

# Childhood, Education and Transnational Migration. Strategies through Micro-Narratives by Bangladeshi Pupils in Florence (Italy)

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**Abstract.** The protagonists of the present article are Florence-based Bangladeshi children who face the challenges of transnationality along with their families. In light of this condition, their destiny is linked to a gamut of possible solutions: emigrating, staying, re-emigrating, or even going back to Bangladesh. These very options frame the purposes of the article, namely exploring: (a) the perceptions and feelings experienced by Bangladeshi children in relation to migration strategies adopted by their parents, and (b) the implications that transnational mobility may have for their education. To achieve these goals, the paper builds upon the results of a qualitative study, largely supported by micro-narratives gathered during fieldwork conducted with Bangladeshi pupils attending Italian schools in Florence.

**Keywords.** transnational Bangladeshi family – transnational childhood – migration strategies – education – children's micro-narratives

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## 1. Introduction: Conceptual Framework

The macro topic of this paper is family in the pattern that takes its socio-educational agency to intersect with pathways of transnational human mobility. At a micro level, the phenomenon is observed in the Bangladeshi community of Florence, Italy, by focusing attention on perspectives and feelings as expressed by Bangladeshi children in relation to the migration project in which they are involved, and to their education interrelated with the variables of transnational mobility.

To gain a greater understanding of the field, the following contents need to be supported by definitions of main concepts, first of all those of “transnational family” and “transnational childhood”, and by an insight into research prospects that arise from the relevant pedagogical, sociological, anthropological, and migration literature.

«Transnational family patterns and living arrangements are not a new phenomenon, but this family arrangement has attracted heightened scholarly attention since the 1990s» (Shih, 2016, p. 1). The phenomenon of transnational families has been more thoroughly addressed by international research since the 1990s so as to become, as witnessed by the relevant literature, increasingly studied in relation to various contexts and aspects since the early 2000s onwards (Bryceson, Vuorela, 2002; Bonizzoni, 2007; Boccagni, 2009;

Carling, Menjívar, Schmalzbauer, 2012; Shih, 2016; Saraceno, 2016).

Accordingly, the object of the field engaged in studying families in the context of transnational migrations has been defined in recent years, namely:

Transnational families are families whose members are separated physically between two or more nation-states but maintain close ties and relationships [...]. Transnational families face many of the same challenges as immigrant families but also unique difficulties. Both immigrant and transnational families must learn to adapt to the new culture, learn a new language, locate suitable and affordable housing, seek employment, and adjust to the educational and social systems in the host country. However, transnational families must also cope with family separation and associated difficulties (Shih, 2016, p. 1, in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Family Studies*).

The said characterisation perfectly depicts the landscapes in which transnational Bangladeshi families are set.

In the Italian context, the family and parenthood in migration field has undergone further innovations with recent contributions specifically dealing with concomitant intra-family dynamics, and educational – both formal and informal – practices (Silva, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2012; Favaro, 2007; Scabini, Rossi, 2008; Tognetti Bordogna, 2007). Being a turning point in the life of transnational families, a part of the literature is dedicated to family reunification (Tognetti Bordogna, 2004, 2011; Ambrosini, Bonizzoni, Caneva, 2009; Lapov, 2019).

A more focussed area of interest, specialised in South Asian migrant population in Italy (Burgio, 2007, 2008, 2016; Lapov, 2017, 2018; Tognetti Bordogna, 2011), has widened both theoretical and empirical knowledge of the subject. As far as the Bangladeshi communities in Italy are concerned, several related topics have been addressed by research so far, namely: transnational mobility (Rahman, Kabir, 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Priori, 2012; Mollick, 2016; Paz, 2013); family reunification (Della Puppa, 2013, 2014b; Lapov, 2019); settlement patterns, networks, and living conditions (Della Puppa, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Priori, 2012); sociocultural and linguistic diversity, educational experiences and expectations (Lapov, 2019, 2020); employment (Rota, 2014a, 2014b), etc., all variously touching upon diverse patterns of family life in emigration.

The notion of “transnational family” entails, where applicable, the presence of one or more children, a fact that has inevitably brought about formulating another relevant concept, that of “transnational childhood”. Equally characterised by its recent emergence, the phenomenon has found a larger acknowledgement in international research since the 2000s. Accordingly, the extant literature allows us to recognise its most defining aspects, namely:

- the participation of children in migration processes as members of transnational families (Orellana, Thorne, Chee, Lam, 2001),
- and the materialisation of multiple identities (Mok, Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 12; Zeitlyn, 2015; Mand, 2010, 2015; Orellana *et al.*, cit.) developed and negotiated by transnational children while fluctuating between nations, societies, cultures, groups of peers, education systems, and educational practices.

Be it pedagogical, sociological, anthropological or migration literature dedicated to first-generation migrant children, it basically addresses two main aspects of their life

abroad. The first of these is their – social, cultural, linguistic, religious, or other – diversity, and the corresponding processes of adaptation and inclusion into host societies. The second aspect is that some research is occupied with the education of migrant children, usually focussing on how they settle in, their attendance, performance, and related inclusion policies. Besides, the reflection on children as part of family migration has, for a long time, been oriented to observing the present in view of future developments and life outcomes, seeing child migrants «mostly in the context of ‘becoming’» (Vathi, Duci, 2016, p. 55), and thus overlooking their current agency. As for the data collection on the social and school life of migrant children in a transnational context, adult family and community members are likewise regarded as primary information sources for developing empirical research within migrant groups.

