

Community Participation in Improving Non-formal Primary Education in Bangladesh: A BRAC Experience

Md. Altaf Hossain

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Research and Evaluation Division

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Bangladesh: the context

Illiteracy in Bangladesh is widespread. The school performance in rural Bangladesh is poor: about one-third of the poorest children never attend school. And less than half of the children who enter primary school pass through the system uninterrupted. Despite a 51% literacy rate, Bangladesh spends only about 2% of its GNP on education compared to an average 3.2% for other low income countries and 6% for high income countries. Due to socioeconomic and cultural factors, along with poor educational management, millions of children in Bangladesh are left out of school. Educating all children of Bangladesh is an immense task, but one that is crucial to the development of the country.

To enable the under-served children to attain basic education and literacy, BRAC initiated the Non-formal Primary Education (NFPE) programme in 1985 with 22 schools where parental and community participation is taken up as one of the guiding principles. Over the last 15 years, the number of schools has increased to over 34,000 with over 1.1 million students - a number that attests to the success of the programme.

The BRAC school model

BRAC has developed two different school models directed at two different age groups. The NFPE is a four-year schooling system for children of the target group who are 8-10 years old, who have never attended school or dropped out in the first grade. The aim of NFPE schools is to provide primary education with the hope of bringing back the children in the formal school system. The Basic Education for Older Children (BEOC) is another model for children aged 11-14 years. The BEOC schools are three years long but cover five academic years of curriculum. This is possible since the students are older and are more able to grasp the material. The BEOC model is designed to provide basic education to students who have already crossed the age for enrolment in primary schools. The basic difference between the NFPE and BEOC models is that the BEOC curriculum contains more 'life skills' including awareness on health, nutrition and some other social issues. Seventy percent of the students in BRAC schools are girls, 97% of the teachers are women and the schools are convenient in timing and distance. The schools have no fees and all learning materials for the students are provided by BRAC.

Community participation in education

The effectiveness of educational system depends on effective delivery system and creation of demand of education within the society. These effective deliveries and demand are largely dependent on the school and parent/community relationship. Where schools are closer to the parents and community the parents seem to be more responsive about sending their children to school. When the parents are more responsible in terms of their children's education, the delivery systems automatically improve to a certain level. Moreover, active community participation in planning and managing basic education

activities is the means for infusing vitality and spirit into the educational efforts by unleashing the enthusiasm and energy of people.

The nature and dimension of this community participation in improving educational management vary widely from country to country depending on its socioeconomic and cultural variations. For example, in England, this idea of community participation has been changing over time depending on the government's priority and commitment to education. While in Bangladesh, the school management committee and the parents are officially responsible for sending all the school-aged children to primary schools, but the schools are under no legal obligation to obey the community directives in improving the quality of education. This parental and community support is essential for effective implementation and management of education, particularly in the rural areas where the problems grappling with the quality of education are mainly socioeconomic.

There is a wide range of ideas about the responsibility of the community regarding educational management. In the recent past, some education specialists have accentuated the role of parents in classroom teaching process as a help to the teacher. In some developing countries this parental and community help turned out to be effective in developing skills among the learners by related professionals of that community. Here parents and community participation in education can be viewed as a partnership between education provider and the customer. This partnership is helpful from both instructional and management point of view.

Depending on these ideas, the feature of community participation can take various forms. The parents and community members can encourage all potential learners to participate in learning activities. The community organisation can ensure effective school functioning, regular attendance of teachers and students and so on. The parents and community can also help identifying people in the community to take up part-time teaching assignments in non-formal schools and encourage them to perform better. At the same time, they can help define learning needs in relation to developmental needs and prospects of the locality.

Community involvement in BRAC schools

Most studies point to poverty as the main reason for not enrolling children in, or withdrawing them prematurely from school. There is also a wide range of gender disparity in school performance in enrolment, retention, absenteeism, repetition, academic and educational attainments. The problem of better educational management therefore cannot be solved solely by creating some more new schools or by improving delivery system. Rather, parents ought to be given the opportunity for involvement in their children's education, to permit consideration of their views on what is taught and how to encourage local contributions of ideas, resources, and management. Keeping this in mind, BRAC has devised its education programme with enough scope for parental and community involvement.

