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Education and poverty: The case of street-children in urban areas of Pakistan

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Highlights

- Explores how informal education empowers street-children in urban Pakistan.
- Uses Kleine's Choice Framework, Capability Approach, to analyze educational access and agency.
- Reveals how free tuition and mentorship expand children's substantive freedoms.
- Demonstrates flexible services as key to inclusive educational empowerment.
- Shows education's role in disrupting intergenerational poverty.

Abstract

This paper investigates how educational services can serve as transformative mechanisms in addressing illiteracy and chronic poverty among street children in urban areas of Pakistan. Drawing on the Capability Approach and using Kleine's (2013) Choice Framework as an analytical lens, the study examines how free educational tuition delivered in informal park-based settings contributes to expanding children's substantive freedoms and empowerment. The research is grounded in a qualitative case study that combines semi-structured interviews with ethnographic observations, including participatory involvement by the researcher. The findings highlight two key contributions. First, the study demonstrates how free-of-cost and flexible educational services, coupled with strong mentorship roles, create the necessary conditions for capability expansion - removing barriers related to time, financial resources, and social constraints. Second, the analysis shows how such interventions influence both the intrinsic and instrumental dimensions of well-being, enabling children to re-enter formal education systems, build psychological resilience, and access improved socioeconomic opportunities. By capturing how agency and structure interact across the four dimensions of choice - existence, sense, use, and achievement - the paper offers a context-sensitive analysis of how educational services may create pathways that contribute to disrupting intergenerational poverty under specific structural conditions. The study contributes to both Transformative Service Research and development literature by offering a context-sensitive understanding of how education, when

designed around real-life constraints, can promote social inclusion, structural change, and long-term empowerment in marginalized communities.

Previous Next

Keywords

Street children; Pakistan; Intergenerational poverty; Educational inclusion; Capability approach; Choice framework; Transformative service research

1. Introduction

Many types of services are linked with well-being (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015, Anderson et al., 2013, Ostrom et al., 2021). The field of Transformative Service Research (TSR) identifies well-being as the "uplifting changes aimed at improving the lives of individuals, families, communities, society, and the ecosystem more broadly" [2: 243]. TSR notes that since service are a fundamental part of our lives, they also affect our well-being as individuals and collectives in many aspects among financial wellbeing, discrimination, marginalization, literacy, inclusion, access, capacity building, and decreased disparity among others (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015). Poverty is a core research priority of TSR (Fisk et al., 2016). When so many people live in multi-generational poverty, the institutions in many societies are failing to deliver adequate basic services. Among such basic services is education. Educational services are known to have widespread individual and collective impact on well-being (Field et al., 2021). This impact is closely linked to the understanding that illiteracy, on the other hand, can have significant negative economic, social, and health impacts on both individuals and society (World Literacy Foundation, 2018).

It is estimated that globally one in five people is illiterate (World Literacy Foundation, 2018), with the highest illiteracy rates observed in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2016). Although global literacy rates are rising (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2016), illiteracy remains prevalent in poverty-stricken contexts. Children from low-income and disadvantaged homes, for instance, are significantly less likely to own books or read regularly, with a 30% increase in these numbers since 2012 (World Literacy Foundation, 2018). This trend reflects that families with low-paying employment often prioritize work over education, expecting children to contribute to the household rather than complete their schooling. Thus, a strong link exists between poverty and illiteracy (Cree et al., 2022). Furthermore, illiteracy often prevails in contexts of extreme resource scarcity and lack of well-functioning formal institutions (Reynoso and Cabrera, 2019), pointing to the vicious cycle of underprivileged people staying underprivileged due to the lack of (equitable) access to educational services.

To understand this issue deeper, the broader educational literature highlights a gap in understanding how education impacts poverty cycles for disadvantaged individuals and communities (Roser and Dyer, 2008). Increased education is strongly associated with reducing the likelihood of chronic poverty (Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2004), yet few studies have examined how education specifically influences poverty cycles. It is understood that the functional implications of literacy are about applying reading and writing skills to real life purposes such as reading medicine labels (health), understanding cost and potential return for investments (financial), filling out a job application (economic), and understanding government policies (social). Yet key questions remain about whether and how educational services enhances employment opportunities, increases productivity in existing livelihoods (e.g., agriculture or small businesses), and improve social mobility as well as the ability to navigate socioeconomic landscapes (Roser and Dyer, 2008). For researchers, it becomes relevant to investigate these questions within poverty-stricken regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where illiteracy rates are among the highest (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2016).

This study explores how people in communities prone to illiteracy and high educational drop-out rates find opportunities to break the poverty cycle through educational services. It examines how a free educational tuition program meets the specific needs of street children in urban slum areas. This understanding is essential in poverty contexts as primary school is mostly the only exposure to schooling that children receive in many developing countries (Lewin and Caillods, 2001, UNESCO, 2006). Additionally, the likelihood of poverty is often linked to individuals who do not complete primary school

(Roser and Dyer, 2008). The study also provides an empirical context within South Asia, a region with one of the highest illiteracy rates globally, alongside sub-Saharan Africa (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2016).

The main purpose of this study is to understand how education has affected the lives of street children in urban slums, particularly in terms of re-admission into formal school systems, social awareness and access to better socioeconomic opportunities. While education is strongly associated with reducing the likelihood of chronic poverty (Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2004), there is limited research on how exactly it achieves this. For example, it is unclear whether education leads to greater employment opportunities, enhanced productivity, or improved social mobility for children (Roser and Dyer, 2008). This insight also highlights opportunities for supporting educationally excluded communities in a way that fosters better inclusion and potentially mitigate illiteracy. The study adopts the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), more specifically Kleine's (Kleine, 2013) Choice Framework as a conceptual lens to investigate to what extent educational access expands individuals' substantive freedoms and opportunities in a poverty context.

Notably, this study does not seek to generalize outcomes beyond the case itself, but rather contribute analytically to the broader debate on educational development by illustrating how particular service characteristics interact with agency and structure in contexts of poverty.

2. A capability lens on educational opportunities for urban slum children

The capability approach as initiated by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1999), is an approach which raises questions about availability of means to- and opportunities for well-being. TSR emphasizes this approach in order understand how services enable or hinder people to do or be what they like (Fisk et al., 2020). In this approach, human capabilities are understood as effective freedoms or valuable opportunities by which people can pursue different kinds of life that they value (Robeyns, 2003). According to Sen, education holds both instrumental and intrinsic value. Instrumentally, it supports economic productivity by building skills that enhance individuals' access to social and economic opportunities. Intrinsically, education is valuable because it promotes personal growth, freedom, and social justice, empowering individuals to lead meaningful lives beyond economic measures. Sen's Capability Approach emphasizes that education should not only be seen as a tool for economic gain but also as a right that enhances human dignity and societal well-being (Dreze and Sen, 2002, Rajapakse, 2016, Sen, 1999). When considering education, the capability approach allows for an analysis of people's ability to get an education (such as academic qualifications or available and accessible schools) in relation to the real opportunity which they have for education. Such real opportunities are analyzed to understand if there are any constraints which hinders individuals in functioning fully upon their abilities. In our case of education in urban slums of Pakistan, we can understand that people living in poverty already have financial constraints. In such cases their real opportunities to get an education are most likely hampered since they cannot pay school-, books- or transportation fees, despite having academic qualifications or available and accessible nearby schools. In addition to their financial constraints, illiteracy of parents also hampers children's' ability to get an education, as some parents will likely look upon education as an unfruitful investment for their children or simply won't know how to fill out admission application to enroll their children into formal schools - which is often the case for illiterate households in poorer communities. These aforementioned constraints are often the influencing factors which make poverty-cycle repeat itself through several generations and why poorer communities persist to exist. This is also the case of urban slums in Pakistan, education is not equitably provided and people living in these areas do not have the same opportunities to attain education as the more prosperous communities.

