



BRAC'S FUNCTIONAL EDUCATION : AN OVERVIEW

This paper presents, in relatively broad strokes, the facts and features of the Functional Education Programme designed by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), which, in its applied form contributed significantly in building human institutions among the disadvantaged learners aiming at a participatory developmental effort. Before going into further detail of the programme, one ought to know BRAC and its starting, to learn how BRAC got involved in such a programme of identifying and meeting the educational needs of the rural people.

1. BRAC

Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is a strictly home grown private non-profit organization involved in total socio-economic upliftment of the disadvantaged rural poor. Starting initially in response to the humanitarian needs of Bangladesh after liberation of the country in 1972, BRAC gradually but purposefully developed into a highly flexible organization capable of undertaking innovative approaches to rural development. BRAC has always avoided the approach where programme plans are thought and designed by a body of experts and then tilted down to beneficiaries as a prescription. On the contrary, the approach has always been one of allowing felt needs to emerge out from the target population's own analysis of the situation within the prevailing socio-economic context. BRAC has provided all-tier support in generating and developing this process, where adult education has played the pivotal role.

11. Early experiences.

The starting of the Adult Education Programme dates back to 1973 after BRAC's 9-month long 1st phase of operation to

rehabilitate the returning refugees after the liberation war. As BRAC felt that this type of activities will not be of any long term benefit to the rural population, it initiated multi-sectoral activities in November, 1972 based on the participation of the local communities. At that time 90 percent illiteracy among the people in the project area was seen as a major contributing factor to rural under-development and poverty.

So a strong literacy drive was therefore launched in early 1973 as a major element of BRAC's rural development strategy. With a view to eliminate illiteracy from the project area within next 3 years, 255 literacy centres were opened in 220 villages and 293 local educated men and women were trained and employed as teachers. Initial enthusiasm among the villagers and the teachers were high and 5,000 students were enrolled, of which, unfortunately, only 5 percent completed the course resulting in a closure of the drive after 18 months. Analysing the poor performance, BRAC experienced that:

- a. Conventional teaching content based on preconceived notions held no relevance to the immediate needs and meaningful solution to the real problems of the learners;
- b. the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills required considerable effort and time that learners could not afford at the cost of their hunger and hardship;
- c. The methodology of teaching in traditional vertical techniques undermined the human dignity in adults, that made learner's interest wane quickly;
- d. The learners failed to retain the skill of literacy and numeracy for very long when it became an end in itself, rather than a means.

Side by side, in running sectoral programmes for the rural people based on community participation, BRAC learnt that

effective participation demands people's awareness about their need, problems, condition and resources. Real rural development can only take place through drawing out human potentials in proper utilisation of available resources for generating their own emancipation and self-improvement.

3. Strategy defined

It was therefore decided to scale down the quantitative aspect of the programme and take up the job to develop and test, on a pilot basis, a non-formal functional education programme suitable to adult learners and compatible to BRAC's development strategy. The specific objectives of this educational approach were:

- a. To maintain learner's interest and participation in the educational process through incorporation of the learner-centered content and horizontal pedagogic relationship;
- b. To modify learner's attitude and behaviour towards newer ideas on health, nutrition, family planning, agricultural practices, co-operative etc.;
- c. To enable learners to read with understanding and write legibly simple texts likely to be of use to them;
- d. To create learner's awareness about his own potentiality to think, plan and act on their own behalf for a better life.

The main steps followed in implementing this new programme were assessment of learner's needs and interests, designing of learning materials and methods and training of supervisors and facilitators. This was followed by implementation of a pilot phase in order to test and revise materials and methods pertaining to eventual expansion throughout the country. Much of the inspiration for this course was derived from the ideas of famous Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire. At a stage, a consultant

from World Education Inc. has helped the Materials Development Unit of BRAC in designing the lessons and initial training.

4. Clientele

BRAC's operations are directed at the poorest section of the rural population that consist mainly of the people who sell their annual labour for their livelihood whether they have a piece of land or not. They are characterized by the fact that they have low levels of skills, education and organising capacity and they face extremely adverse health and nutritional conditions. It is with this target population that the functional education course are conducted. Typically, a group of 25 male or female members between age 15-50, forms a class. A teacher is chosen by the group to lead and initiate the discussions. This person should preferably, be from amongst the target population itself having dropped out from formal schooling after 7 or 8 years. The person should have good power of expression, be able to spare time for his people and be committed to the goal of seeking the enhancement of his community.