As pointed out in the literature review by Curtis, Thompson, and Fairbrother on migrant children in Europe, «a notable finding from this review is the relative paucity of research reporting children’s own perspectives and experiences» (Curtis, Thompson, Fairbrother, 2018, p. 82). Similarly, a study by Vathi and Duci draws attention to the fact that «the inclusion of children in migration research contests a tradition in which children have been considered as just an appendage to (the migration of) adults» (Vathi, Duci, 2016, p. 55), rendering children largely invisible in a significant portion of research (Curtis *et al.*, *ibid.*; Vathi, Duci, *ibid.*).

In conclusion, the gaps in research on transnational families and children can be summarised as follows:

- from a thematic point of view, there is a need for deeper insights into specific aspects of migrant children’s here-and-now experiences (e.g. the study of intersections between childhood, transnational migrant condition, and education);
- regarding methodological strategies, the trend of considering migrant children as active agents in migration processes should be further expanded, especially by exploring children’s perspectives pertaining to their migration experience as members of transnational families (e.g. their participation in sharing opinions, aspirations, feelings etc. about their migrant condition and education in the emigration context).

## 2. Research Goals and Purposes

This paper is part of a larger research project following itineraries of sociocultural and linguistic inclusion of South Asian migrant children in Italian society and schools. Considering the state of the art, the present work would like to contribute to the field of pedagogical, anthropological, and migration studies by adding novel information gathered through micro-narratives provided by Bangladeshi children in Florence, Italy. The following contents delve into implications that a migration experience, conditioned by stay-or-go decisions in a transnational space, may have on younger family members and their perspectives on their condition abroad, and – more specifically – on their education. With the goal of identifying intersection points and exploring influences between family life, childhood, human mobility, and education, the paper provides a snapshot of reality while referring to intergenerational dynamics and feelings that are triggered within the Bangladeshi community of Florence by the effects of transnationality.

To this end, as a starting point several questions underpinning the overall research hypothesis were formulated, namely:

- how do Florence-based Bangladeshi children feel about the migration project and related strategies adopted by their parents in order to improve the living and economic conditions of their families?
- are Bangladeshi children attending primary and middle schools in Florence aware of the implications and impact that the event of transnational mobility and related migration strategies may have on their educational and personal growth, and how do they feel about this?
- what do Bangladeshi pupils, who are directly concerned, identify as main issues emerging from the intersections between their migration and education experiences?
- why is it important to study the said processes, and to explore children's perspectives and feelings in relation to their migration and education experiences?

### 3. Methodological Remarks: Children's Micro-Narratives in Context

*Methodological framework.* In view of the research goals and purposes of the present study, its methodological framework draws upon the ethnography of schooling (Spindler, Spindler, 1992; also: school or classroom ethnography, cf. Watson-Gegeo, 1997): as an integral part of educational (Mead, 1928, It. trans. 2007; Maguire, 2015; Spindler, 1955, 1963; Hodges, 2011; Gobbo, 1996; Gobbo, Gomes, 2003) and pedagogical anthropology (though founded upon a slightly different approach; Montessori, 1911; Nanni, 2002), this methodological perspective – grounded in anthropological research approaches and practices – implies an ethno-pedagogical survey (Burgio, 2007) of the context. Exploring cultural phenomena intertwined with education (in its broadest sense), it further calls for the ethnographic method to blend into pedagogical research, a methodological switch that brings about the generation of a series of ethnographies (Spindler, Spindler, 1987, 1992; Mills, Morton, 2013), or rather “micro-ethnographies” of educational settings (cf. Hargreaves, 1967; Leoncini, 2011). In this context, these micro-ethnographies merge with children's micro-narratives.

Given its thematic breadth, research with transnational family and childhood at the core of its interest embraces contributions from diverse subject areas and methodological repertoires. Specifically, this interdisciplinary research is underpinned by approaches and perspectives from intercultural pedagogy, family pedagogy, family studies, childhood studies, migration studies, the ethnography of education and schooling, and educational anthropology. Finally, when addressed in terms of micro-ethnographic observation, educational aspects need to merge with surrounding contexts, events, and social actors, namely: family, community, classroom, school, teaching staff, the social fabric, territory, or other aspects, in order to provide a picture as complete as possible of the situation. These are the frames defining the methodological approach that transnational Bangladeshi families and children are explored through in this paper.