Community participation in BRAC school has a feature that differs from formal primary school system. Each school has a management committee consisting of four parents, a

community leader and the teacher who are together responsible for smooth running of the school. This school management committee represents the community and meet whenever necessary. On the other hand, parent meetings are held once a month in each school which are meant to encourage the guardians to play an important role in the education process. To understand the significance and importance of parental and community participation in BRAC schools, it is necessary to comprehend how their involvement is indispensable in the programme. Parents and the community people perform some special tasks related to the school implementation process. These are:

Student selection: The NFPE programme targets the rural children most likely to be left out or to have dropped out of formal primary schools. Selection of eligible children according to age, sex and literacy status is a complex and delicate matter to deal with by the NFPE programme. Due to better performance and flexible implementation policy, BRAC schools are gaining popularity in rural Bangladesh. Therefore, many well-off households are also getting interested to enroll their children in NFPE schools, which creates some problems in some areas in selecting learners. Some parents try to enroll their primary school aged (5-7 years) children concealing their real age. There are some extreme cases where the parents do not send their children to formal schools so that he/she becomes eligible for next cycle of BRAC schools. Parents are also interested in enrolling their irregular and inattentive children in the NFPE school who are already continuing their education in formal primary schools. All these issues regarding student selection are dealt with by prospective parents and the community at the beginning of the programme. It is impossible for any BRAC staff to resolve all these issues without the help of local community.

Teacher selection: Attitude of teachers of BRAC schools is another important factor in effective implementation of the programme. Teaching in BRAC schools is not well paid. It is rather a 'para profession' where the sense of responsibility in educating rural poor children is felt as a social responsibility. Therefore, in selecting teachers, parents and the community prefer the kind of person who they think would be more caring for their children's schooling and with whom there would not arise class conflict between the parents and the teacher.

School room selection: School room selection is an important issue in NFPE programme. It was found in the early stages of the programme that acceptance of house from a wealthier household tended to increase the number of non-target students from better-off households. To serve the poorest families' education need, the programme now prefers houses from the poorest people. The parents and the community make an important decision as to which room will be most suitable considering physical facilities and distance.

Vacation and school time fixation: As per the needs of the society BRAC designs its curriculum and administers it according to the convenience of rural poor children. In doing so, BRAC adopted a short class duration and flexible school hours depending on the students' involvement in different economic and household activities. As BRAC is determined not to subjugate the total contact hour to the concise class timing so it

proscribes long vacations and encourages parents and community members to fix short vacations at their earliest convenience.

Mat replacement: In BRAC schools there are no benches for students to sit. Rather they squat on the unfurled mats on the ground to make the class more communicative, participatory and effective. BRAC supplies the mats for the first time and exhorts the community to replace it whenever they wear out. This is the only pecuniary decision the community has to make and contributes towards that.

School supervision: The parents and community have been ascribed with some responsibilities to make the schools transparent and accountable to the community for creating a congenial school environment. BRAC schools are usually situated within that part of the village where most of the students reside. Therefore, it is expected that the parents and the community play an important role of supervision of the opening and closing hours, attendance of the teachers and students, cleanliness of the school premises and removal of the onlookers.

Conflict resolution: In some places BRAC schools and parents have to face some obstacles from the wider community. For example, in many places religious fundamentalists brand BRAC schools as anti-Islamic as it introduced some cultural activities such as, singing, dancing, clapping, physical exercise, and others to make schools attractive to children. In some cases these religious extremists who spread rumours blaming NFPE schools for converting the poor children into Christianity had burned out some schools. To protect the schools from this type of social problems it is necessary to involve the community and the parents in the school management and implementation process so that they can clearly understand what is being taught and how, the significance of introducing such activities.

Attendance in the monthly meeting: Parents' meetings are held once a month in each school which are meant to encourage the guardians to play an important part in the education process. Constant reminders are needed to promote the view amongst community members that the education of their children has benefits for themselves and for their communities. At the meetings, the parents and teachers discuss children's progress, attendance, cleanliness and hygiene, the responsibility of parents towards their children, and any other social problems requiring parental attention. Through all these activities parents and the community get involved in BRAC school management process and ensure quality education to outreach poor children of Bangladesh.