5. Developing materials

The first round of materials-large charts with drawings, generative words, and short suggestive sentences-was the product of brainstorming among the materials development unit staff, set up in early 1974, centering on the themes identified as the main concerns of the rural people. These were distilled down to a complete logical sequence of 80 lessons. The major content topics are: (a) soil and use of fertilizers, (b) high yielding rice cultivation, (c) animal husbandry and poultry, (d) fisheries and pisciculture, (e) co-operatives, (f) nutrition, (g) environmental hygiene and public health, (h) family planning, (i) child care, (j) cottage industries, (k) rights and responsibilities of citizens and state, and so on.

Different types of formats like illustration, story, letter, demonstration, discussion, role-play, debate, workshop etc. have been used to introduce the topic and initiate the discussion. All the lessons have certain generative words that spring from the central concerns of the lessons and are particularly evocative of the issues being discussed in the lesson. Examples of these words are like: House, Hunger, Money, Trade, Co-operative, Germ carrier, Vegetable cooking, Multiple Cropping, Self-interest vs. Community Development etc. The key words, apart from being the focal points for discussion, also form the main literacy component of the course. As each word is introduced, it is also displayed in its written form and this visual image of the word is absorbed by the participants for later recognition in written contexts. The topics are systematically illustrated and recorded in the FLIP CHART and in the WORKBOOKS for the future reference and practice of the participant. The numeracy content of the course is also included in the discussions and illustrations around relevant topics.

The search of relevant topics, generative words and preparation of effective formats for each lesson was done through repeated surveys, discussions, pretesting and revision for about 21 months. At a certain stage, the number of lessons were increased upto 100. But after a thorough revision it has again been reduced to 60 lessons by eliminating closer topics to accommodate learner's limitations like time etc.

Side by side, a GUIDE BOOK comprising of programmed instructions has also been prepared to acquaint the teacher-facilitator with the subtleties of each lesson, its objective and the process for moulding the discussion. It serves as a useful training aid as well as a handy reference for instructors in the field.

6. Imparting process

The learning experience provides adults with opportunities for critical analysis of their environment, for deepening their self-perceptions in relation to it, and for building confidence in their own creativity and capabilities for action. This is done through the problem posing process coupled with a 'feeling' component into every lesson. It offers open ended questions with answers resulting from a concerted effort to analyse the situation and find alternatives by bringing the learners together in a group and teacher as facilitator. Through this process the individual is able to describe what he sees and feels, to analyse its relative importance, to make comparisons with other situation and to formulate concrete responses. Once he is able to locate the different areas of his problems he will then see the need to come together in, such as, youth organisations, mother's clubs, co-operatives etc. to deal with multifaceted problems in their socio-economic life. Thus programmes aimed at nurturing such village level institutions will grow out of the very desire of the people for concerted action to better their lives. A typical learning process consists of following steps:

a) Large group discussion of stimulus(illustration, story, letter, role-play, game etc.). Analysis of this stimulus grows through the following questioning sequence:

- i. Questions that elicit simple descriptions and observation which deals with obvious facts;
- ii. Questions that call for analysis, which try to uncover cause-effect relationship;
- iii. Questions that deal with attitudes, feelings and values.

- b) Small group discussion for consolidation of ideas for action.
- c) Reports from small groups.

- d) Large group discussion on the reports for generalisation of the group decision
- e) Literacy/Numeracy work.

The literacy and numeracy works start with the visual presentation of the letters of the word and the phonemes. The learners are then asked to identify symbols, repeat them and practice writing on their work book. Following the discussion, reading and writing, the learners play games or solve puzzles.