*Qualitative empirical research.* This study is largely based on the observations and interpretations aimed at understanding people's perception of different social, human or human-related phenomena, situations, and events in a natural setting (*field inquiry*): hence, a qualitative research approach, along with associated data collection methods

and analysis approaches, appeared to be the most suitable methodology to opt for (Khan, 2014; Maxwell, 2009). This paper reports the findings of fieldwork that started in 2014 with South Asian communities in Italy, above all with Bangladeshi families in Florence and its surrounds. The choice to set the inquiry in Florence and to focus on particular sections of the local Bangladeshi population is due to the collaborations of the under-signed with primary and middle schools in Florence, attended (among other pupils) by Bangladeshi children. While exploring the complexity of transnational phenomenon as experienced by Bangladeshi children residing in Florence, the work takes the shape of a qualitative case study mingled with socio-pedagogical (LeCompte, Millroy, Preissle, 1992) and ethno-pedagogical reflection (Burgio, 2007). As a such, the paper's contents rest on two information sources: relevant literature and empirical research. In more detail, four main techniques of qualitative data collection are: fieldwork, observation, interviews (observation and interviews often deemed as fieldwork segments), and document analysis (literature/text analysis) (Khan, 2014, p. 229), and this study has availed itself of all of them. Accordingly, a set of specific research methods and approaches has been employed in order to elicit information and build up a data corpus consistent with the purposes of the study, and useful for achieving the planned research objectives.

*Research and data collection methods.* Most of the fieldwork builds upon two data collection tools: observations and spontaneous conversations with children of Bangladeshi origin attending primary and middle schools in the 1<sup>st</sup> District of Florence. This main sample comprised some 30 Bangladesh-born children, who were observed during lessons, workshops, or other activities in the said schools over the last six years. Relationships with Bangladeshi families have been largely (though not only) established through the contacted pupils, hence a number of adult community members, mainly their parents, were included in the research. These are the sampling techniques used for the selection of target population.

Field data were gradually supplemented with information gained from semi-structured interviews that involved twenty (20) individuals, primarily Bangladeshi pupils (15), parents (3), and community mediators (2). Most of the interviews took place at the "Pieraccini" School in Florence<sup>1</sup>, and – to a lesser extent – in other schools in the city centre. Some conversations also occurred in the workplace of the respective parents, prevalingly fathers, or in other less formal locations.

*Language.* For the purposes of communication with the community, whether it was with children, parents, family members, relatives or mediators, the language mainly used, with various levels of fluency, was Italian. At times, the conversations were supported by Hindi/Urdu, linguistically related to Bengali and spoken by many Bangladeshis, hence interspersed with expressions or fragments in this language(s). Occasionally, English was used to communicate and conduct interviews with some children. In other words, no communication occurred in the native language of the involved, i.e. Bengali, unless via linguistic mediation by dedicated professionals. This being said, a good number of children who attend Italian schools are fluent in Italian, and consider themselves, after several years of experience, as both Bengali and Italian native speakers.

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<sup>1</sup> "Pieraccini" School is one of the School clusters or Unified schools (*Istituto comprensivo* in Italian) in Florence: in the Italian education system, a School cluster consists of a group of nearby schools granting education from pre-school to middle school levels (ages 3-14) (hereinafter referred to as *School cluster*).

*Data analysis.* Analysis of data obtained by means of a qualitative inquiry implies a multilevel combination of sources, data, and methodologies. The selected main body of meaningful qualitative data from the primary sources (fieldwork: observations, spontaneous conversations, semi-structured interviews, field notes) were combined with additional information gained from secondary data sources (literature, broader observations, supplementary field notes). The process of qualitative data reading and comparison was conducted by applying different qualitative approaches, above all ethnography (fieldwork, ethnographic observation), case study (snapshot of reality and perceptions), and narrative research (text/story analysis) (Khan, 2014, p. 226).

*Children's micro-narratives.* The said elicitation techniques and analysis approaches take the research process to children's micro-narratives, primarily based on self-narration and life story methods. Acting as both methodological tool and information source, a micro-narrative is being formed through a process of gradual adding fresh information on the given subject, hence generating novel knowledge of the phenomenon under study. Such a methodological approach allows the collection of fragments of (mostly) spontaneous information from various sources and in various moments, from one or multiple informants, from a number of contexts jointly flowing into one, all aimed at arranging and interpreting the collected data so as to build a story. Characterised by variable extent, duration and subject, micro-narratives may either form a part of a wider frame story, stand alone as independent narrations, or intermingle with other micro-narratives. While letting children participate in the research process by giving them an opportunity to express themselves, the narratives provided by Bangladeshi children currently residing in Florence have been assumed in this study to be a primary data source and overarching methodological approach. Thus framed, micro-narratives represent an important methodological device as they give voice to the involved, transnational migrant children native to Bangladesh in this specific case, by inviting them to narrate the pathways of their social, cultural, linguistic, and educational development. Most important, such an approach regards children, in general, and migrant children, in particular, as first person narrators and active agents of change in their personal growth.

#### **4. Dimensions of Bangladeshi Transnationality**

In the first stages of its emergence, the outflow of people from Bangladesh should be followed in a general context of human mobility in South Asia (cf. Shah, 1994; Sahoo, Kadekar, 2012; Rahman, Yong, 2015; Rai, Reeves, 2009; Lal, Reeves, Rai, 2006; Singh, 2013; Reeves, Rai, Kiruppallini, 2013).

The onset of modern, and more substantial South Asian migrations, moving out of the Subcontinent, hence assuming transnational and transcontinental magnitudes, can be dated back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century period when Bangladesh was not a sovereign national entity, but a region incorporated into the overseas imperial possessions of the British Raj (British Indian Empire). In those years, South Asian emigrants were heading towards Europe, or rather Great Britain, and to British dominions located in Eastern (Uganda, Kenya) and Southern Africa (Zambia, Botswana, South Africa), and in Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Singapore).