Community participation and improved educational management: some empirical evidences

Parental and community participation is a social aspect of education. It plays an important role in effective implementation of BRAC's NFPE where effectiveness lies in enrolment, retention, attendance, academic and other educational achievements. A recent study on parental and community participation and effective implementation of BRAC schools reveal a positive correlation between community participation and effective running of the school. The school which enjoys the highest degree of parental and

community participation in management-related activities performs better in selecting learners, reducing dropout, ensuring attendance of learners and teachers, and enhancing academic achievement. Many other studies looked into the matter and came up with the evidence that vouches the idea of community participation and improved educational management. There is also ample evidence that corroborates higher basic competency of BRAC students compared to the students of other government or non-government primary schools controlling age, sex and grade. Strong parental and community involvement in education policy can potentiate a sound school environment to ensure children's higher educational attainments.

Epilogue

This discussion reveals that parents and community participation play an important role in effective implementation of BRAC's education programme. The nature and dimension of this participation are changed over time depending on the intent, commitment, and flexibility of the programme and the needs of the community. As a learning organisation BRAC is experimenting with various approaches in educating the poor children. In the light of the experiences, BRAC has made necessary changes in the curriculum and management process evaluating the local resources and socioeconomic condition of the populace. BRAC is constantly trying to identify new areas of community participation in achieving better management capability to reach the outreach poor children and improving quality of education.

Author

Md. Altaf Hossain

Senior Staff Sociologist

Research and Evaluation Division (RED)

BRAC, Bangladesh

BRAC Centre, 75 Mohakhali, Dhaka 1212,

Tel: 880-2-884180-87, 9881265, Fax: 880-2-883542,883614

E-mail: general@bdmail.net, BRACamr@bdmail.net

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Community Participation in School Management

As all member institutions are aware, the Third Annual Meeting of the Network held at NIE, Colombo, Sri Lanka in December 1998 suggested that the ANTRIEP should initiate a collaborative project in the area of improving school management. As per the request, the

IIEP, Paris in consultation with the Focal Point prepared a draft proposal and sent it to member institutions for their comments. I am happy to inform the readers that we received a number of valuable comments. Based on the comments, the proposal was revised and now we are seeking funding support from various agencies to implement the project activities. A brief write-up on the project is included in this issue of the Newsletter as Box item (see p17).

Based on the interest shown by the member institutions in the Third Meeting, to host the next meeting of the Network, IIEP, Paris contacted SIHRD, Shanghai, China to finalise the venue and date for the next meeting. We are happy to inform you that now it is finalised to organise the next meeting in September, 2000 in Shanghai, China. The box item on the ANTRIEP proposal contains information on this.

As suggested in the Third Meeting, the present issue of the Newsletter focuses on 'Community Participation in School Management'. We had requested the member institutions to contribute articles on the theme based on their experiences in the respective countries. The responses have been prompt and positive. We have received articles from BRAC (Bangladesh), KEDI (Korea), NIE (Sri Lanka), CERID (Nepal) and NIEPA (India).

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Community Participation in Improving Non-Formal Primary Education in Bangladesh: A BRAC Experience

The Context

Illiteracy in Bangladesh is widespread. The school performance in rural Bangladesh is poor: about one-third of the poorest children never attend school, and less than half of the children who enter primary school, pass through the system uninterrupted. Despite a 51 per cent literacy rate, Bangladesh spends only about 2 per cent of its GNP on education, compared to an average of 3.2 per cent for other low income countries and 6 per cent for high income countries. Due to socio-economic and cultural factors, along with poor educational management, millions of children in Bangladesh are left out of school. Educating all children of Bangladesh is an immense task, but one that is crucial to the development of the country.

To enable the under-served children to attain basic education and literacy, BRAC initiated the Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) programme in 1985 with 22 schools where parental and community participation was taken up as one of the guiding principles. Over the last 15 years, the number of schools has increased to over 34,000 with over 1.1 million students - a number that testifies the success of the programme.

