles came and went, Madam. We didn’t know what was going to happen tomorrow. Only thing is financially the situation was tight. Salman was earning and he brought money once in a month”. Talking about the present she says, “I can say now it is better Madam. My son Salman has started working. He has become very responsible and caring’.

Salman who has been into work since childhood in view of the circumstances at home is now on road to maturity through his work, responsibility and has been contributing financially for the economic improvement of the family. He aspires to send his mother for Hajj pilgrimage, assist his younger siblings in studying well, help his mother during his sister’s marriage and seek the help of his good friends to tidy up when there are financial difficulties.

Case Study
A year prior to the third round of qualitative research, Rahmathullah aged 15 years residing in Polur, lost his elder brother who had been the primary earning member and caretaker of the family. He is the youngest of the four siblings, and with his elder sister studied in the local private school. His eldest brother had been in a flower business and earned well to take care of the family needs. Before his brother’s death, everything was blissful for Rahmathullah who enjoyed school, was good enough in his studies, played cricket during the weekends and holidays, assisted his mother in embroidery work, fiddled with toy car models and fetched things from the shop as and when necessary. His father who suffered a paralytic attack two years ago just manages to walk now. During the course of the interview child said ‘, when I
finished 9th class there were financial difficulties here, I had to work even in holidays, so I started working in the garments shop. I had to take care of the house, my sister also is there.”

“He started working full time when the school opened this year. He is working in a garments shop” added Rahmatullah’s mother. “What can I say? We don’t have money to pay for his fees. And we need to pay for the tuitions also. Monthly school fees is 400 rupees per month and extra tutoring fees is 200 rupees per month. From where can I provide that kind of money? I could not say anything. He went and joined as a sales boy in a garments shop.” Rahmatullah views that there is no scope for studies and he has to work to tide over the financial difficulties in the family

Family indebtedness

Financial crisis in the form of indebtedness is a common phenomenon in rural areas. It becomes a distress phenomenon if the loan taken is for non productive purposes and becomes a heavy liability if the loan is taken for high rates of interest from non institutional sources like money lenders.(GOI 2007) Various factors perpetuate and maintain the phenomenon including poverty, unexpected expenditure, inheritance of the family’s debts and the presence of money lenders who encourage small farmers to borrow (Pujari 2011)

Case Study

Ravi a boy aged 17 years from the Scheduled Caste, lives with his parents, elder brother and nephew at Katur; his two sisters recently moved out to their in-laws’ house. His parents migrated for work (when he was in the fourth grade aged 8/9) and he was left in his grandmother’s care. He often missed school and eventually dropped out. Ravi has been into different kinds of work including that of a farmhand, mostly weeding in the fields of the dominant high caste families, work as a ‘bonded labour’ to clear of the family debt with the local landlord, work in a quarry and the latest being learning masonry at Cuddapah. He is keen on learning different kinds of work for his livelihood. He also wants to learn to drive a tractor which according to him fetches good money. While at home he also swept, fetched water and fire wood and took care of his parents Earning money is important to Ravi and his role within his family; he can buy new clothes on festival occasions and also support the education of his elder brother and nephew. He explained: “When someone makes some money…one is really proud to show it off. I am very proud about it…to show off before others”.

Failing to manage work and school
Children in rural areas as mentioned in literature are often engaged in domestic and household-related duties (girls) and agricultural labour (boys), which are for the most part unpaid, under-recognized, and take up substantial amounts of time. Labour of this sort does not necessarily disturb their school work. But such children who combine work with school, depending on the nature and volume of work, have irregular school attendance, long absences or frequent instances of being late to school. Further, agricultural work being seasonal often clashes with school timetables, leading to seasonal withdrawals from school. These withdrawals which are initially ‘temporary’, as literature shows may lead to more permanent withdrawals from school. This being so there may also be children who are still in school combining school and work, but fail to engage adequately in teaching and learning processes.

**Case Study**

Ranadeep aged 17 years from a back ward caste in Poompuhar, has an elder sister and the family owns 10 acres of land on which Paddy and cotton are grown. Like many of the children in Poompuhar, he missed school for two to three months of each year during the cotton pollination season because of which teachers would scold him; but his parents especially his mother made him work. Apparently his family was heavily in debt due to crop failures, failure of two bore wells, celebration of his sister’s marriage, and property division among the father’s siblings. He mentioned about Maths and Science being very difficult and in 2010, and like his friend Subbaiah, left school because he had failed in maths, and could not proceed to intermediate college. He was engaged full-time in agricultural work – irrigation, grazing the oxen, cutting firewood and other works and has got used to it. He explained that all his five friends had ‘failed’. According to him, all those children in the community who failed had been involved in farm work. Ranadeep, during the interview, said “They [parents] told me I need to do both (school and work). They told me I have to study as well as do the cultivation also. Yes, they told me that I need to do both work and studies. I asked them how it will be possible. They said I need to do both. I told them that I will do any one thing at a time. Then too, they never listened to me and asked me to come and work in the fields. I know how they are struggling in the house. How will I refuse?” He also said: “Ah, 10 students failed. Yes those who went for the cultivation work only”. Ranadeep has a strong desire to continue studies though he does not mention any things specific about his future.