An increase in migration outflows had been observed after Independence (1947)

from British rule was gained. The initial decades of the postcolonial period, esp. 1950-70, saw thousands of emigrants native (first of all) to independent India and Pakistan moving to Europe, in particular to Great Britain, within the British Commonwealth.

Finally, contemporary transnational departures from South Asia to other continents occurred over the last three to four decades. Since the 1970s, and with even greater intensity during the 1980s, the pre-existing movements experienced further diversification with increasing numbers of Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan migrants. Since then, “new” locations have emerged as being more attractive emigration destinations for South Asian migrants, such as Persian Gulf countries (esp. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), the United States of America, Canada, and Australia, along with some little-known or unexplored destinations in Europe, including Italy. Consequently, South Asian migrations have progressively turned into a global phenomenon.

In conclusion, South Asian diasporas currently count sizeable communities in the United Kingdom, in the Middle East (esp. Arab Gulf countries), in the United States of America, in Canada, Australia, South Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius, Fiji, Singapore, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago. Regarding the European Union, Italy is placed among the member countries (France, Germany, Spain, etc.), whose economies have attracted larger flows of South Asian migrants in the last three decades (Sahoo, Kadekar, 2012; Rai, Reeves, 2009; Lal, Reeves, Rai, 2006; Reeves, Rai, Kiruppalini, 2013).

And Bangladeshi diasporas perfectly fit into the picture.

## **5. Between Bangladesh and Italy**

In the specific case of migrants heading to overseas destinations, such as Bangladeshi families, the phenomenon makes them cross the boundaries of their own nation and continent, introducing their migration project to the expanses of a spatiality that is becoming increasingly transnational and transcontinental: distances are getting larger, time gaps unbridgeable, and along with them relations, interactions, cultural references, languages, emotions, perceptions, definitions, and ambitions. These dynamics are affecting the roles, tasks, responsibilities, and expectations of the involved families, whose members are concurrently going through a series of transformations.

The underlying questions about the migration preferences of Bangladeshi citizens are: why are they emigrating? why are they leaving their own country? and why Italy? what push and pull factors have induced Bangladeshi, and more generally South Asian migrants to change course and head for the Apennine Peninsula?

Broadly speaking, emigration from South Asia is traditionally motivated by the need for novel labour markets and better living conditions. Regarding the changes in their migration projects, it has not been one, but rather a set of factors that have led Bangladeshi migrants to opt for Italy: these range from market saturation and a shift in traditional migration destinations of South Asians to professional qualifications that are in demand (economic aspects), from opportunities to enter and stay in a potential host country (migration policies) to sociocultural questions (e.g. religious and/or cultural affinity). And these are only the most salient reasons behind their choices. To this end, the decision of some European governments, in particular those of Britain and Germany, to introduce restrictive policies in the early 1980s (in Germany since 1979; Priori, 2012, p.

58), aimed at decreasing the migrant flows from South Asia, has determined transformations and further developments of the phenomenon through the forthcoming decades.

Starting between the 1970s and 1980s, arrivals reaching Italy fall into the last stage of South Asian migration history. Accordingly, the stabilisation of South Asian migrants in the national territory occurred in the 1990s and 2000s. Preceded by Sri Lankans and Indians, Bangladeshi migrants started putting down roots in Italy in the 1980s (Della Puppa, 2014a, p. 12), whence their steadier presence can be followed from the early 1990s onwards (Rahman, Kabir, 2012a).

The narratives of Bangladeshi migrants in Italy recall central, southern, and south-eastern parts of the Country as their native regions: many of them hail from the city of Dhaka and surrounds (e.g. Dhaka Faridpur District), or from the regions located south-east of Dhaka, especially from the Comilla and Noakhali Districts (Della Puppa, 2014a, p. 63; Lapov, 2018, p. 77).

Three main migration patterns can be categorised within the Italian Bangladeshi population: the largest category comprises male economic migrants (labour migration i.e. for economic reasons); many of them arrive alone and strive to reunite their household by bringing their wives and children in through the family reunification process (family migration i.e. for family reasons), creating thus a second pattern; a third main category comprises individuals emigrating in search of international protection, such as asylum seekers and unaccompanied minor migrants, who are recorded among Bangladeshi immigrants, yet in much lower numbers (forced migration i.e. for safety/political reasons).

Regarding their labour inclusion, Bangladeshi migrants in Italy can be roughly distributed between services (kitchen staff, waiters, hotel and restaurant workers, information and communications services, etc.), and industry. A significant proportion of them work in the commercial sector (66,8% of the self-employed; Melchionda, 2017, p. 37), mainly in retail, as either managers or employees (merchants, shopkeepers, shop assistants) who are engaged in selling miscellaneous merchandise, such as food, spices, clothing, accessories, jewellery, leather goods, etc., plus (casually) peddling umbrellas and various articles.