The BRAC School Model

BRAC has developed two different school models directed at two different age groups. The NFPE is a four-year schooling system for children who are 8-10 years old, and who have never attended a school or have dropped out in the first grade. The aim of NFPE schools is to provide primary education with the hope of bringing back the children to the formal school system. The Basic Education for Older Children (BEOC) is another model for children aged 11-14 years. The BEOC school system is of three years duration but it covers five academic years of curriculum. This is possible since the students are older and are more able to grasp the material. The BEOC model is designed to provide basic education to students who have already crossed the age for enrolment in primary schools. The basic difference

between the NFPE and BEOC models is that the BEOC curriculum contains more 'life skills', including awareness on health, nutrition and some other social issues. Seventy percent of the students in BRAC schools are girls, 97 per cent of the teachers are women and the schools are convenient in timing and distance. The schools have no fees and all learning materials for the students are provided by BRAC.

Community Participation in Education

The effectiveness of an educational system depends on effective delivery system and creation of demand for education within the society. The effectiveness and demand in turn are largely dependent on the school and parent/community relationship. Where schools are closer to the parents and the community, the parents seem to be more responsive about sending their children to school. When the parents are more responsive in terms of their children's education, the delivery systems automatically improve to a certain level. Moreover, active community participation in planning and managing basic education activities infuse vitality and spirit into the educational efforts and unleash the enthusiasm and energy of people.

The nature and dimension of this community participation in improving educational management vary widely from country to country and depend on respective socio-economic and cultural variations. For example, in England, the idea of community participation has been changing over time, depending on the government's priority and commitment to education. In Bangladesh, the school management committee and the parents are officially responsible for sending all the school-aged children to primary schools, but the schools are under no legal obligation to obey the community directives in improving the quality of education. This parental and community support is essential for effective implementation and management of education, particularly in the rural areas where the problems grappling with the quality of education are mainly socio-economic.

There is a wide range of views about the responsibility of the community regarding educational management. In the recent past, some education specialists have accentuated the role of parents in classroom teaching process as a help to the teacher. In some developing countries, this parental and community help has been able in developing skills among the learners with the assistance of professionals of that community. Here parents and community participation in education can be viewed as a partnership between education provider and the customer. This partnership is helpful from both instructional and management point of view.

Depending on these ideas, community participation can take various forms. The parents and community members can encourage all potential learners to participate in learning activities. The community organisation can ensure effective school functioning, regular attendance of teachers and students and so on. The parents and community can also help identify people in the community to take up part-time teaching assignments in non-formal schools and encourage them to perform better. At the same time, they can help define learning needs in relation to developmental needs and prospects of the locality.

Community Involvement in BRAC Schools

Most studies point to poverty as the main reason for children not enrolling in, or parents withdrawing them prematurely from school. There is also a wide range of gender disparity in enrolment, retention, absenteeism, repetition, academic and educational attainments. The problem of better educational management, therefore, cannot be solved solely by creating some more new schools or by improving delivery system. Rather, parents ought to be given the opportunity for involvement in their children's education, and their views given consideration on what is to be taught, and how to encourage local contributions of ideas, resources, and management. Keeping this in mind, BRAC has devised its education programme with enough scope for parental and community involvement.

Community participation in BRAC schools has a feature that differs from formal primary school system. Each school has a management committee consisting of four parents, a community leader and the teacher, who are together responsible for smooth running of the school. This school management committee represents

the community and meets whenever necessary. On the other hand, parents' meetings are held once a month in each school which are meant to encourage the guardians to play an important role in the education process. To understand the significance and importance of parental and community participation in BRAC schools, it is necessary to comprehend how their involvement is indispensable in the programme. Parents and the community people perform the following special tasks related to the school improvement process.

a) Students Selection

The NFPE programme targets the rural children most likely to be left out or to have dropped out of formal primary schools. Selection of eligible children according to age, sex and literacy status is a complex and delicate matter to deal with by the NFPE programme. Due to better performance and flexible implementation policy, BRAC schools are gaining popularity in rural Bangladesh. Therefore, many well-off households are also getting interested to enrol their children in NFPE schools, which creates some problems in some areas in selecting learners. Some parents also try to enrol their primary school aged children (5-7 years) in these schools by concealing their real age. There are some extreme cases where the parents purposely do not send their children to formal schools so that they may become eligible for next cycle of BRAC schools. Parents are also interested in enrolling their irregular and inattentive children in the NFPE schools who are already continuing their education in formal primary schools. All these issues regarding student selection are dealt with by prospective parents and the community at the beginning of the programme. It is impossible for any BRAC staff to resolve all these issues without the help of local community.