**Case Study**

Subbiah, aged 17 years, is from washer men community in PoomPuhar, is one of the four siblings including an elder sister who is college educated and two younger sisters who are in
school. He failed his 10th grade exam – in Telugu language twice. Being the only son, he undertook some agricultural works while in school but is working harder now than in the past. As the care giver puts it ‘If it is hard life only, on understands. All these days we never made him do it but now he has failed and is not studying. He failed in Telugu and we made him write his supplementary in which he again failed. We like our children to study well, our lives are like this since we never went to school and studied. If they are willing to study we will work hard and will support them. I work hard and don’t want them to become like us. We encouraged our daughter to study well and she passed we were very happy but my son he failed so we worry about him a lot. Subbiah feels bad that he has been unable to pass his exams

Thus combinations of factors that explain this phenomenon include family requirements which push children to manage school and work, thereby resulting in poor performance and either parents or caregivers choosing work in preference to school. Subbiah and Ranadeep from Poompuhar are examples of children who combined work with school and finally dropped out due to failure in the 10th grade examinations

**Trajectory 2 : Continuing in education**

We move to children who are still in school. In the Indian secondary education scenario, it has been observed that the Gross enrollment rate, and Gross attendance rates (GAR) of adolescents in secondary school have improved considerably along with the Gender Parity indices in Andhra Pradesh (Biswal 2011). As a consequence of this rising enrollments an increasing proportion of adolescents are participating in higher levels of schooling. Thus boys and girls in the sample who are in middle adolescence are spending typical time in the classroom engaging in similar type of activities.

Some authors (Hussain, 2010; Sarkar & Hussain 2011) researched on gender disparities in completing school education in India and their findings revealed that though there were gender disparities at lower levels of education, this gets reversed at higher levels in several states. At the all India level, too, in recent years, a reversal of disparity is observed in urban areas the author noted. This factor points out that lives of adolescent boys and girls are becoming more similar than in the past and they are spending more of their adolescent years in school/college. Thus gender is no longer a hindering block towards girl child education and their entry to college education may be seen as a building block in the societal pathway toward establishing greater gender equality during adolescence which is a critical phase of their transition to adulthood. In this section, some of the factors found to influence the children’s continuation of education in secondary and post secondary levels are presented.
Household factors
The influence of household determinants (Marjoribanks 2005; Keng 2004) including factors such as parent’s education (Kumar & Vellymalay 2010; Sidhu et al 2010; Acharya & Joshi 2009; Kean 2005) on decisions related to children’s education and its outcomes has been one of the important areas of research worldwide. Literature points out the role of parental expectations in children’s educational attainment and it is reported to have great influence on the children’s school outcomes. It is the parental expectations for their children’s future educational pursuits that are linked to children’s educational attainment. Zhang (2011) examined the impact of parent’s educational expectations on children’s school persistence in rural China and found that the discrepancy in educational expectations between mother and children was substantial. Zhang also points out that in order to realize their goals for their children’s education, parents mobilize the necessary resources and make sacrifices themselves as reflected in the following case scenarios

Case study
Saifuddin, studying grade eight in an English medium private school, along with his younger siblings in the same school, is a resident of Polur. His father, educated up to grade ten, works as a compounding (medical assistant) in a hospital. Apart from paying the school fee of Rs 300/month he did not hesitate to allocate another Rs 500/month towards tuition to improve the child’s performance in Mathematics and English which has otherwise has not been satisfactory. Saifuddin’s father aspires to see him as a computer engineer and has a tight daily schedule that keeps children working and keeps them away from watching television and unhealthy peers. He believes that Saifuddin should be associated with friends who study well so that they would be helpful in reaching the goal. Saifuddin family shifted to a new locality (during the round 3 of data collection) as the father was keen on providing a healthy environment for the children. Parents have been consistent in their expectations for their children in all the three rounds of data collection.

Case Study
Keerthi an Older Cohort (OC) tribal girl from Patna, is the eldest of the three children, the other two being boys and all of them have been educated in private schools. Her parents were educated primary school level and father is employed as a home guard while mother works as a helper in a residential school run by the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA). An active member in of the self help groups for women, Keerthi’s mother aspires of high education for her daughter, a steady job, a comfortable life of her own, devoid of hardships and on the whole a life different from that of her mother. During the third round of the
qualitative research, in 2010, Keerthi was pursuing the second year of the intermediate (+two) education in a private institution, a best corporate college that offers rigorous coaching for entry into professional courses such as Engineering and Medicine. A major driving force behind Keerthi’s excellent performance in the 10th grade, her mother succeeded in getting sponsorship from the ITDA which bears the hostel and course expenditure during her stay in the corporate college while the other expenditure related to travel, clothes etc is met from the household income.

The above case illustrations are an evidence that family can provide different forms of resources to facilitate child’s education and it is contended that demographic measures such as family background, parents education, and family income, alone cannot account for all the variations in home environment that lead to differences in children’s educational outcomes.