As highlighted by several studies (Melchionda, 2017; Von Rohr, Delaney, 2016; Rota, 2014a, 2014b; Rahman, Kabir, 2012a, 2012b, 2015), the Bangladeshi economy in Italy shows noteworthy trends: while contributing to the growth of immigrant-run business, the economic participation of the Bangladeshi community impacts Italy's overall economy too (Rota, 2014a, p. 3; Melchionda, 2017, p. 36).

Altogether, these dynamics have brought about the stabilisation process of Bangladeshis in Italy, especially in terms of their demographic and economic involvement. As for minors, they are regularly attending schools. Having grown in number, the Italian Bangladeshi community entered the classification of the 10 most represented migrant communities in the Country (taking also naturalisation into account). To this end, the fact that Italy hosts the second largest Bangladeshi community in Europe after Great Britain is another datum symptomatic of its steady settlement in the Country (Haque, Biswas, 2015, p. 61; Paz, 2013, p. 6; Chugh, 2014).

## 6. Between Family Decisions and Transnationality

Before focusing on the information that has emerged from Bangladeshi children's narratives, it is essential to provide some social and economic data that demarcate their lives in emigration.

In the Italo-Bangladeshi panorama (139.953), the Florentine micro-reality amounts to 2.133 people (Tuscany: 6.674, in: *Tuttitalia.it*<sup>2</sup>). The socioeconomic conditions of Florence-based Bangladeshi families can be described as various and variable, a fact that has repercussions on their children's schooling in terms of both attendance and performance. A good part of the Florentine Bangladeshi population, with particular reference to its male share, is occupied with retail trade, followed by segments employed in services (e.g. restaurants) and industries. Several Bangladeshi retailers, running family business (shopkeepers, merchants) are classifiable, in the Bangladeshi society, as members of the middle/upper-middle class (Della Puppa, 2013, p. 123). In line with this background, some of their children attended private schools in Bangladesh, whereas others experienced state education.

It is in the afore-outlined context that our young interlocutors are living in as Bangladeshi girls and boys abroad; as daughters and sons of immigrants; as pupils attending Italian schools in the Italian language. As young people – namely active members of their societies, hence potential agents of social change – they are supposed to share rights and duties, privileges and obligations, sociocultural diversities and similarities with their peers, starting from their classmates, friends, cousins, and through to the youth population as a category.

Their transnational condition encourages them to become bilingual, even trilingual, in Bengali and other language(s). Nonetheless, in the eyes of Bangladeshi children and youths moving through a transnational experience, the very same migration dynamics may bring both benefits and concerns into their lives. In fact, human migration belongs to those social phenomena that put relationships within a family to the test of redefinition and adjustment.

Despite the fruitful economic participation of the Bangladeshi community in Italy, above all in commerce, the tendency to move on has always persisted. In such a migration project, Italy would be deemed as a transit station on migrants' route to other European countries or beyond. The main pull factors inducing this choice are family ties, and unexplored employment opportunities, basically for adult males. As such, this circumstance looms over the destiny of young Bangladeshis: should the thought become reality, new transnational movement(s) would variously impact on the family life and relations, intergenerational dynamics, identity feelings, and school attendance of the concerned Bangladeshi children. Herein, we are interested in possible developments of the latter option within the Bangladeshi community of Florence.

It is all about emigrating then. In view of this eventuality, an exploration into the emotions and feelings of transnational Bangladeshi children is a priority: what do they feel and how do they feel about decisions made by adult family members to move, to

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Istat data (Italian National Institute of Statistics) on 01-01-2019, in *Tuttitalia.it*, accessed: 19-03-2020.

emigrate, changing thus the course of their lives? By this, we are entering the field of transnational migration strategies revolving around the migration project: *to stay, or not to stay*, that is the question!

Once abroad, the actors of transnational mobility may envisage three possible scenarios, namely: *staying, going back home or leaving for elsewhere*.

As previously shown by demographic and economic stability indicators, many Bangladeshi immigrants opt to stay in Italy. Others, under certain circumstances, choose not to return to Bangladesh with the entire family, but to send back some of its members, usually children, to “save” them from the risks of school failure. The third category comprises children and youths who are bound to follow their parents in further migration experiences, whether these involve other parts of Italy or novel transnational destinations, usually the UK, as they have family links and networks there. Actually, while stating that it is all «for the children», parents are actually engaged in seeking «better options for their children’s education» (Chowdhury, 2018; cf. also: Clarke, 2015).

## 7. Bangladeshi Children Narrating

To portray children’s perspectives on the topic of inquiry, it was opted to exemplify them by means of three micro-narratives selected from the overall sample collected during the fieldwork. Extracted from broader children’s life stories, the following fragments are – as with the rest of the accounts – based on observations during school activities, spontaneous conversations, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. The decision to focus on these very excerpts was motivated by their potential to be representative of the narrative corpus that the involved Bangladeshi children, these three comprised, have “written” in relation to their migration and schooling experiences in Florence.

*Amjad*<sup>3</sup> (M, 9, year 3 at “Lavagnini” Primary School<sup>4</sup>, Florence; observation period: Spring 2019; languages known: Bengali, Italian; interview language: Italian). Amjad’s story rests on a mix of feelings dwelling within his seemingly “phlegmatic” and relaxed temperament: he appears both serious and sunny-natured, calm and attentive at the same time, without letting his mood be easily unsettled.