b) Teacher Selection

Attitude of teachers of BRAC schools is another important factor in effective implementation of the programme. Teaching in BRAC schools is not well paid. It is rather a 'para profession' where the sense of responsibility in educating rural poor children is felt as a social responsibility. Therefore, in selecting teachers, parents and the community prefer the kind of person who they think would be more caring for their children's schooling and with whom no class conflict would arise between the parents and the teacher.

c) School Room Selection

School room selection is an important issue in NFPE programme. It was found in the early stages of the programme that acceptance of a house from a wealthier household tended to increase the number of non-target students from better-off households. To serve the poorest families' educational needs, the programme now prefers houses from the poorest people. The parents and the community make an important decision as to which room will be most suitable, considering physical facilities and distance.

d) Vacation and School Time Fixation

As per the needs of the society, BRAC designs its curriculum and administers it according to the convenience of rural poor children. In doing so, BRAC adopts a short class duration and flexible school hours depending on the students' involvement in different economic and household activities. As BRAC is determined not to subjugate the total contact hour to the concise class timing, so it proscribes long vacations and encourages parents and community members to fix short vacations at their earliest convenience.

e) Mat Replacement

In BRAC schools, there are no benches for students to sit on. Rather they squat on the unfurled mats on the ground to make the class more communicative, participatory and effective. BRAC supplies the mats for the first time and exhorts the community to replace it whenever they wear out. This is the only pecuniary decision the community has to make and contribute towards that.

f) School Supervision

The parents and community have been ascribed with some responsibilities to make the schools transparent and accountable to the community for creating a congenial school environment. BRAC schools are usually situated within that part of the village where most of the students reside. Therefore, it is expected that the parents and the community play an important role in supervising the opening and closing hours of the school, attendance of the teachers and students, cleanliness of the school premises and removal of the onlookers.

g) Conflict Resolution

In some places, BRAC schools and parents have to face

some obstacles from the wider community. For example, in many places, religious fundamentalists brand BRAC schools as anti-Islamic as these introduce some such cultural activities as singing, dancing, clapping, physical exercise, and others to make schools attractive to children. In some cases, these religious extremists who spread rumours blaming NFPE schools for converting the poor children into Christianity had burnt some of the schools. To protect the schools from this type of social problem it is necessary to involve the community and the parents in the school management and implementation process so that they can clearly understand what is being taught and how, and the significance of introducing such activities.

h) Attendance in the Monthly Meeting

Parents' meetings are held once a month in each school which are meant to encourage the guardians to play an important part in the education process. Constant reminders are needed to promote the view amongst community members that the education of their children has benefits for themselves and for their communities. In the meetings, the parents and teachers discuss children's progress, attendance, cleanliness and hygiene, the responsibility of parents towards their children, and other social problems requiring parental attention. Through all these activities, parents and the community get involved in BRAC school management process and ensure quality education to outreach poor children of Bangladesh.

Community Participation and Improved Educational Management: Some Empirical Evidences

Parental and community participation is a social aspect of education. It plays an important role in effective implementation of BRAC's NFPE programme where effectiveness lies in enrolment, retention, attendance, academic and other educational achievements. A recent study on parental and community participation and effective implementation of BRAC schools reveals a positive correlation between community participation and effective running of the school. The school which enjoys the highest degree of parental and community participation in management-related activities performs better in selecting learners, reducing dropouts, ensuring attendance of learners and teachers, and enhancing academic achievement. Many other studies had looked into the matter and came up with the evidence

that vouches the idea of community participation and improved educational management. There is also ample evidence that corroborates higher basic competency of BRAC students compared to the students of other government or non-government managed primary schools. Strong parental and community involvement in education policy can potentiate a sound school environment to ensure children's higher educational attainments.

Epilogue

This discussion reveals that community participation plays an important role in effective implementation of BRAC's education programme. The nature and dimension of this participation are changed over time depending on the intent, commitment, and flexibility of the

programme and the needs of the community. As a learning organisation, BRAC is experimenting with various approaches in educating the poor children. In the light of the experiences, BRAC has made necessary changes in the curriculum and management process, evaluating the local resources and socio-economic condition of the populace. BRAC is constantly trying to identify new areas of community participation in achieving better management capability to reach the outreach poor children and improving quality of education.

*Md. Altaf Hossain
BRAC
Dhaka, Bangladesh*