In the case of education in Pakistan, is noted that the government of Pakistan devotes few resources to education; in 2017 only spending 2.9 % of its GDP on education (Hunter, 2020). It is also unlikely that these circumstances will change as Pakistan faces declining economic growth rates, high levels of public debt, inflation, and budget shortfalls (Hunter, 2020). Although education is provided by the government for children at the age group of 5–16 years, it is estimated that 22.8 million children within the same age group don't attend school, representing 44 % of the total population of the country (UNICEF, 2019). The reason for this can be connected to poor economic circumstances where children are expected to work (support family through various means), rather than go to schools. Other reasons can be the vast gap in access to education, including safety concerns in rural areas where students must walk to school (Hunter, 2020). Dysfunctional school facilities are also a common problem related to illiteracy at the elementary level, such as lack of sanitation or electricity, underqualified teaching staff, widespread corruption, and many "ghost teachers" who don't show up for work despite remaining on public payrolls (Hunter, 2020).

It is further noted that the educational opportunities of urban slum children in Pakistan are worse than the children living in rural areas (Masih, 2013). In Pakistan, the urban slums, also called Kachi Abadis (informal settlements), varies between 35 and 50 % of the population; this percentage is increasing day by day due to population growth, urbanization (rural-urban migration) with no provision of houses/serviced plots for low-income individuals/families (Masih, 2013). The dire economic conditions of families living in urban slums also pushes children into labor. It is noted that child labor is more prevalent in urban slum areas; children may work longer hours and some children may work after school till late night, giving them insufficient rest to be productive at school the next day (Mugisha, 2004). Child labor also exposes children to the streets without parental or guardian oversight, leading to unsupervised social development. Hence, it is also noted that urban slum children are more prone to be exposed to social evils, and consequently teachers have a hard time teaching and keeping urban slum children in school (Berhe, 1999).

Existing analyses point to many conditions which hamper the real opportunities to education for urban slum children of Pakistan. These being poor economic wealth of families (financial constraints), educational level of parents (illiteracy and decision-making), and living conditions in the urban slums (social development and morality) (Masih, 2013). It is noted that such pertaining conditions contributes to the socioeconomic disparities between rich and poor, where the poor often remain poor and are unable to break the poverty cycles of earlier generations (Cree et al., 2022). Under these conditions of public school system in Pakistan, many non-governmental organizations have entered the education sector in Pakistan comprising of more than 200 schools.

Researching poverty contexts involves exploring how social, economic, and structural constraints affect individuals' real freedoms and opportunities, a concern central to Sen's Capability Approach. Sen's Capability Approach provides the foundational basis for understanding empowerment in contexts of deprivation such as urban slums. Building on this foundation, Kleine's Choice Framework (Kleine, 2013) offers a relevant theoretical perspective.

Kleine's Choice Framework (Kleine, 2013) categorizes empowerment into four dimensions of choice:

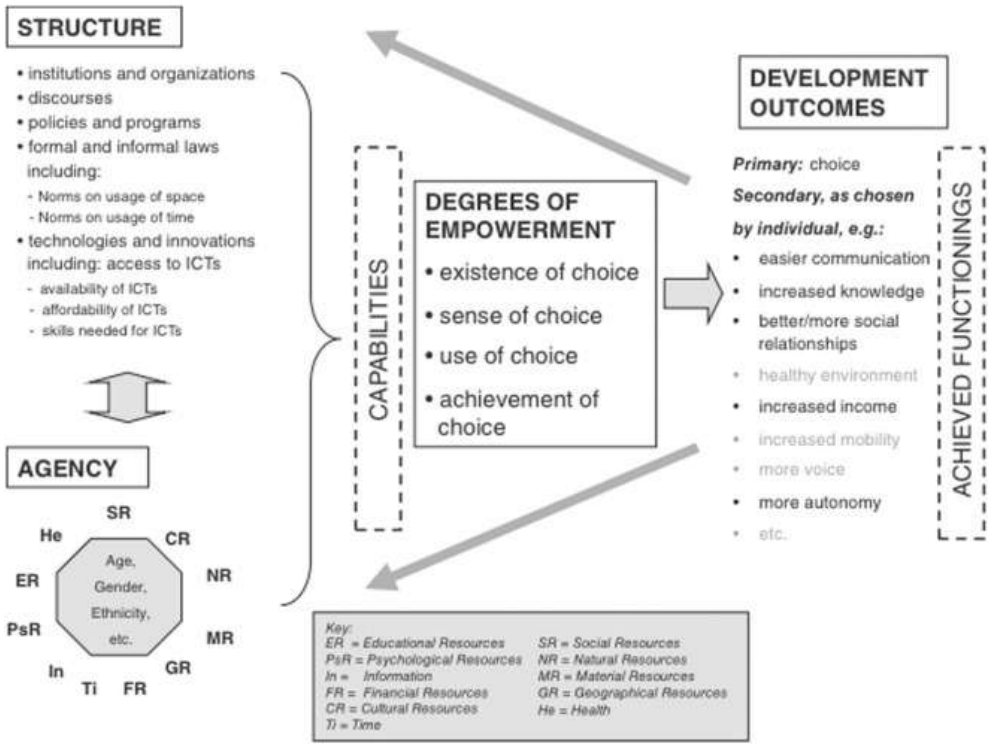
- Existence of Choice: Are options available within existing resources and structures? This examines whether an individual theoretically has the possibility to make a choice if they possess the necessary resources and structural conditions.
- Sense of Choice: Does the individual perceive that they have options? This considers the awareness of available choices, which may be influenced by social norms or exposure to new technologies.
- Use of Choice: Does the individual take action to make a choice? This dimension assesses if a person takes action to exercise their options.
- Achievement of Choice: Does the outcome align with their choice? This evaluates whether the selected choice leads to a desired or expected result.

Each dimension aids in identifying barriers and designing interventions that truly empower individuals by enhancing awareness, access, and meaningful use of options. Agency within the framework refers to a person's resource portfolio (comprising material, financial, social, and psychological assets) that supports their decision-making capabilities. This broad view of resources underscores that empowerment goes beyond financial means alone. Structure represents the broader social and institutional context, including laws, policies, and cultural norms, which either enable or restrict individual choices. Structure influence access to resources and can vary greatly based on societal context.

Agency is the capacity to make meaningful choices, dependent on a person's resources (Kleine, 2013). Key resources include material, financial, natural, geographical, health, educational, psychological, informational, time, cultural, and social resources. These resources, which often interlink and overlap, shape a person's ability to make choices within a social structure. Recognizing the full range of resources helps assess an individual's capacity for choice within their environment. This "resource portfolio" allows individuals to leverage personal strengths and assets to make choices and act upon them. For instance, material resources could mean owning tools or technology, while social resources may represent a network of supportive relationships. By recognizing these varied forms of resources, the framework shows that individual power comes from more than just financial wealth. Development practitioners can use this concept to assess what resources individuals need and where they may need support to enhance their agency.