The migration movements, undertaken by Amjad’s family, are driven by his father’s employment opportunities. Needless to say, this continual coming and going between Bangladesh, Italy (Florence), and England (Birmingham) has contributed to building Amjad’s personality.

One day, invited to tell us his story in the class, Amjad began:

*I was born in Bangladesh ... after a couple of years, I came to Florence, Italy, with my family ... I attended kindergarten for a year or two, and the first year of primary school, all here at “Lavagnini” ... During the first year of my primary school, we moved to England, to Birmingham... [And how was it?] Oh, it was nice, very nice... [Amjad did not linger a lot over his stay in England].*

<sup>3</sup> The real children’s names have been replaced with pseudonyms selected from Bangladeshi onomastic inventory.

<sup>4</sup> “Lavagnini” Primary School is part of the “Pieraccini” School cluster in Florence.

*Then, my parents decided to move again, and I'm back in Florence now.*

[How do you feel about it, are you glad to be back here?] *Oh yes, I am – I have friends here [telling names], I like the school, and everything...*

Amjad returned to Florence in Spring 2019. Judging from his disinterest in talking about this experience, Amjad's two-year stay in Birmingham seems to have left no important marks on him. If one recalls this chapter of his life, Amjad conveys the impression that he chooses to ignore the period of time spent "abroad" – just as though nothing happened. As a result, it is difficult to understand how he really feels about the Birmingham episode. Amjad actually strives to bridge the recent past so as to bring back memories of his days in Florence.

Be it a defence mechanism employed to repress his being different, especially in terms of his personal history, or an actual wish to resume his life in Florence and leave behind the one in England, the fact is that Amjad is not overly enthusiastic – for the time being – about facing his transnational experience.

On the other hand, having spent a few years at "Lavagnini" School in Florence, the exposure to Italian language does not present a novel situation for Amjad, and his proficiency in Italian L2 proved to be sufficient for his reintegration into Italian school. Put differently, Amjad has not lost his Italian language skills, nor childhood recollections. He has instead found his emotional equilibrium by re-entering the classroom in a Florentine school he left a couple of years ago.

**Shamim** (F, 10, year 5 at "Battisti" Primary School<sup>5</sup>, Florence; observation period: Autumn-Winter 2017-18; languages known: Bengali, English, spoken Hindi; interview language: English). Shamim reached Florence in Summer 2017. It was not hard to understand that she received a good education before coming to Italy, which is due to her regular attendance at a bilingual, i.e. English-medium school in Bangladesh. In fact, besides her mother tongue – Bengali, Shamim is fluent in English, and able to use both Bengali and Latin scripts.

Despite her initial shyness and struggle with Italian language learning, Shamim never stopped displaying her motivation and interest in studying. Willing to express her needs and thoughts, she availed herself of her pre-existing knowledge by resorting to English, or searching for lexical coincidences between Italian and English.

Shamim can be described as interactive and keen to learn new things. Her inquisitive nature leads her to seek further information by asking clarifying and probing questions. And vice versa, Shamim likes to share stories from her life experience:

I have a friend, a boy, in Bangladesh, his name is Riyaj ... we used to play when we were children, and we always go along very well ... we are neighbours, and our mothers are friends too...

Also tenets emerging from her spiritual knowledge:

*In our family, we say that it doesn't matter if you're a Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu ... it*

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<sup>5</sup> "Battisti" Primary School is part of the "Pieraccini" School cluster in Florence.

*is important to be a good person, only then can you be a good Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu. I learnt that from my äbbä.*

Though making progress, there was not enough time for Shamim to get closer to her linguistic autonomy: her elementary language proficiency was not sufficient to meet her learning needs. According to both her parents and school records, she was a very good student in Bangladesh, instead. With the goal of preventing any further risks of school failure, her father decided to send Shamim back to Bangladesh as soon as the first term came to a conclusion:

*My äbbä says I'm wasting my time here.*

**Jalal** (M, 9, year 4 at “Vittorio Veneto” Primary School<sup>6</sup>, Florence; observation period: Autumn-Winter 2018-19; languages known: Bengali, Italian; interview language: Italian). Jalal spent just a year in Italy – approximately, from February 2018 to February 2019, and this year was sufficient for him to reach a high level of fluency in Italian, and to get familiar with his class and the surrounding context. These are, apparently, the main reasons underlying his reaction to the decision by his parents to leave again.

It was his eighth month in Italy when we met. The colleague who received and followed Jalal in the previous school term, before the summer holidays to be precise, portrayed him as a reflective, attentive, and collaborative boy, who was very enthusiastic about expressing himself, studying, asking questions, and participating in school activities. Being highly motivated to attain proficiency in Italian, he paid close attention to every word he said. Indeed, after five months or so, Jalal was able to deal autonomously with a good deal of assignments in Italian.

I could confirm the pupil's description, when we first met in October 2018.

