

Understanding a Primary School Teacher's Life and Her School Context

Kh. Atikur Rahman*

Institute Of Education and Research, University of Dhaka

Article history	This article is a by-product of a qualitative study, which focuses on understanding the organisation of a teacher's professional life, understanding the organisation of her school's professional life and understanding her as a practitioner and as a person. The study was conducted in an ethnographic style of research. To carry out the investigation a teacher of a primary school of Laxmipur, Bangladesh was selected purposively. Data for the study were gathered through shadowing the teacher for three consecutive days, classroom observations, collection of artefacts, interviews with the teacher, with her students, informal discussion with the teacher and the Headteacher. The general findings reveal that the teacher has a huge work-load which poses a challenge for her. Yet because of her passion for teaching and supports from her family and school, she never loses interest in teaching.
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Introduction:

Until the 1990s “focusing on teachers’ lives and telling their stories was not thought of as serious scholarship” (Bullough, 2008, p.11). Because of such ignorance, for the most part teaching remains an “unexamined” life (Floden & Huberman, 1989, p.458). In the last few decades, however, there has been a shift towards exploring their lives and their professional knowledge and experiences, although in Bangladesh, still there is hardly any literature which can feed us to understand teachers' lives, their choice of career, job satisfaction, motivation and commitment etc (Haq & Islam, 2005). This article is an attempt to fulfil our obligation as researchers “to assure that teachers’ voice is heard, heard loudly, heard articulately” (Goodson, 1992, p.112). In general, the objective of the study presented in the article was to understand a Bangladeshi primary school teacher's life. In particular, it focuses on understanding the organisation of a teacher's professional life, understanding the organisation of the school's professional life and understanding the teacher as a practitioner and a person.

Methodology:

This article is the by-product of a qualitative study done as a part of an intervention project, *English-In-Action (EIA)*. In order to conduct the study, a primary school teacher of Laxmipur district of Bangladesh was selected purposively. The author as a researcher of the project had to spend more than a year, though not ceaselessly, with the teacher for his professional purpose. Consequently, he had opportunities to observe her personal life partly and professional life very closely.

However, data for the study derived from: (1) direct timed observation of the teacher’s activities

* Correspondence: Department of Language Education, Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh, Phone: +880-1670700303, Email: kardu2011@gmail.com

throughout three consecutive days (i.e. shadowing the teacher), (2) classroom observations, (3) collection of artefacts, (4) teacher interviews, (5) interviews with students, (6) informal discussion with the teacher and the Headteacher.

Understanding the organization of the school's professional life

Literature shows that school climate affects not only learners' academic achievement (e.g. Blum *et al.*, 2002; Rutter *et al.*, 1979) but also teachers and their working lives just as a positive organisational climate benefits employees, ensures job satisfaction and increases their productivity (OECD, 2009; Lazear, 2000). So for understanding professional life of the teacher (mentioned in the study) we need to understand her school, its professional life and its climate.

The name of the school, where the teacher teaches is LC Govt. Primary School. It is situated at the core of Laxmipur *Sadar* in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) defrays the expenses needed for infrastructural facilities, salaries of teachers and all other expenses of the school. It is administered according to the regulation of Directorate of Primary Education, GoB. There is, however, an elected School Management Committee (SMC) which monitors progress, attendance and other sides of the school.

The school is a single shift-school, which runs from 9:30 am to 4:15 pm on Saturdays to Wednesdays and 9:30 am to 2:30pm on Thursdays. It teaches students of Pre-primary and primary (i.e. Class/Grade-1, 2, 3, 4 & 5) sections. There are eleven teachers (including the Headteacher) teaching in the school. All of them hold a bachelor degree (BA/BSS/BCom) along with a Certificate in Education (C-in-Ed). Besides these, all the teachers underwent a basic in-service training, different subject-based trainings and other professional development trainings and workshops during their service-life. They teach different subjects at school. These are Bangla, English, Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, Islamic/Religious Studies and Fine-Arts (*Charukaru*). They were found to have co-operative and congenial relationships among themselves. They talk extensively about their activities related to their profession. During the off-period or leisure they discuss their lesson plans, students' progress, students' absence, other challenges and opportunities they face. The Headteacher of the school is also very friendly and cooperative which is a vital factor for teacher performance since teachers' working life is influenced by the administration and leadership provided by Headteacher (Ingersoll, 2001; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990).