The structure comprises the broader social, institutional, and cultural context within which individuals operate. It includes both formal (laws, policies) and informal (cultural norms, societal expectations) elements that can either support or restrict a person's choices. Technologies, like access to mobile networks, can also play a critical structural role, shaping what's possible in a given context. The structure's role is significant in development, as it not only influences what resources people can access but also how they can use them. For example, access to education policies or social norms about gender roles can directly impact what choices are feasible for different individuals.

The Choice Framework by Kleine (Kleine, 2013) provides a model for understanding how individuals can navigate complex social structures to exercise freedom and achieve valued outcomes. By examining outcomes, dimensions of choice, agency, and structure, the framework highlights that empowerment involves ensuring people have meaningful choices, the resources to make them, and supportive social structures. Overall, it presents a model for development that expands personal freedom by ensuring individuals have options, are aware of these options, can act on them, and ultimately achieve valued outcomes. To analyze our case study in Pakistan, we particularly use Kleine's Choice Framework (2013) as an operationalised model of the capability approach. See Fig. 1.



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Fig. 1. The choice framework. From Technologies of Choice?: ICTs, Development, and the Capabilities Approach (p. 44), by D. Kleine, (2013), MIT Press. Used with permission.

3. Method

3.1. The case study: Park school for urban street-children

The case study involves an initiative by a private person (a philanthropist) who started providing free education to street kids who usually didn't go to school as they had to work to sustain livelihood either for themselves or their families. The initiative of providing free education has been ongoing for over 30 years and eventually developed into an informal "Park School" that takes place in a public park. The initiative provides a valuable option for children who are working to feed their families, children who are discriminated against or simply children who have lost families or have no place to go. Through the free education of the Park School, many children who initially didn't have access to education have benefitted by getting admitted into formal school systems, taking university education, employed in various sectors, and found occupations in the public education ministry. In other words, these slum children have experienced various benefits through the educational service.

The free educational initiative is made up of students and teachers, where both older and former students contribute as teachers for younger students. The teachers teach kids all subjects which are taught at the K-12 level following formal school curriculums. Throughout the years of the initiative, many volunteers have contributed with teaching the children at the Park School, these range from arts to games that allow the children to bond with each other. The central role within teaching is mostly of the philanthropist who started the initiative, and since then received national and international recognition for his efforts despite coming from poor and underprivileged circumstances himself.

The Park School operates through a volunteer-based model. Teachers are not salaried and contribute their time alongside paid employment elsewhere. While this limits formal capacity, it also reflects a high level of commitment among participants. Financial resources are minimal and consist primarily of pooled personal contributions, small private donations, and occasional NGO support for materials such as books and pencils. Funding stability remains fragile and depends on personal goodwill rather than institutionalized financing.

The Park School is mostly active in the afternoon as many school-going children often come there to get help with homework and revise what they learn in school. For the street kids who are working, the main teacher (the philanthropist) usually sits with them either in the morning or late at night as the kids still need to work. The philanthropist is retired and distributed his time according to the needs of the children. Most of the other teachers are working and come to teach at the Park School in the afternoon. Although the teachers don't earn that well, they mostly contribute to running the initiative by covering costs for books, pencils, and other administration fees related to education and admission.

3.2. Research approach, and implementation

The study employes a qualitative approach to explore the impact of educational initiatives on street children's lives in urban slums in Pakistan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations (which included both participatory involvement and observational methods) allowing for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018, Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, facilitated by the philanthropist's help in gathering respondents. Children were invited to participate based on regular attendance at the Park School and willingness to share their experiences, while teachers and student-teachers were selected due to their active instructional roles. Data collection took place over a concentrated field period during which the main researcher was physically present at the Park School for three consecutive days. As such data was collected throughout the day starting from 11 a.m. until evenings to 6 p.m. Interviews were conducted on site, complemented by participant-as-observer engagement during teaching sessions and informal interactions.

Semi-structured interviews' questions were developed with the support of existing literature, pilot tested, then conducted with both students and teachers, focusing on their experiences with the free tuition program and its perceived impact on their lives. This approach allowed flexibility, enabling participants to share insights beyond the prepared questions and facilitating a deeper exploration of the educational and social changes experienced by students (Patton, 2015). See Table 1 for participant demographics and interview duration.

Table 1. List of respondents for the case study. Note: "Student-teacher" refers to older students who teach younger students while continuing their own studies.

Respondents	Lengt of interviews	Age	Gender
Philanthropist, aka. main teacher	55 min	50 years	Male
Main Teacher2	20 min	40 years	Male
Student-teacher 1	13 min	18 years	Female
Student-teacher 2	7 min	15 years	Female
Student-teacher (Student8)	14 min	35 years	Male
Student-teacher 3	10 min	14 years	Female
Student 9	10 min	12 years	Female
Student 10	10 min	12 years	Female

Respondents	Lengt of interviews	Age	Gender
Student 11	11 min	14 years	Male

The main researcher also participated as a teacher in the tuition program for three days, adopting a participant-as-observer role within an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, Spradley, 1980). This form of participatory involvement, where the researcher was known to participants as a researcher, enabled immersion in the teaching environment while simultaneously observing educational dynamics from an insider's perspective (Gold, 1958). This involvement helped build rapport with participants, facilitating more informal interactions and open responses in subsequent interviews (Glesne, 2016). Observational data were thus gathered through varying degrees of participation, ranging from active teaching sessions to moments of non-participatory observation. These ethnographic observations captured interactions, engagement, and behavior during classes, while observations outside of teaching provided further insight into the broader social context of students' and teachers' lives (Emerson et al., 2011).

3.3. Data analysis

This study employed a hybrid thematic analysis approach to address the study's aim and explore how educational services effectively reach and serve underprivileged urban communities in Pakistan. The hybrid thematic analysis integrated both deductive and inductive coding processes (Boyatzis, 1998, Braun and Clarke, 2006, Xu and Zammit, 2020). This approach allowed for selecting data that aligned with predefined theoretical categories (deductive) while also facilitating the emergence of new concepts from the data (inductive) (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Kleine's Choice Framework served as a guiding lens for the deductive component, providing a theoretical framework to understand how capabilities were shaped by structure or agency, influencing empowerment and well-being.

The hybrid thematic analysis allowed the study to uncover patterns within the data, linking observed outcomes to broader theoretical insights. The inductive analysis primarily examined how and to what extent the educational service effectively reached street children and responded to their needs. Inductive analysis allowed for the emergence of themes related to the service's characteristics, such as its flexibility, no-cost structure, and mentorship roles. These features revealed how the service adapted to local constraints and helped mitigate barriers related to cost, time, and accessibility.

Exploring how educational access impacted children's lives over time was guided by the deductive method. Drawing on Kleine's Choice Framework, the analysis examined how the service's characteristics shaped the children's capabilities across the dimensions of choice - including the existence, sense, use, and achievement of choice. This deductive analysis illuminated how education influenced the lives of street children, particularly in terms of re-admission into formal school systems, increased social awareness, and access to improved socioeconomic opportunities. These insights offered deeper insights into how agency, supported by educational resources, empowers children in different ways. The hybrid approach ensured a comprehensive, context-sensitive analysis of the respondents' perspectives, capturing both the immediate and broader impacts of the educational service (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

3.4. Trustworthiness and rigor in the research

The analytic process involved multiple stages. First, interview transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated both deductively, informed by Kleine's Choice Framework, and inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data. Third, codes were clustered into higher-order themes corresponding to service characteristics and dimensions of choice.