Several perspectives have been put forth to explain the nature of household decisions on children’s education. Extensive literature has shown that parents who are educated themselves have more positive attitudes towards education and provide their children with more stimulating environment for schooling than parents with less education. Parents who anticipate that their children are likely to get formal sectors jobs such as teachers, policemen and civil servants that require at least a high school education need to be more willing to commit time and money to their children’s schooling.

Santhi an older cohort from Patna, from a tribal family finds immense support in her father a school teacher and mother an affectionate and responsible home maker. Eldest of the two siblings, she aspired to become a doctor but got less marks in the 10th grade due to ill health. She took up mathematics instead of biology when she joined college. Talking about her parental involvement in her education she puts it elaborately this way “They have supported me in many ways, but health wise they have given me more support, studies wise also they have supported me but health wise more, when I was not well my parents were more worried and involved than I was about my health, I just was care less about my health I thought let anything happen we will see later but my parents they were worried a lot and they wanted me to recover fast, when my health was not well I used to think a lot about my studies then they use to tell me not worry and think more of my studies and spoil my but to relax and recover soon then I can think of my studies and complete them. In this manner morally they supported me, I used to think of my studies more as the exams are nearing how do I study?

**Illness in the family**

Considering the interconnectedness between poverty and health (Lawson 2004), ill health leading to impoverishment, household asset depletion, and income loss that cause
consumption levels to fall below minimum needs (Russell 2004) it enables us to draw some insights on children’s life trajectory.

Kareena from Polur, eldest of the four siblings (three girls and a boy) was studying 10th standard during the third round of the qualitative data gathering process. According to the child, her father who is an auto driver suffered from breathlessness and was admitted to a private hospital for a fortnight while her mother who had chest pain was hospitalized for a couple of days. The family incurred heavy expenditure for undergoing treatment in a private hospital and her maternal aunt and maternal grandmother offered the necessary financial assistance. Kareena’s younger sister suffers from a congenital eye problem which has been left untreated due to financial constraints at home. When asked about her future expectations especially in relation to education Kareena says ‘family members, they say first 10th and we will think about it. I have not thought of anything so far, but I will think after some time.

Despite the hardships caregiver during all the three rounds of data collection expressed that this child has to complete 10th standard which is a minimal educational requirement

DISCUSSION

The Young Lives data in this paper reveals the significant factors that have influenced the life course trajectories of the children considered in the study. Life course perspective as mentioned earlier takes into consideration specific events that predominate the lives of individuals and families. We start with the children who are in the work trajectory as a part of their life course. In the case of Bhavana, family’s migration to Mumbai since childhood prevented her school continuation thus leading to a work trajectory very early in life. Her story brings forth the transition in terms of work and her view that learning different kinds of work prepares her for future has come out explicitly. Parental concerns for daughter’s safety and fear of heterosexual relationships curtailed Latha’s education that settled her in a work trajectory. Her case study though does not reveal any significant change in the nature of her work.

Salman and Rahmatullah though have lost their family members at different points in their life their losses have had different impact in their contexts. Salman who lost his father at a young age, was disinterested in studies and thus entered a pathway leading into work. He appears to be settled in this trajectory with plans to improve his livelihood. Rahmathullah’s entry into work was due to his brother’s unexpected death which led him into taking care of the household with a sense of responsibility. Rahmathullah made a decision to stop his schooling and start working to take care of his family which put him on a pathway to work.
Rahmathullah unlike Salaman being a novice in this trajectory has no clear expectations regarding his future.

Coming to children continuing school, we notice that there are distinct factors that are influencing their pathway. Saifuddin parents want a good life for him and have chalked out a routine that is containing him in the educational pathway. In the case of Kareena from the same community i.e. Polur adverse conditions at home have not deterred her from the pathway and she is keen on completing her 10th grade. Santhi and Keethi from Patna have crossed the 10th grade and have entered the portals of college based on the encouragement and support from their parents.

Caught in between the above pathways are children who are fully into work because they have been unable to manage school and work together. While bad home conditions forced Ranadeep into spending more hours on work than school, while continuous bad performance in exams led Subbiah into a pathway for work.

The life-course perspective emphasises the interdependence of human lives and the ways in which relationships both support and control an individual’s behavior. The role of parents and parenting has been highlighted in literature. While there is a growing debate on the causal relationship between parenting and poverty, research by Furstenberg et al (2000) and Ghate and Hazel (2002) counteracts the assumption that all parents living in poverty lack parental capacity. Authors argue that majority of the parents in poverty do possess parenting capacity and should not be treated as a single group simply because they are materially less affluent.

In most of the cases cited here parents have provided social capital for their children, in terms of role models and support.

To conclude, families potentially play an important role in determining the pathways of their children at a certain point in life i.e especially when one 15-17 years old, a time to complete 10th grade and enter junior college. In view of the factors discussed in this paper it is essential to take into account the perspectives and experiences of children and their caregivers regarding the diverse pathways that the children take on.
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