The school has two brick-built two-storied buildings where the lessons of grades-1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 are held. The buildings are situated closely to each other. There is another tin-shed building where the lessons of Pre-primary students are held. All the classrooms of the school are quite spacious. They are well equipped and well decorated. They are well lighted, ventilated and aired. The school is a big school with 555 students. The table below shows the school's number of students by grade and gender.

Table 1: Number of Students; (Source: School Monitoring Board-2)

Grade	Girls	Boys	Total	Attendance (%)
Pre-Primary	29	14	43	70.00%
1	63	61	124	82.00%
2	49	70	119	67.00%
3	41	66	107	74.00%
4	41	63	104	80.00%
5	23	35	58	78.00%
	246	309	555	

The school has a playground in front of it. It also has a pond. Though the school is funded and operated by the GoB, the land of the school was donated by a local philanthropist.

The school maintains certain policies. These are listed in the following table. In the table, we can see deviations also exist in maintaining the policies.

Table 2: School Policies

Policy	Differences between policy and actions
Increasing the number of students' admission	Maintained satisfactorily
Providing various in-service trainings.	Maintained satisfactorily
Following daily class routine	Because of absence of any office-attendant/Clark, the bells marking the end of class/lesson are not rung. So teachers often miss exact time of lesson
Using textbook and taking class according to lesson plan	Teachers used textbook but in case of following lesson plans they were a bit slack.
Mother Assembly (Once a month)	Maintained satisfactorily
Annual work plan for every teacher.	Maintained satisfactorily

Teachers of this school have to involve themselves in a number of professional activities outside classrooms. These activities include meeting with SMC / guardians (done on a monthly basis), Mother Assembly (done on a monthly basis), and preparing monthly attendance report for the Education Office (done on a monthly basis) etc.

According to the opinion of teachers, students and their guardians, the school-community relationship is good. There are various community activities in which the school takes part in. For example, on nationally announced day camp is set in the school for giving doses for various fatal child diseases. Secondly, teachers take part in children survey and other such works.

The researcher had been informed that parents come to school for various purpose like inquiring about the progress of their children, for taking Transfer Certificate or *Charpotro* (Release letter). Mothers attend assembly once a month to know about their children's study. Teachers, however, also informed that though the school is in *Sadar* (Town), the parents of the students are grossly indifferent to their children's education. Because children of conscious parents usually attend private schools. Only those who are less fortunate send their children to this school.

Although most of the aspects of the school are quite impressive, there is one gap. There is no office-assistant/clerk in the school to help teachers. As a result, when all the teachers are in the classrooms for taking their lessons, there exist none to ring the bell when the lesson-time is over. Consequently, at times teachers miss the time and it hampers the maintenance of class-schedule properly. Yet, as a whole, the school can be mentioned as a better place to work in.

Understanding the Organization of the Teacher's Personal life:

Ms. Jobaida Afsari (pseudo-name) was born on January 01, 1974 at Sonapur in Laxmipur. She is a married lady with a husband and three sons. Her husband runs a small business. Their eldest son studies at grade-IX majoring in Science. The second one studies at grade-5. He is going to appear in the national (public) examination which is termed as PSC (Primary School Certificate) examination. Her youngest one is four and a half-year old.