The combination of semi-structured interviews, participatory involvement, and ethnographic observations allowed for triangulation, ensuring a comprehensive view of the educational experience within this community (Denzin, 2017). To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation was implemented by collecting data through semi-structured interviews, participatory involvement, and observations, which helped to confirm findings across multiple sources and minimize researcher bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Themes were triangulated, thus cross-checked across data sources and iteratively refined through reflective comparison between interviews and observations.

Ethical considerations were central to this study, given the vulnerable population involved. Informed consent was obtained from participants and, ensuring that they fully understood their involvement and could withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained to protect participants' identities (Orb et al., 2001). This study

also received full ethical approval from the ethics review board at Karlstad University, confirming that all procedures met institutional ethical standards.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study. First, it examines how educational services can effectively reach and address the needs of underprivileged communities in urban areas. Drawing on the empirical material, the analysis identifies key characteristics that enabled a free educational tuition program to meet the needs of street children in urban slum areas. This is a significant contribution, as primary school often constitutes the only formal schooling exposure for children in many developing countries (Lewin and Caillods, 2001, UNESCO, 2006), and the likelihood of poverty is closely linked to individuals who do not complete primary school (Roser and Dyer, 2008). The findings identify three central characteristics underlying this contribution: the importance of free-of-cost services, flexible service delivery, and mentorship roles. Together, these characteristics represent key dimensions of the educational service that mitigated barriers arising from financial, educational, and social resource deficits in children's agency, thereby enabling greater access to primary education and supporting the existence of choice.

Second, the study explores how education influences street children's lives in urban slums. The findings offer deeper insights into how agency, when supported by educational resources, empowers children and impacts their lives. These insights are important, given the limited research on how education can potentially break the cycle of chronic poverty (Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2004). The findings indicate that education enhances children's capabilities both intrinsically (supporting personal fulfillment and growth) and instrumentally (providing practical benefits that improve their circumstances).

The findings are presented in the following subsections, structured in line with the study's overarching purpose. Section 4.1 and its subsections present findings on how the educational service addressed the specific needs of underprivileged communities through its key characteristics. Section 4.2 and its subsections focus on how educational access influenced children's capabilities and broader life trajectories. This latter section draws on Kleine's Choice Framework to analyze how the service shaped capabilities. This structure ensures a clear alignment between the empirical results and the study's overarching research aim.

4.1. Characteristics of the educational service

This subsection presents findings on how educational services can reach and support underprivileged communities in urban areas. It focuses on the characteristics of the educational service and examines how it successfully targeted street-children in the urban slums of Pakistan. The educational service demonstrates how excluded communities can be equitably supported for better inclusion and potentially mitigate illiteracy. Three themes were prevalent in this case study. The first two were free-of-cost and flexible services. These two themes relate to how urban slum children face constrained capabilities from the outset and, as a result, lack real opportunities to access education - the choice to pursue an education does not really exist for most of these children. Here, free-of-cost and flexible educational services helps overcome these limitations and provides the children a choice to get education. The third theme, mentorship roles, relates to how most urban slum children are exposed to bad social environments or social evil which may hamper their decision-making. Here, mentorship roles work as conducive social support for better decision-making related to pursuing education.

4.1.1. Free-of-cost and flexible services

The empirical context is a context of prevailing illiteracy and low monetary resources. Low monetary resources are understood as a predominant factor to why people face inaccessibility to education. Within this context, many children lack the existence of choice when it comes to education. This is due to two reasons. One, most families and children don't have the money to pay for education (fees, admissions, pencils, books, etc.), second, most children work during day-time, and the possibilities to attend school during evenings are very limited. However, the free educational service by the philanthropist started providing free-of-cost teaching in addition to flexible hours of teaching. These two factors were essential in addressing street-children's absence of choice to education. The philanthropist describes how he started his educational service providing children an existence of choice: "For some days, I was observing a kid who was washing cars all day. He didn't have any parents and had five brothers and three sisters. After a while, he recognized me, since I would observe him daily. So I asked him, *'Tell me, you wash cars all day and do this work, why don't you go to school or take up education?'* He replied in a way that was both surprising and made me reflect. He said, *'Will your father pay for the cost of*

my books and education?' I was astonished and told him, '*Okay, I will get the books and start teaching you tomorrow.'* The next day, I brought the books and started teaching him right there, where he used to wash cars. The poor kid showed real interest, and continued to wash cars on the side. Sometimes, I even helped him wash the cars or do other labor work. He also had a good friend who didn't have parents either and was working as a daily wager. I took him in too and began teaching him. […] Eventually, I managed to gather 25 kids. I used to teach them at a market." (Philanthropist).

Regarding flexibility, the philanthropist further describes how he provides street-children the possibilities to education during evenings or preferred hours: "If there are kids who want to come at night, I sit until 11 p.m. Some might come and ask questions and such." (Philanthropist). Another teacher also informs on how she spends more time with the students who need more attention: "There are some issues regarding the kids who don't go to school, when they come here, they often don't have books. It also takes a little more time to teach these kids compared to the school-going kids. With them, we try to teach them until they understand. That is the work of a teacher, to teach until the student understands. So, until they grasp a concept, we have to use time on them so that they can get up to speed with other kids at their level." (Student-teacher1). Another student-teacher also describes how in formal school there is less flexibility, whereas in the Park School, street-children can benefit from flexible services: "In the school, teachers only keep to their work and go home. Here [the Park School], teachers teach every subject carefully until you understand. There is also no fee." (Student-teacher3).

A former student who is now pursuing a master's degree informs about the possibilities the philanthropist provided him: "I went to school until seventh grade. I dropped out in grade 8 and started working in a bookshop. The philanthropist came to my bookshop once to buy some books and asked me how much I have studied. I told him, *'Sir, if you want to buy books then please buy them, why are you interested in my education?'*. But he insisted and I told him that I dropped out of eighth grade. Then he asked me, *'What if someone could teach you?'*. I told him *'Who teaches [for free] in this day and age? I just need to work and get by'*. The main teacher then insisted and didn't let go of me. So after I finished my work at 10 p.m., he helped me study up to two hours in the marketplace where I worked." (Student 8).

4.1.2. Mentorship roles

The philanthropist describes how since the beginning of his educational initiative he is used to persuading street-children for education: "There was a kid who didn't have a father and used to trouble and bother his mother. One day his mother was crying and told me, *'I have only one son, and yet he goes around all day fighting, stealing, being in police custody. Every day I have to go here and there [getting him out of trouble]'*. When I met the kid, he cursed me out and threw stones at me. But I prayed and wanted to take him in and teach him. I was consistently trying to persuade him, but on that day, he wasn't persuaded by me. But after a few days I slowly took him in and started teaching him and prayed for him as well. I taught him till twelfth grade, and got him employed in an office where he works today." (Philanthropist).

Another student-teacher also informs on how the teachers at the Park School persuade street-children to get an education: "We tell these children to look around and see the circumstances of the people around them. That if they get educated it will be better for them and that they in the future can become someone or teach others. We tell these children to look at other children who aren't educated, how these children need to work and are bearing different burdens. So not getting an education can complicate things for you in the future. So, we tell the kids with love, that our wish for them is to advance and do something for this society and nation. And we succeed in this effort of ours around 50–60 % of the time." (Student8).

The teachers themselves also inform on how they had received mentorship by other teachers in school while growing up and how it affected their possibilities to get an education. The philanthropist informs: "I had a teacher. He was my greatest teacher, he instilled empathy within me. He also employed me for 2–3 years and I could continue my education and help my siblings get an education as well. He used to call on me and tell me that I should advance and find interest in getting education."