Towards the end of the year, Jalal started disclosing his feelings about his family's decision to move to London. While trying not to show it, he seemed seriously concerned:

*...they say everything's nice over there, everything's beautiful in London ... there are a lot of cousins ... schools are better...*

Jalal eventually revealed his emotional state, shaken by worries and perplexities before leaving for London. Uncertainty about a new venture, displeasure about being forced to interrupt his schooling and leave his friends were – most likely – mingled with a sort of disenchantment with the migration experience, bringing a kind of apprehension in Jalal.

To avoid the risk of generalisations, it must be observed that some children would be very keen to move and resettle in England, to meet relatives and make new friends. Others would not. And Jalal was not:

*I'm not sure if I'd like to go, to leave here.*

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<sup>6</sup> “Vittorio Veneto” Primary School is part of the “Centro Storico-Pestalozzi” School cluster in Florence.

## 8. Research Findings

This paragraph reports the main research findings, almost entirely based on field data, and only occasionally combined with information coming from supporting sources (i.e. broader observations, supplementary field notes). In order to analyse the collected data, it was necessary to turn back to the initial research questions. These questions will help us organise and discuss the findings that emerged from the children's micro-narratives, and were used to outline the experiences of Bangladeshi children with transnational mobility and the Italian education system. Accordingly, each research question is answered by considerations reflecting children's perceptions, feelings, interpretations, and perspectives on a specific topic.

### 8.1 Migration projects and strategies

While speaking of Bangladeshi transnationality, it should be noted that the search for better social and economic conditions acts as a main pull factor inducing Bangladeshi nationals to migrate to Europe. Likewise, the migration project includes more favourable prospects for their children's educational and personal growth. That is, migrations are viewed as an opportunity for all family members.

Conversations with Florence-based Bangladeshi children, aimed at discussing the migration strategies adopted by their parents, generally inferred an affirmative attitude in this respect. Confident about the decisions made by adults with the goal of improving the family's living and economic conditions, children are pleased to follow their parents and relatives abroad. This step, determined by adult choices, is deemed a propitious event for the wellbeing of the entire family. On the flip side, it means that children do not feel compelled to emigrate together with their families or to join their fathers or both parents abroad after some time. Last but not least, several children resolutely lay emphasis on the fact that it is also their duty to respect and abide by their parents' decisions, as they know what is best for them and for the family.

According to the information offered by both children and adult members of the Florence Bangladeshi community, migration processes and specific migration strategies, as dictated by dynamics of transnational human mobility, may variously impact on their family life and children's educational and personal growth. The resultant situations can be organised into three main categories:

- if the situation is regarded as satisfactory, the likely decision is to stay in the country, Italy in this case: such a choice means continued integration and schooling processes in emigration;
- awareness of better economic and employment opportunities in another country, usually the UK, may give way to the decision to re-emigrate: when taken, this step entails interruption of integration and schooling processes in Italy, and re-adaptation to a new context;
- should parents notice that their children are not making progress in school (irrespective of possible reasons), they might opt for "saving" children's education by sending them back to Bangladesh: in this case, the interrupted schooling process in the country of origin will be resumed.

### 8.2 Educational and personal growth in emigration

As for the implications and impact that the phenomenon of transnational mobility and related migration strategies may have on their educational and personal growth, the involved Bangladeshi children, irrespective of their age and school level, show full awareness in this respect. Unquestionably, children's awareness of both tangible and intangible reality increases with their age, hence elder children (e.g. middle school pupils) prove to be better at describing and discussing their experiences. This said, elicitation of particular details is a process that commonly requires a broader discussion supported by strategically targeted, well-aimed, though discreetly asked questions.

Not rarely, children will combine their own convictions with adult views, according to which emigration option may provide the opportunity of better educational and social opportunities for their personal growth. This opinion is based on a widespread belief that European schools and education systems are far better than those in Bangladesh.

It is at this point that children's expectations start being inundated with mixed feelings ranging from happiness to worry and fear as they prepare to face emigration. If, before leaving Bangladesh, they are generally happy to follow their parents abroad and learn new things, their initial enthusiasm may risk being gradually overwhelmed by a sense of disorientation, due to the uncertainty awaiting them upon arrival to their destination, all the more so after entering the Italian education system. This sequence of unfamiliar events introduces children to novel challenges and emotions that they have to cope with in emigration.

### 8.3 Issues and challenges

Changing country and residence implies a multilevel adaptation process which entails a series of adjustments in terms of relations, interactions, language skills, habits, all together requiring time and persistence. Coming in touch with the local education system oftentimes represents an initial contact with Italian society for many migrant children, as well as for some of the adult migrants. In this research, Bangladeshi children attending Italian schools were invited to express their views on the circumstances that resulted from the intersections between their migration and education experiences. Being directly concerned, most of the observed pupils identified several issues and challenges in this process of adaptation, with special attention to changes that may occur in:

- sociocultural relations, interactions, that is "*friends and cousins*" in children's own words;
- language and communication issues;
- psychosocial adjustments (Vathi, Duci, 2016), commonly expressed in terms of "*fear or worry about what's going to happen*";
- the said aspects are needed for children to achieve similar levels of educational attainment to their schoolmates (be they autochthonous or long-term migrant children), in terms of cultural references, prior knowledge, and learning styles;
- finally, some children add they "*have no (suitable) place for studying at home*" (Lapov, 2018, p. 67), meaning that they are living in either extended families, or small flats (or both).