Her Typical Day at Home:

Her typical day starts at 5.30am when she gets up and doing ablution says her morning prayer (*Salatul Fazr*). Then she wakes up the maid-servant who also lives in her house. Then they start preparing breakfast and lunch. At 7.00am one of her sons leaves for school while the other son leaves at 8.00am. Before their leaving she has to put tiffin in their tiffin-box. Then they (her husband, her youngest son and the maid) have their breakfast. Thus in the morning she spends very hectic hours at home. At 9.00am she leaves for school. From 9.15am to 4.30pm she spends time in her school.

Usually around 4:45pm she arrives at her home. Reaching home she at first hugs her four and a half-year old son who waits eagerly for her. She gets fresh and takes an hour's rest. During this one hour she usually talks to her three sons about their lunch and their schools. On the eve of the evening, they have a light food. The menu varies day to day. Having heard the *Azan* (call of prayer) of *Magrib* prayer, she does ablution and performs the prayer. Then she sits with her sons to look after their study. She helps her sons in doing their lessons. At home she is even busier, because during these hours (6:30pm to 10:00pm) she has to do several tasks. She says,

"I have to look after my sons, prepare foods for the night and for the next afternoon as I have to go out early in the morning for the school...ah! one more thing, I have to get prepared for the next day's class, especially for the English classes, because after getting involved with 'English In Action' project I have to work harder as the audio and other materials are new to me."

However, Ms. Afsari and her family members usually have their dinner at 9:30pm. After having dinner she watches TV for an hour or so. At about 11:00pm she goes to sleep.

Understanding the Organization of her Professional Life:

Although people these days hardly opt for teaching as a profession especially considering the financially factor (Tasnim, 2006; Haq & Islam, 2005; Ingersoll, 2001; Mumane & Olsen, 1990), for Ms. Afsari it was her aim in life. Her childhood experiences affected her decision to become a teacher (Knowles, 1992). Her family members had great influence on her choice. There was a school on the land of her forefathers. Her grandfather was the president of that school. Besides, two of her paternal uncles were teachers by profession. All these family factors (Goodson & Numan, 2003) fascinated her in her early years to be a teacher. Moreover, when she was a 12th Grade student, she was married to a highly educated family where all the members have postgraduate degrees. It also worked as an impetus to her further education and career in teaching. She says,

... my family environment encouraged me. The school was on the land of her forefathers. My grandfather was the president of that school. ... You can say, teaching was my aim-in-life. Two of my uncles (her father's brothers) were teachers. I was inspired by their profession. I am very glad to receive teaching a profession. All the members of my in-laws have postgraduate degrees. When I was married, I was a student of 12th Grade. Then I studied for my bachelor degree.

During the interview with her, she shared how hard she worked for qualifying in the recruitment test and how much shocked she was when she failed to qualify the Viva-Voce after being qualified in the written test. She was disheartened especially because she even studied those books which are usually read by the applicants aspiring to be recruited as 1st class Government officer (BCS Cadre Officer). Secondly, many of her friends qualified but she failed! She was disheartened at this, but she did not left

it altogether, nor did the God kept her waiting for a long time. Though she was not offered job as a candidate from the first selection list, within a short interval she had been sent letter of appointment. With the researcher she also shared the excitement of her hearing the news that she had been sent the letter of appointment. She says,

It's a pathetic story! ... One day I came across a teacher recruitment advertisement in a newspaper. Then I applied for it and qualified in the written test but could qualify the Viva-Voce in the first chance, I qualifies in the next round. Many of her friends qualified. I was very shocked internally. Because for getting the job, I even studied the BCS guide book. Then one day to my surprise, my sister-in-law phone me to inform that my letter of appointment for the job came. Then I along with my children went to Laxmipur. I was very excited but I was careful lest out of excitement there should occur no accident. Then I returned home. It was a very happy day, indeed!

She started her career as a teacher on November 17th, 2003. The following data gives a picture of her profession.