Another teacher at Park School describes how a teacher provided him mentorship to complete his education despite having decreased capabilities: "I met the main teacher at this school through my father. My father told the main teacher, *'From now on, he is your son.'* Since then, I have been with him. The main teacher persuaded me to continue my education, but I told him, *'What can I learn? I cannot learn at this late age.'* The main teacher insisted and succeeded with me, as I eventually completed my tenth-grade exams" (Main-teacher 2). Another student-teacher also reflects on how the mentorship role of teachers has influenced her own teaching approach: "When I used to come here, I felt good, since the

main teacher treated us as his own kids, and I liked being his student. So that is how I try to teach these kids, in the same manner as I was taught." (Student-teacher1).

Parent-teacher relationships are also prevalent in the mentorship roles. The philanthropist explains how the reaches out to the parents of the students: "Whenever a student wants to be taught, I first reach out to their parents. That is why I have a parent-child relationship with these students. If the students are doing something bad, I will scold them. The parents will also tell me that I can scold them as they are also my children." (Philanthropist). A student also describes how she started education at the Park School due to family relations with the teachers at the Park School: "I started going to school first, then my father's sister used to come here and teach so I started to come here." (Student9). Another student also informs on how his father approached the philanthropist: "We used to play here in the park while the philanthropist used to teach here. Then my father told me to come here for educational tuition." (Student11).

This shows that the students benefit from a coordinated social support system, in which teachers maintain strong ties with both the students and their families. Other teachers also reflect upon the importance of family support in relation to the teachers: "Firstly, as teachers persuade these kids to study, parents and siblings should also persuade them. If the kids tell their parents that they don't want to go to school, and the parents agree, then that's the issue. If they are also persuading like the teachers then these kids will be more interested." (Main-teacher2).

A teacher also reflects upon this when asked about the differences between students: "There are differences, and we try our best to teach the kids. If their parents and siblings also care for these kids to get an education then they will be better off." (Student-teacher1). She further describes how parent-teacher relationship can provide support for maintaining students' attention in education: "When students are careless and consistently don't pay attention then we tell the philanthropist. The philanthropist then talks with their parents so that they can attend to their kids and focus more on them [i.e., ensure that parents monitor their children's attendance, behavior, and study habits more closely]."

A student informs on how support from both parents and teachers provided him positive educational outcomes in underprivileged circumstances: "Everyone has their necessities or hindrances due to which one falls behind. Sometimes you get caught up in bad social networks. But thank Allah, due to the efforts of my parents and the philanthropist I stand here [with an education and better circumstances]." (Student8). This highlights the crucial role of mentorship in enabling educational success despite challenging environments.

In conclusion, these findings demonstrate how context-sensitive educational services can effectively reach underprivileged communities. By offering free-of-cost and flexible services, the initiative addressed the economic and temporal constraints that often make education inaccessible, thereby establishing the existence of choice for children in urban slums. Mentorship roles further supported children's decision-making, providing sustained social and emotional guidance from both teachers and families. Together, these three characteristics, free access, flexibility, and mentorship, show how education can be made meaningfully accessible and socially anchored. These findings illustrate how educational services can be designed to equitably include marginalized groups and counter structural exclusion by demonstrating how key service characteristics meet the needs of underprivileged communities.

4.2. The choice framework and education

This subsection presents findings on how education can potentially break the cycle of chronic poverty by illustrating how it holds both intrinsic value (personal fulfillment and growth) and instrumental value (practical or external benefits) for the study participants. The findings present different aspects in which education affected the children's capabilities: their direct relevance to the well-being and freedom; their indirect role through influencing economic production; and their indirect role through influencing social change [35:296–297]. By applying Kleine's Choice Framework (Kleine, 2013), the analysis sheds light on how these changes occurred and how education ultimately contributed to expanded capabilities and improved life circumstances.

4.2.1. Development outcomes

The primary focus of this study was to understand whether respondents experienced influences in the various dimensions of empowerment (existence, sense, use, and achievement of choice). The philanthropist who started the free educational service articulates his vision for the students to gain skills that enable achievement of choices in many aspects of their lives, thereby contributing positively to community and society and avoiding cycles of poverty or criminal activity: "These kids are of different faiths, Christians and Muslims. I think of them all as Pakistanis, and I am serving Pakistan. Some of

these kids will go into the army, become a police officer, a scientist, a doctor, an engineer, or start their own business, as long as they don't loaf around. If these underprivileged kids don't get an education, then, they will get in the hands of terrorists. That is why I started doing my work and still work till this day." (Philanthropist). Another teacher shares this goal, emphasizing the potential for these students to achieve choices that will positively impact the collective whole: "The only thing today is that kids get educated so that the country can advance in the future. Then we can eliminate illiteracy." (Main teacher2). Many students expressed similar aspirations, describing future careers that require higher education, with some wanting to become doctors, teachers, or police officers: "[I want to become] a doctor so I can treat poor people." (Student 10); "a teacher so I can teach poor children." (Student 9); "by studying properly I can become a police officer when I grow up." (Student 11). These ambitions underscore that the service has empowered an achievement of choice, as the service has helped the students make choices (use of choice) which align with their aspirations (achievement of choices). Additionally, these aspirations further illustrate an emerging sense of choice, as students begin to perceive education as a viable pathway toward valued futures.

As described in Section 4.1.2, the Park School's free and flexible model created an existence of choice by removing financial and time barriers. However, not all children immediately acted on this opportunity. Rather than repeat the service description, this section focuses on how mentorship roles shaped students' psychological readiness to engage with this opportunity.

Mentorship in this context helped build what Kleine (Kleine, 2013) terms psychological resources; internal capacities such as confidence, tenacity, optimism, creativity, and resilience that shape the capacity to envision alternative futures. For children hesitant or unable to act on the available educational choice, mentorship reinforced a sense of choice, helping them imagine life trajectories shaped by education. Over time, this psychological support enabled many students to engage actively with the educational service, progressing to the use of choice stage. As their engagement deepened, students were not only able to complete various educational levels but also transition into formal education, employment, and higher studies. These transformations marked the achievement of choice, where individual aspirations began to align with actual outcomes. In parallel, students accessed and developed other types of resources - social (e.g., networks offering opportunities), cultural (e.g., values and social roles), financial (e.g., earnings and savings), and informational (e.g., guidance and awareness) - thus expanding their overall capability sets.

These well-being achievements come in the shape of both the intrinsic and instrumental value education provides. Numerous children have secured jobs across public and private sectors, while others have taken up education in elementary schools to college/university. The philanthropist reflects on the service's long-term impact: "Here, thousands of kids have been educated. Some I have educated until fifth grade and admitted into schools, others until eighth grade. Some I have admitted into college. This is my interest. I also help people with their documents, applications, or school admissions." (Philanthropist). He further elaborates on the success of his efforts: "There is success. Some of my students have joined the army, some the police, and others are now in departments like education, water and power, defense, and interior affairs. I have two students who have become nurses in a clinic, and some are in emergency services. For me, this has been a success." (Philanthropist).

Using Kleine's Choice Framework, we can understand that the educational service has empowered underprivileged children, creating pathways in education, employment and social affairs that directly impact their quality of life. This empowerment stands in stark contrast to the limitations typically faced by low-income individuals in illiterate communities, where barriers to education, literacy and skilled occupations persist. Through this service, these students have developed capacities to use their agency, allowing them to pursue goals they value but would otherwise be unable to attain. The following sections will explore these aspects of empowerment in greater detail.