In case their parents decide to re-emigrate, children are compelled to undertake the adaptation process all over again. Be they afraid of going elsewhere, or happy to reach their relatives and friends in the UK (the most sought-after destination), children are concerned about their social, linguistic, and educational future.

To their credit, parents attach great importance to education: as a matter of fact, Bangladeshi children in Florence are regularly enrolled and attending school. Yet, while often well-qualified and wishing the best for their children, the Bangladeshi parents belonging to the community settled in Florence can hardly offer them any support with schooling. As detailed by both parties, two main reasons underlie this circumstance, namely:

- parents are lacking in specific tools, starting with the language barrier, which precludes them from being able to assist their children in doing their homework assignments;
- Bangladeshi parents are mainly employed in the commercial sector in retail trades (followed by services and industry), a job which, in addition to the corresponding lifestyle, does not leave them much time to devote to their children's schooling.

#### *8.4 Possible directions and prospects*

The fourth and last question is aimed at understanding the importance of children's perspectives and feelings in relation to their migration and education experiences. These topics and processes need to be observed, explored and studied, both in connection to each other and in relation to other concomitant phenomena, for a number of reasons. Starting from the most salient, these are:

- to give voice to children, and especially to migrant children;
- to let migrant children express their feelings, ambitions, desires, expectations, and perspectives with regard to their migration and education experiences in the context of transnational human mobility;
- to provide more targeted insights – going beyond linear, standardised evidence – into the lives of transnational families and children, paying close attention to their social, cultural, and economic conditions;
- to gain greater understanding of the impact of migration on the lives of migrant families with particular reference to their children's education in a transnational setting;
- to contribute to inter- and transdisciplinary research in pedagogical, sociological, anthropological, and migration studies (among other fields) by indicating possible research directions and prospects;
- to foster intercultural education by incorporating both diversities and similarities of children belonging to various sociocultural traditions in a plural perspective;
- to invest resultant pedagogical reflections in socio-educational policies aimed at promoting educational opportunities for all, and developing interventions in support of school attendance, continuity, and performance of migrant children in order to prevent – as an ultimate goal – the phenomenon of early school lea-

ving among them;

- to promote social policies that ensure a larger inclusion of migrant communities, and a fuller participation of the entire citizenship in the social, cultural, and economic life of the Country, Italy in this case.

## 9. Conclusions

The Italian Bangladeshi population gives rise to one of the most sizeable immigrant communities in the country: accordingly, a number of Bangladeshi families take an active part in forming a prominent community in terms of their economic participation and social inclusion.

Nonetheless, some Bangladeshi migrants choose to re-emigrate, to leave Italy for another country, even if they have Italian citizenship. All the more so, being exempt from international restriction policies that would hinder their free circulation within the European Union, some Italian Bangladeshis try their fortune beyond the national boundaries. And, one of the most sought-after destinations is Great Britain, especially the cities of London and Birmingham. The set of push and pull factors may vary from one case to another, yet the most recurrent reason for re-emigrating is the search for novel labour markets, better living conditions, and a brighter future – basically in terms of educational opportunities – for the children. Sometimes, the remaining option is returning to Bangladesh, or sending back some family members, commonly children.

Against these circumstances as a broader context, the paper was intended to shed light on perspectives and feelings experienced by young Bangladeshis in the face of the decisions made by adult family members to move. Though made in the best interests of the entire family, these choices are not always perceived as such. Put differently, children – usually informed about the final outcomes of decisions, rather than being fully involved in the decision-making process – go through a variety of emotional states before adjusting to a new context.

In the meantime, their mood may fluctuate between bewilderment and gladness, fear of the unknown and excitement, puzzlement and enthusiasm, despite the fact that the new experience will certainly involve new friendships, refreshed expectations, hopes...

While tackling these and other relevant issues, the paper tried to answer research questions by providing a portrayal of the context that Bangladeshi children are living in as members of transnational families. Particular attention was paid to socio-economic aspects, these being the main drivers pushing migrants to set off again. No standard solutions exist, and each case depends on particular social contexts, family conditions, and individual abilities to deal with novel situations.

The three children, who shared their stories with us through these pages, were fully aware of the benefits and opportunities that education might have brought to their personal growth. At the same time, this very awareness of theirs constituted, most likely, the basis for their own perceptions and interpretations against the decision to move again.

As stated in the paper, observing children's perspectives and exploring their feelings

in relation to the surrounding reality, transnational migrations and related operational decisions in this case, deserve greater scholarly attention. And not only because these might be interesting processes and phenomena to research. Studying them proves to be important for several reasons, starting from encouraging children to express themselves as directly concerned on their here-and-now experiences: giving voice to children, and especially to transnational migrant children, involve them as primary informants, and allow them to be active agents of change in their personal growth.

Pedagogically speaking, such a methodological approach, combined with socio- and ethno-pedagogical reflections, paves the way for further research prospects and directions. In the final analysis, this form of fieldwork research on migrant children's schooling, with particular focus on their micro-narratives, contributes to generating knowledge that offers itself as a useful information source for developing socially engaged practices and policies aimed at fostering education, enhancing school systems, and promoting educational opportunities for all.

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