Table 03: Teacher's Professional Information

Title	Information
Name of School	LC Govt. Primary School, Laxmipur
Designation	Assistant Teacher
Date of Joining :	
a) Present School	06.06.2006
b) Initial School	17.11.2003
Tentative Retirement Date	01/01/31
Educational Qualification	BSS , C-in-Ed
Grade/Subjects She teaches	Class-1 and 3 (English), Class-5 (Social Science Studies/Shomaj), Class-4 (Islam Studies), Class-3 (Fine Arts/Charukaru)
Lessons attended per week	34

She has undergone various training which she believes is important for her professional development. For her this is “a pathway to increase competence and greater professional satisfaction” (Guskey, 2002). So far she attended the following trainings.

Table 04: Trainings attended by Ms. Afsari

Name of the Trainings	Institutes/Providers
Certificate In Education (C-In-Ed)	Primary Teachers' Training Institute/GoB
Basic In-service Training	Upazilla Resource Centre/GoB
Training On Sub-Cluster Meeting	Upazilla Resource Centre/GoB
Subject Based Training On English and other subjects	Upazilla Resource Centre/GoB
English-In-Action (CPD Training on English)	English-In-Action (EIA)/Non-Govt

Her Typical Day at School:

Everyday during the school hour eight lessons are held. Out of eight, she takes six

lessons/classes everyday (with an exception on Thursdays when she takes four lessons). Among these, she has to attend four lessons at a stretch before lunch hour and two after lunch. The following table captures the scenario well.

Class Routine: Saturday to Wednesday (9:55 am to 4:15 pm)

Lesson 1 9:55- 10:50 am (55 min)	Lesson 2 10:51- 11:35 am (45 min)	Lesson 3 11:36- 12:20 am (45 min)	Lesson 4 12:21- 1:15 pm (45 min)	Lunch 1:16- 1:44pm (30 min)	Lesson 5 1:45-2:25 pm (40 min)	Lesson 6 2:26-3:05 pm (40 min)	Lesson 7 3:06-3:40 pm (35 min)	Lesson 8 3:41-4:15 pm (35 min)
Subject: Bangla Grade:3 Room: <i>Polash</i>	Subject: English Grade:3 Room: <i>Polash</i>	Subject: English Grade:1 Room: <i>Shapla</i>	Subject: <i>Shomaj</i> Grade:5 Room: <i>Rajaniga ndha</i>	Lunch Hour	Off-period	Subject: Islam Grade:4 Room: <i>Jui</i>	Subject:Fi ne-Arts Grade:3 Room: <i>Polash</i>	Off- period

Class Routine: Thursday (9:55 am to 2:30 pm)

Lesson:1 9:55- 10:50 am (55 min)	Lesson:2 10:51- 11:35 am (45 min)	Lesson:3 11:36- 12:20 am (45 min)	Lesson:4 12:21- 1:15 pm (45 min)	Lunch 1:16- 1:44pm (30 min)	Lesson 5 1:45- 2:25 pm (40 min)
Subject: Bangla Grade:3 Room: <i>Polash</i>	Subject: English Grade:3 Room: <i>Polash</i>	Subject: English Grade:1 Room: <i>Shapla</i>	Subject: <i>Shomaj</i> Grade:5 Room: <i>Rajanigandha</i>	Lunch Hour	Off-period

Actual time versus planned time:

The teacher was found to follow the schedule of class routine according to the school policy. The deviations, however, were found in two areas. First, she was not taking Bangla lesson which is her first lesson of the day. The reason is it was taken by 2 trainees of *C in Ed* programme. She just went to the class only to oversee the trainees. During the period, she remained in the teachers' room. Secondly, absence of any office-attendant/clerk, the bells marking the end of class/lesson did not rung. So she at times missed exact time of lesson. For comprehensive detail on it read below where her activities during the lesson hours has been captured.

Day 1

Lesson 1: actual time: 3-4 minutes; Teacher did not take the class though it was her class because then it was taken by a trainee of *C in Ed* programme. She just went to the class only to oversee the trainee. During this period she remained in teacher room.