4.2.2. Agency

The Choice Framework helps us understand that resources function as enablers of agency, allowing individuals to pursue their desired choices and outcomes. The context of this study is a resource scarce environment in terms of low-income and illiteracy. On a theoretical level, low-income and illiteracy often translates into low agency for individuals, which is also reflected in this empirical case study. However, the free educational service provided participants with essential resources that increased their agency, allowing them to make and act on choices that impacted their lives.

4.2.2.1. Financial resources

The free educational service played a crucial role by removing financial barriers to education, which expanded the children's existence of choice - the initial possibility of pursuing education despite financial hardship (Kleine, 2013). As discussed in Section 4.1.2, the free provision of books, pencils, and tuition addressed the financial exclusion faced by low-income students. These efforts directly enabled the existence and use of choice. Here, we analyze how these financial resources expanded agency within Kleine's framework. The philanthropist informs us about a kid who couldn't pursue education due to low financial resources: "There was another kid who was halting, he was missing a leg and an arm. I asked him why he didn't start getting an education instead of loafing around and asking people for money. He answered, *'Who will teach me? How will I eat or work for income if I start getting an education?'*. I told him, *'It is okay, I will teach you*.' Then he told me to just give him money. But I replied to him saying, '*I will not give you money, I will give you books*.' So, I gave him books and pencils and started teaching him." (Philanthropist). The philanthropist also expresses how he supports the students' families as they are of low-income background: "This woman works in a school [non-academic work], but she doesn't get much from there [income]. Her daughters are here, and I bought her books some days ago. I have pooled savings; I can tell you about that. The pooled savings consists of 5–6 friends of mine. Once a week we gather small amount of money and every month we help these kids out by buying books or pencils." (Philanthropist). Here, the agency provided by this financial support enables use of choice - actual enrollment in education despite limited means.

A student also informs on how the free educational service provided him the possibility of good education without overpaying. He expresses how other educational services by private people often focuses more on students who pay better: "There was someone else we used to go to before. They didn't teach good. They focused more on other kids, grownups. Those who paid more." (Student 11). As such, free of cost service, allowed low-income families and their children to feel valued and included.

4.2.2.2. Educational resources

The second main aspect of this service is that it provides educational services. The context is an environment where most people have low educational resources. Low educational resources also hamper agency in terms of occupation, completing administrative tasks, and social mobility. Most importantly in this context, low educational resources also impact financial resources in a negative manner as job opportunities are low. As such, education as a resource empowers children by enabling use and achievement of choice. A student-teacher recounts his journey from dropping out to completing high school, facilitated by the Park School service, "[With the help of the Park School] I also got interested in education. I developed the concept that education is good for people, education teaches you culture and how to be civilized. After that I completed my eighth grade and after three months preparation, I passed tenth grade board exams. Then I also completed my high school and bachelor's degree. I am doing my masters now." (Student-teacher8).

Here, educational resources provide psychological empowerment, allowing him to envision new possibilities and advance in life. The impact of this resource on the achievement of choice is evident, as it creates pathways to better livelihood opportunities, increasing the respondents' freedom to make empowered life choices. This can also be understood as respondent expresses how an increase in educational resource has increased his agency such as "advancing in life" with improved possibilities to a sustained livelihood for his family: "In the beginning when the main teacher tried pursuing me, I told him, *'It is enough, I have studied as much as I could and now, I need to work here at the bookshop and earn for myself.*' But when you come into the practical life, you get married and have kids, then you realize how your own parents used to work and sustain the family [pointing to low paid jobs and the difficulties of feeding several people]. Then you also realize how your parents used to encourage education to advance in life." (Student-teacher8).

Other students also express how the free educational service improved her possibilities to getting admitted into formal school: "I started my education here then the main teacher helped me get admitted into school for my fifth grade" (Student-teacher1). One of the teachers also expresses how education can be an important resource for the underprivileged children: "As the students grow up, and if they are interested in getting an education, they will themselves realize how important it is. It is the biggest asset and it cannot be stolen." (Main teacher2).

4.2.2.3. Time resource

Flexible scheduling addressed the time poverty of children working to support their families. While discussed in detail in Section 4.1.2, here we focus on the capability perspective: children gained a use and sense of choice over their time. Time resources are the degree of control individuals have over their time, and with low financial resources children often work to sustain a livelihood and cannot pursue education as they mainly work during the day. By taking this aspect of people's

agency into account, the free educational service enables children to participate in education despite having daytime work responsibilities. The flexibility of the tuition service addresses time constraints, which is critical for children who work to support their families. By offering evening classes, children can exercise agency over their time resource, choosing to pursue education alongside work. This increased sense and use of choice allows them to avoid missing opportunities due to daytime responsibilities. The philanthropist expresses this, "My doors are open until 11 p.m. People come to me and say, *'I should close my door [in case of robbery]'*, but I tell them, *'I don't have much what should I close my door for [prioritizing flexible scheduling over wealth, as the children may come and ask for educational help during the nights].'* Some people took my watch and my only mobile phone, what [more] can they do. God is forgiving and merciful, he gives in abundance." (Philanthropist).

People's time resources are limited and the possibility to get education at night provides an improved choice for those who desire to take up education. However, such possibilities come with a trade-off for children who may wish to spend their time engaging in leisure or play with friends. This reflects the circumstances of underprivileged children, for whom the trade-off between leisure and education is often a daily reality. A student expresses this concern: "We go to school at 8 a.m. and come home at 2 p.m., then go to the park for educational tuition within 10–30 min. Then we go home between 5 and 6:30 p.m. and feel exhausted. [After school] we go home, eat, and then come here for educational tuition. After this we go home and sleep. We don't get time to play around." (Student 9). Although attending classes at night requires sacrificing leisure time, it is also a valuable trade-off that enhances their achievement of choice - when asked if their grades had improved since coming here, they responded: "Yes, we are getting better grades." (Student 9 and 10), underscoring the positive impact on their academic performance.

4.2.2.4. Psychological resource

Psychological resources relate to elements such as self-confidence, optimism, creativity and resilience. Psychological resources can also influence a person's capacity to envision and therefore create a greater sense of choice. The analysis of psychological resources in this subsection draws on teacher, student and student-teacher narratives. The teacher and student-teacher narratives articulate internal states such as confidence and resilience, while the student narratives articulate optimism and the capacity to envision. It should be noted that the student narratives are limited and may not fully capture how all children themselves experience internal states related to psychological resources. However, the narratives provided offer valuable insights into the relational and motivational dimensions of the educational service.

Firstly, delivering a free educational service in such underprivileged circumstances is a challenge in itself. This is especially true given that the teachers instructing these children for free are also low-income individuals who have faced numerous hardships due to limited financial resources or other personal adversities. The philanthropist recalls a major calamity from his early life: "In fifth grade when my dad was sick, I used to care for him. He told me, *'Son, work, learn to work, my life is uncertain, you have 3 sisters and 5 brothers, you have a lot of work to do [expecting him to take care of his younger siblings].*' So, at nights I used to gather plastic bags and newspapers until morning and distribute them to different households. After my father died, I took over his role, and married my siblings. My mother died before that. But I didn't let my younger siblings feel the loss of their parents." (Philanthropist). Having experienced these calamities firsthand and having navigated them over time, the philanthropist developed valuable psychological resources, such as resilience, responsibility, and empathy, which now enable him to motivate others. Consequently, this motivation fosters similar psychological resources among his students, strengthening their sense of self-worth and belief in their own potential.