The total process for imparting a lesson requires two hours. The classes are usually conducted about 4/5 times a week as convenient to the participants. These are usually held at some mutually agreeable location around the village often being held at night-time under open sky. The participants sit in a circle along with the teacher and exchange ideas, experience, feelings on the theme lesson and identify the action plan in seeking solution to their pressing problems. Teacher's function is not deliver instructions in an unidirectional flow but to encourage them to reflect, comment and criticise the issues under discussion and to co-ordinate the views of the learners. He too participate in this process and allows the discussion to explore the issues as detailed as possible to arrive at a consensus of opinion.

7. Training

In order to make the role of the teachers and supervisors more participatory, facilitating and effective, an orientation and training course is also designed following the implementation of the programme. The training sessions, passing through initial trials, starting from 1974, have evolved into a common pattern (module). Presently, a session normally lasts for 7-12 full days, depending on the needs and limitations of the trainees. The specific objectives of the training are:

- a) to help participants shed their inhibitions in group situations and understand the dynamics of an effective group as well as the worth of individual members in the group;
- b) to eliminate the traditional notions of 'experts' and 'teachers' and to demonstrate that everyone in a group can enrich the groups learning experiences;
- c) to familiarise the participants with the philosophy, materials and methods of Functional Education Course and their role as facilitators of group interaction; and
- d) to let the participants engage in practice and demonstrations of the methods to be used later with the learners.

Appropriate activities including demonstration lessons are conducted with actual illiterates to attain desired goals of these training sessions. In addition, short workshops, follow-up meetings and refresher courses are organised with the facilitators and organisers by the supervisors, and they, in turn, attend review meetings with the training and materials development staff at the head office.

8. Support reader

Lack of interesting reading materials in rural areas has been identified by BRAC as a constraint in practicing acquired skills of the FE learners in out-of-centre situations. As such, with the aim of providing relevant informative reading materials to rural readers, BRAC began publishing a monthly journal 'Gopokendra' (The People's Forum) from April 1973. The content range from farming to family planning, education to emancipation and poverty to power. Each issue also contained some literacy and entertainment pieces. A special page entitled 'The Worker's Forum', with bold type faces, written on neoliterates specific interest, is also inserted in the journal to generate thinking and practicing of skills acquired. It is worth mentioning that the present circulation of the journal is over 50,000 copies.

Presently, some follow-up materials are also in the process of preparation for the learners who graduated the BRAC Functional Education Course. This is expected to provide the curious learners more insight about the problems, help him in analysis and quicker decision making apart from increasing his skills in reading with understanding, writing effectively and simple accounting needed for his life and living.

9. Problems encountered

In initiating and running this new participatory functional education programme, BRAC has encountered a number of problems which are mainly:

- a) non-availability of defined facilitators from among the group;
- b) discouragement by the drop-outs of formal education, local influentials and vested interest groups;
- c) high absenteeism during natural calamities like flood, drought, cyclone, etc.;
- d) discouragement by the male members of the family in attending FE courses by the women members;
- e) lack of sufficient relevant reading materials for neo-literates and opportunity to use frequently their skills in their daily life;
- f) high demand by the learners to start collective economic activities as soon a FE centre opens while they lack the very basic technical skills and management competencies required for the job;
- g) occasional physical inability due to tiredness from hard work.

10. Visible change

Despite all these problems, there are indications that the course is meeting with considerable success in achieving its

objectives. Quantitatively, the dropout rate has been reduced to about 40% in average, whereas the conventional adult literacy courses had drop out rates of upto 90%. And more and more centres are being opened up on the request of the rural communities.

It is extremely difficult to measure the qualitative impact of a curriculum that is designed to create greater critical awareness among the deprived and dependent poor about the social, economic and political situation. But some concrete behavioral changes among the learners and, who completed the course, have been observed while working with them:

- a) there is greater knowledge and understanding among the course attendants about various rural problems and their own situation than in a non-participant rural resident;
- b) a feeling of oneness among the members within a group has emerged;
- c) the learners became more responsive to calls, more receptive to new ideas and more reactive to falsehood, and exploitation;
- d) the analysing and decision making power of the participants has improved;
- e) the participants started encouraging their children and female members to have access to education;
- f) the majority of the target groups that took the FE course have gone on to establish themselves as landless organisations within their villages and have been involved in wide range of socio-economic activities;
- g) some groups have come up to local power structures and started regulating the situations to community benefit.