Lesson 2: actual time: 43 minutes; the gap is here of 2 minutes when teacher stayed in the teachers' room. Rest of the time, teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 3: actual time: 44.30 minutes; Teacher took 0.30 minute to move to the class. Rest of the time, teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 4: actual time: 44 minutes; Teacher took 1 minute to move to the class. Rest of the time, teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 5: actual time: 00 minutes; teacher had no class/lesson for this period. She came 7 minutes late from lunch (she goes to her house for lunch). Rest of the time she remained in the teacher room.

Lesson 6: actual time: 40 minutes; teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 7: actual time: 35 minutes; teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 8: actual time: 00 minutes; teacher had no class/lesson for this period. She remained in the teacher room.

Day 2

Lesson 1: actual time: 00 minutes; Teacher did not take the class though it was her class because then it was taken by a trainee of *C in Ed* programme. During this period she remained in the teachers' room.

Lesson 2: actual time: 49 minutes; Teacher went to class 4 minutes extra as the bell rang 4 minutes later. Teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 3: actual time: 44.3 minutes; Teacher took 0.30 minute to move to the class. Rest of the time, teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 4: actual time: 44 minutes; Teacher took 0.55 minute to move to the class. Rest of the time, teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 5: actual time: 00 minutes; teacher had no class/lesson for this period. She came 10 minutes late from lunch. Rest of the time she remained in the teacher room.

Lesson 6: actual time: 40 minutes; teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 7: actual time: 35 minutes; teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 8: actual time: 00 minutes; teacher had no class/lesson for this period. She remained in the teacher room.

Day 3

Lesson 1: actual time: 5-6 minutes; Teacher did not take the class though it was her class because then it was taken by a trainee of *C in Ed* programme. She went to the class twice to oversee the trainees. During this period she remained in the teachers' room.

Lesson 2: actual time: 42 minutes; the gap is here of 3 minutes when teacher stayed in teacher room. Rest of the time, teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 3: actual time: 44 minutes; Teacher took 1 minute to move to the class. Rest of the time, teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 4: actual time: 44 minutes; Teacher took 1 minute to move to the class. Rest of the time, teacher

stayed in class.

Lesson 5: actual time: 00 minutes; teacher had no class/lesson for this period. She remained in the teacher room.

Lesson 6: actual time: 45 minutes; teacher stayed in class. Teacher stayed 5 minutes extra as the bell rang 5 minutes later.

Lesson 7: actual time: 30 minutes; teacher stayed in class.

Lesson 8: actual time: 00 minutes; teacher had no class/lesson for this period. She remained in the teacher room.

Understanding Her as a Practitioner:

Typical sequence of her lessons

Ms. Afsari was found to start her lessons with greetings. Then she moves on to main lessons using different types of materials. It was observed that the nature of interactions in her lessons took different forms. For example, interactions between teacher-students where the teacher interacted with the students asking different questions, giving instructions etc; interactions between students-teacher where students took the lead. And in case of students-students interactions, they were found to do pair works and group works etc.

Closing the lessons

In the later part of the lessons, it was observed that the teacher evaluated the learning of her students and tries to check their understanding. She was also found to give home works more often. Finally she ended her lessons with a good-bye.

Her Professional Practice:

Ms. Afsari was found to create a congenial classroom-climate. During observing her lessons, it has been observed that she delivered her lessons lucidly, which helps the kids follow her. Her quality of instruction has been found appreciable. She manages her lessons and the kids very aptly and is able to hold the attention of her students.

She used various activities in her lessons. These activities include pair-works, group-works, responding in chorus etc. Students were also seen to answer individually to teacher's questions in some cases.

During the interview with her students, the author has been informed that they enjoy her lessons. They love to do pair-works and group-works and like listen to audios (provided by EIA as materials to develop students' listening skill of English). During observing her lessons, it was found that each of her lessons were very interactive and collaborative.