Despite living in such underprivileged circumstances, himself, the philanthropist still feels like giving and caring for others. For the philanthropist this motivation is driven by religious teachings as he expresses: "This is how I serve/give my services [referring to teaching the children]. I have assisted people in their work, I have been of help for them. Allah is a great facilitator and most merciful, Allah has been of help for me." (Philanthropist). This religiously motivated drive understandably gives him increased psychological resources, as such his agency is increased as he shows resilience despite facing great challenges in life, "Until there is even one blood drop in my body, I will [and if continuously willing] continue to teach these kids and hold my firm position. That is my wish, that at least someone get an advantage [in life] through my teaching services. It is the saying of my Prophet, Peace Be Upon Him, that one should seek for knowledge and teach others, also to keep seeking knowledge throughout life even if it requires to travel to a country far away." (Philanthropist). The findings indicate that high psychological resources can strengthen agency, enabling individuals to cope with the limitations posed by low financial resources or weak social resources, such as family-related hardships, common in underprivileged contexts.

The philanthropist who experienced significant hardships himself, draws on these resources to persist in teaching underprivileged children. Along with him, other teachers also display the same spirit or mentality in delivering the service: “If you are sincere to your nation, to your family and others. If your intentions are pure, then I think such passion is attainable [that of the philanthropist]. But we are not sincere to ourselves. If I am not sincere to myself, then how will I think sincerely about others? If you are sincere then you can attain everything. If you are greedy then it is difficult. These things are done without greediness [again, referring to the services of the philanthropist]. Without greediness, both your heart and mind are satisfied.” (Main teacher2). This spirit or mentality is consistently observable among the teachers and instills self-belief in many students. A student-teacher, who has directly benefited from the educational service, reflects on his own journey: “My age is 35 years. I have had a relationship with the main teacher since I completed my tenth grade. Currently, I am doing my master’s in Islamic history and also work as a fire-fighter. When I am free, I come here to teach so that these kids can positively contribute to this country.” (Student-teacher8). Another student also reflects the capacity to envision by expressing his aspiration: “By coming here [to the Park School] I can become a police officer when I grow up.” (Student 11). This articulates how the educational service can also increase students’ psychological resources by instilling optimism and consequently create a sense of choice.

4.2.2.5. Social resource

Social support, particularly from family, reinforces sense of choice by promoting positive values about education. For example, family encouragement to pursue higher education provides children with a stronger sense of purpose and achievement of choice by aligning their aspirations with family goals. Students shared their dreams of joining the police, inspired by family members, demonstrating how social resources help empower their aspirations, shaping choices that may have otherwise seemed out of reach. When asked what career she aspired to, one student-teacher responded: “Go into the police force.” When asked how she developed this interest, she explained, “Since childhood, my mother wanted it and I also wanted to.” She further elaborated, “She tells me that I should get education, and then become whatever I like. But that her wish is for me to become a police officer. And I also wish that” (Student-teacher 3).

As discussed before, education is an important resource in increasing agency. However, when combined with social resources, such as cultural understanding and interpersonal support, it can provide even greater freedom and a stronger sense of choice. Here a student informs, “So here in this Park School we also try to teach culture [behavior and manners] along with academic teaching. So that these children may interact with people in society appropriately, and people should recognize that these are educated individuals. Basically, how they should behave in a civilized society.” (Student-teacher8). Lack of social resources is not necessary a hindrance to the existence of choice, but increased social resources have an important role to play for agency in terms of sense of choice. Just as individuals with low educational resources may struggle with a sense of choice, those with limited social resources can also experience diminished agency in the same sense - even when the existence of choice (i.e., the possibility to pursue a preferred outcome) is present. One student-teacher expresses how social resources (family) can become a supporting factor for sense of choice: “Once my grandmother told me that it was enough to get an education until tenth grade. But now she tells me to study as much as I like. My father told her, *‘My daughters will get an education for as long as they want.’* He told her to look at what he and others are doing, working for others, since they didn’t get an education. He told her that when his daughters get an education, they will get good jobs in the future.” (Student-teacher1). The support of family members also becomes more apparent when children often are influenced and motivated through family relations to get education and accomplish certain things in life. One student expresses his interest in what he wants to become, “[I want to go into the] police force. [It is] just an interest. [I developed this interest] from the beginning, my father’s little brother is in the police.” (Student 11).

Section 4.1.3 outlined how mentorship extended to families, creating a coordinated support network. Here, we analyze how such social resources helped strengthen the children's sense of choice by aligning family expectations with educational aspirations. However, the philanthropist highlights how the social environment surrounding the children is important but can also present challenges: “[The issue] is this, people who come and divert the attention of the students.” (Philanthropist). These reflections illustrate how social resources, through encouragement, involvement, and shielding from distractions, can critically shape children’s ability to pursue and sustain their educational goals.

4.2.3. Structure and educational resources

Structure, in combination with agency, constitutes individual capabilities. Individuals often navigate the environment based on their individual agency which is linked to their portfolio of resources. The structure can consist of institutions and organizations as well as the social structure, which is the “formal and informal laws, regulations, norms and customs”

[1:9] that often arise from discourse within an environment (Kleine, 2013). The case illustrates how organizations such as NGO's with their almsgiving and charity can be a great support, although not many have given, the few provide important support to the free educational service, "Very few NGO's have helped. Of those who have helped, they have provided pencils and books, helped with admitting students into schools. They have also helped me sometimes [with private issues, most often financially]." (Philanthropist).

An important finding highlights how educational resources shape social discourses, illustrating the interplay between structure and agency. Educational resources can empower individual agency through social awareness which can influence broader social norms and policies. One of the student-teachers shares his views on these social dynamics: "Societies are built on teachers. If there weren't teachers, then societies wouldn't exist. For us [Muslims] there is the example our Prophet, Peace Be Upon Him; through him we know what the position of a teacher is and how in his time he encouraged people to seek knowledge and also taught people himself. But it is a pity that in our times, a teacher is not viewed in the manner in which they should be viewed. We position bureaucrats higher than teachers. For instance, the government doesn't compensate a teacher as much as a bureaucrat, even if a teacher is doing more work and is more highly qualified. A teacher won't even be given a bike, while the bureaucrat is given expensive cars and domestic workers for his house. But to think of it, it is a teacher who educates a bureaucrat so they are able to become one; it was a teacher who taught them [in schools or universities]. So, the teacher isn't given that much importance in relation to the bureaucrat, despite the important position of a teacher in educating future leaders." (Student-teacher8). The respondent notes that these perspectives were absent before getting an education, suggesting that educational resources can enhance individual agency to foster social awareness, which in turn influence how they view the social discourses in society.

The same student-teacher reflects on how structural change can be achieved for underprivileged students, emphasizing the transformative power of education, "So, you can also tell people the importance of a teacher. For instance, if you have domestic workers at home, you can teach their kids. Imagine if you teach a kid one new word every day for a year, that is 356 words. If a kid gets taught 365 new words, don't you think there would be some degree of influence on this society? Would this society not change? [Rhetorical question]." (Student-teacher8). Together, these reflections underscore that access to educational resources not only empowers individual agency but also reshapes how individuals perceive and engage with societal roles and norms, fostering a vision for structural change that can uplift underprivileged individuals and communities. These findings underscore how children's interaction with educational resources gradually transformed their capacity for self-determination. Not only did they overcome structural barriers, but they also developed confidence and purpose. Such processes of empowerment illustrate how individual agency and structural opportunity can co-evolve, contributing to longer-term shifts in social roles and norms.

In conclusion, these findings illustrate how agency, enhanced by a portfolio of resources such as financial, educational, time, psychological, and social assets, interacts with supportive structures to empower individuals across multiple dimensions of choice. By offering free educational access and flexible service options, the initiative enhanced the existence of choice for children in resource-scarce settings, making education a viable alternative despite financial and time-related constraints. Agency, underpinned by these resources, further enabled children to develop a sense of choice, allowing them to perceive education as a meaningful and attainable pathway. Moreover, flexible scheduling and inclusive practices supported the use of choice, enabling children to actively pursue their educational goals. The outcomes achieved, personal development, heightened social awareness, and expanded livelihood opportunities, reflect multiple facets of empowerment and underscore the value of aligning individual agency with intentional service design. In sum, these findings reveal three key ways in which education enhanced the children's capabilities: by directly promoting well-being and freedom, indirectly supporting economic productivity, and contributing to broader processes of social change. These results align with existing findings in the literature (Sen, 1999, p. 296-297). These three pathways demonstrate how educational access influences children's capabilities and broader life trajectories.

5. Discussions and conclusion

Drawing on Kleine's Choice Framework (Kleine, 2013), this study examined educational service through fieldwork and interviews conducted at an open education initiative for slum childrenin Pakistan. The main findings highlight how educational initiatives can support underprivileged communities in poverty-stricken urban areas. Consistent with the literature, education holds both intrinsic and instrumental value (Dreze and Sen, 2002, Sen, 1999), making it essential not only for developing skills but also for empowering individuals to achieve personal and societal well-being. The findings also align with TSR, which emphasizes uplifting changes aimed at improving individual and societal well-being through

services such as education (Anderson et al., 2013, Field et al., 2021). In line with TSR's emphasis on interdisciplinary research, this study contributes to educational development and poverty research literature to provide empirical insights into how services like education can foster well-being and social inclusion (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015). TSR highlights that profound and impactful findings often emerge when problems are evaluated from multiple disciplinary perspectives. By drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, particularly from education and poverty studies, this study contributes to the ambition of TSR to uncover deeper interrelationships and solutions that can better illuminate pathways for improving individual and collective well-being, especially for educational services. The findings should be interpreted as illustrating potential mechanisms and enabling conditions through which education may influence life trajectories, rather than as evidence of large-scale or universal poverty alleviation.

The first contribution of this paper highlights how free educational tuition tailored for street children can effectively address and target educationally excluded groups. By focusing on urban slum areas, the study sheds light on the ways in which educational services, when accessible and tailored, can foster engagement with children who otherwise might have limited exposure to schooling. Through the dimensions of choice outlined in Kleine's framework (Kleine, 2013), the findings emphasize how this initiative created an 'existence of choice' for the children by removing financial and time barriers through its free-of-cost and flexible service delivery. Additionally, the mentorship roles played by educators provided crucial social support, which helped maintain the children's focus and mitigate the negative influences of their socioeconomic conditions and environment, reinforcing their ability to recognize the value of education and pursue it actively.

The second contribution of this study lies in its exploration of the broader impacts that educational access can have on the lives of children in poverty contexts, i.e., how education can potentially break the cycle of chronic poverty. Evidence from the case study demonstrates that access to education helps facilitate re-admission into formal schooling systems and provides these children with better long-term socioeconomic opportunities. Notably, the findings highlight how educational resources influenced the dimensions of empowerment beyond the existence of choice, particularly sense of choice and use of choice. By fostering a sense of choice, the educational initiative allowed children to perceive education as a meaningful and achievable pathway to improved well-being and social mobility. This aligns with Kleine's framework, which emphasizes the importance of awareness and agency in enabling individuals to navigate and exercise available opportunities. Furthermore, flexible timings and inclusive practices supported the active use of choice, enabling children to balance their education with work and family responsibilities.

The achievement of choice, as evidenced in the respondents' stories, further illustrates how these dimensions of empowerment translate into tangible outcomes. Whether through re-admission into formal schools, access to stable livelihoods, or increased social awareness, these achievements underline the potential of educational services to shape both individual capabilities and societal structures. This reflects education's instrumental value in enhancing life prospects and its intrinsic value in promoting personal autonomy, societal inclusion, and critical thinking. These are consistent with Sen's perspective on substantive freedoms of education, recognizing both the instrumental worth of education in ensuring participation/accessibility and expanding economic opportunities, and the intrinsic worth in fostering individual growth, social awareness, and dignity; ultimately enhancing the children's well-being and expanding their life choices (Sen, 1999). These factors can be essential in lifting communities out of chronic poverty. From a TSR perspective, this further highlight how educational interventions can serve as transformative services that promote broader well-being and social change (Fisk et al., 2016).

The South Asian region, like sub-Saharan Africa, faces particularly high rates of illiteracy. This study therefore contributes empirical insights into how targeted educational support can provide a foundation for improving literacy rates, reducing exclusion, and enhancing social mobility and awareness. By using Kleine's framework, this study demonstrates how aligning individual agency with supportive structures can create a comprehensive pathway to empowerment, addressing the multifaceted challenges of poverty and illiteracy. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of inclusive educational initiatives as a means to address poverty and support equitable opportunities within marginalized communities.

From a policy and practice perspective, the case offers insights into how state systems and development initiatives might learn from grassroots, charitable educational initiatives when designing services for socioeconomically excluded populations, particularly in contexts where formal schooling fails to reach the poorest children. While the Park School is deeply embedded in its local context, several design features may hold relevance beyond this case. These include the removal of cost barriers, temporal flexibility for working children, and relational mentorship structures. Among these, the

financial accessibility and flexible modes of delivery appear most directly transferable to other poverty-affected contexts, as they respond to structural constraints commonly faced by educationally excluded children across diverse settings. At the same time, reliance on volunteer labor and informal funding makes this model difficult to scale without institutional support. Mentorship-based relationships may also offer transferable value. However, their form and function should be understood in relation to the specific sociocultural norms governing teacher–student relationships in each context, rather than assumed to operate uniformly across settings. Nevertheless, the case illustrates how non-formal educational initiatives can complement, but not replace, state provision in contexts of constrained public capacity. In policy and practice terms, the findings point to the potential for hybrid approaches in which state systems engage with, support, and/or learn from locally embedded non- formal initiatives, particularly in reaching populations that remain underserved by formal schooling structures.

While this study offers valuable insights, it has several limitations that warrant consideration. As a qualitative case study situated in South Asia, the findings provide an in-depth but context-specific perspective that may not be fully generalizable to other settings. This study represents one piece of the larger puzzle regarding educational interventions in marginalized communities. Given the socio-cultural and economic diversity across regions, especially when comparing South Asia with sub-Saharan Africa, further empirical research is essential to deepen understanding and validate how different educational service characteristics and agency-resource dynamics play out in diverse contexts. Expanding the geographical scope and incorporating multiple case studies would help capture the complexities and variations in how education can empower marginalized children and address structural exclusion. Nonetheless, the current findings contribute important, context-specific insights into how targeted educational support can enhance agency and capabilities, thereby advancing both scholarly knowledge and practical approaches for reducing poverty and illiteracy.

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Transformative service research: advancing our knowledge about service and well-being

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