Now we are revising previous lessons (as term final is approaching) and students are also very enthusiastic. If they are given group-works, they become even more excited... The students do not show interest in the lesson when they are given individual works. They remain indifferent (to works). So I do it (engage them in group-works and pair-works) so that they find interest in the

lessons (tasks).

She maintains a healthy communication between her and her students (YOK, 1998). She was found to encourage students to participate in the lessons actively. Most of the students did not hesitate in interacting with the teacher. She says,

Sometimes, I carry on lessons through games. Today in Grade-5, For example, I did so. Two groups would have marks. The group which will gain more marks will be victorious. (At times,) I invite students to come in front and tell a story. In such case, a kind of excitement works in them considering who would get opportunity to come first.

Thus she is found to be providing more responsibility and freedom to her students (Oord & Brok, 2004). Not only that, she involves herself in communicating high expectations, providing constructive feedback, delivering content in small and structured units to her students (Creemers, 1994; Lowyck, 1994; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997)

I inspire them by telling them that one day you will be in greater position than us, you will be great human being. ... And I approach those who are unable to do their tasks and inquire about the problem they are facing (in doing the tasks).

Her Professional Activities Outside Classrooms:

Teachers today do not act only in the classroom. They perform professional activities on the school level, such as co-operating in teams, building professional learning communities, participating in school development, and evaluating and changing working conditions (Darling-Hammond *et al.* 2005). Ms. Afsari is also found to perform a few professional activities outside classrooms. She says,

I maintain the daily attendance. I collect the average from the teachers and make the percentage. I prepare the report to be submitted to the Upazilla Education Office.

She also attends SMC meetings, *Ma Somabesh* (Mother Assembly), *Uthan Boithak* (Field-Meeting), counselling, social works etc. She meets the guardians to give information about their children's attendance, homework, school dress or any other problems faced by the children and their educational progress etc. Most of those works occur in one month interval. In the beginning of the year, teacher also participates in the field survey.

Her inspiration as a teacher

Although literature confirms that the prestige and status of teachers is falling to a great extent, many teachers (especially female teachers primary schools outside Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh) join teaching considering it honourable and prestigious profession (Tasnim, 2006; Haq & Islam, 2005). This particular aspect inspires Ms. Afsari also. She values the respect the guardians show towards her. She feels proud that her students show her great respect even after completing their studies. As an example she mentioned an incident when an adult student who passed out successfully from her school long ago saluted her when he came across her on the street, even though she herself could not recognise him at the first glance.

Her Hopes and Aspirations:

During interviews and informal discussions with the author, Ms. Afsari frequently referred to her eagerness to ongoing learning (Kelchtermans, 1993a). She is very motivated to participate in “continuous self-improvement” and has willingness “to break out of the comfort zone in order to make needed changes” in her professional skills (Malone & Tulbert, 1996, p. 46). She wants to earn an MA degree and make herself more competent. She wants more training like EIA. The government of Bangladesh is implementing National Education Policy-2010 where the free primary education will cater up to Grade-8. In such case this particular school having sound infrastructural facilities has a fair chance of being enlisted in the list of those schools, which will teach up to Grade-8. For teaching the students of grade-8, she thinks she should have more education and self-development. So, by having an MA she wants to make herself competent enough to teach even at Grade-8.

Conclusion:

Teachers are the crucial elements of any educational system. They are the public face of education, and their direct actions influence school characteristics, such as student achievements and school enrolment numbers (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). Their actions, on the other hand, are influenced by different events, experiences, and other people in their lives (Knowles, 1992). Thus, it is essential to understand their personal and professional lives. This article, which is a little stride made in this regard, has explored a Bangladeshi primary school teacher's life and her school context. At the same time, it has revealed the impact of the personal life of the teacher on her professional life and vice-versa. The general findings show that the teacher has a huge work-load which poses a challenge for her. Yet because of her passion for teaching and supports from her family and colleagues, she never loses interest in teaching. References:

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