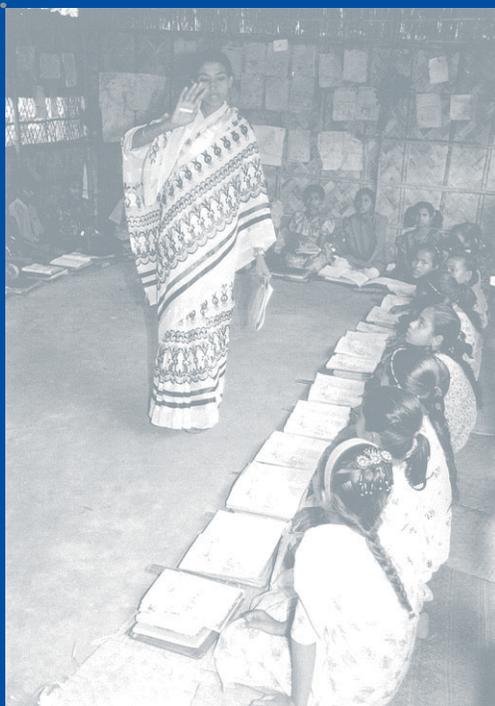


ADVANCING BASIC EDUCATION AND LITERACY PROJECT

BANGLADESH RURAL ADVANCEMENT COMMITTEE (BRAC)
LESSONS FROM THE BRAC NON-FORMAL
PRIMARY EDUCATION PROGRAM



ATSweetser

ANNE T. SWEETSER

ACADEMY FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT



U.S. Agency for International Development • Bureau for Global Field Programs, Field Support and Research
Center for Human Capacity Development • Office of Basic Education and Learning Systems

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ANNE T. SWEETSER
SOCIAL/MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGIST
ACADEMY FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
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INTRODUCTION



Children watch with interest a BRAC parent's committee meeting.

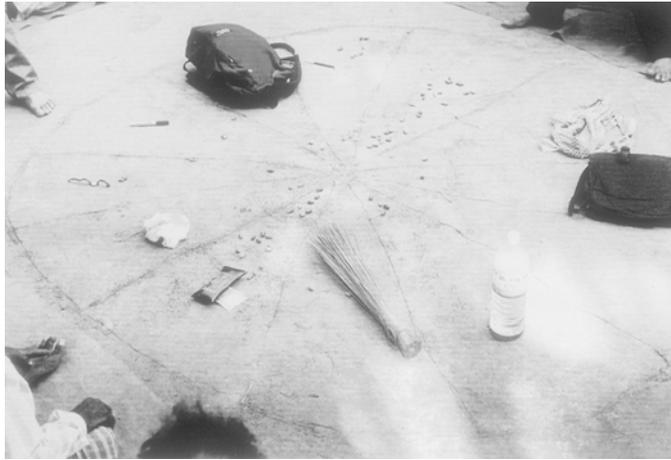
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study focused on understanding the perspectives of the beneficiaries of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee's (BRAC) Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) program, including students, parents and other community members, teachers, BRAC program staff, and some who work in public education. By employing participatory research methods, the research team gave those directly involved in the program the opportunity to share their perspectives as well as to answer questions that arose from the team's review of written materials and interviews in BRAC's Dhaka headquarters. By coming to an understanding of the relationships between the NFPE activity and those affected by it, the research team was able to gain an appreciation of the sociocultural factors that affect the sustainability of the effort and of the

overall contribution BRAC, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), makes toward the building of social capital in Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

One does not necessarily know enough to formulate the right questions before commencing a social research project. Qualitative research methods allow open inquiry into others' perceptions of the relevant features of a subject, and thus facilitate broad learning. High quality team work among individuals with contrasting backgrounds, triangulation among varying sources of information and modes of analysis, and an iterative or spiraling pattern of learning are key features of this research method. Critical requirements include excellent listening and observation skills and the ability of team members to engage in



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The use of this pie chart, a basic participatory learning activity tool, helped parents rank the effects of the BRAC school on their community from lists that they created.

frank discussions of their differing perceptions as they review what they are learning. Rigor results from careful execution and accurate presentation rather than statistical analysis of data whose quality might be questionable. After all, people may provide answers that do not correspond with what researchers believe they are asking, or they may adjust their answers to accord with their beliefs about the

sponsors of the study. Qualitative methods complement, but do not replace, statistical studies assessing the efficacy of education development programs.

The research team primarily used relaxed (or rapid) appraisal to obtain information. After reviewing relevant documents and interviewing BRAC staff and members of the international community in Dhaka, the team relied largely upon semistructured or conversational interviews rather than standardized questions. The research team raised topics of interest with interviewees and listened for clues to perceptions and experiences that diverged from its own. As the team's understanding grew, it modified the topics it raised. The team supplemented interviewing with graphic exercises from rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and participatory learning and action (PLA). Typical tools of these research methods are mapping, ranking, and making matrices. These exercises promote equal opportunity for all to give their opinions, allow participants to learn one another's views, facilitate group reflection and discussion, and allow outsiders to learn about the lives of the villagers. When fully employed over several days, PLA also facilitates local planning and empowers individuals and communities.

THE REGIONS

The team visited two districts. The first district, Jamalpur, is a poor, very densely populated rice-growing area north of Dhaka. BRAC started its programming in this area in 1976 soon after expanding from its first program area in the northeast. Some of the first work that focused on women was initiated over the next few years.¹

The second district, Thakurgaon, is in the extreme northwest where the land is drier and less fertile, the economy less dynamic, the population less dense, and the society more traditional. BRAC only recently began working in this area.

THE BRAC SCHOOLS

BRAC'S NFPE program sponsors over 2,000 schools in Jamalpur along with 240 adult centers and 700 adolescent, or KK (kishor-kishori) schools. There are also 227 libraries, including 47 located in schools and intended for adolescent girls, and 11 union libraries. The first BRAC staff arrived in Thakurgaon in November 1995. Two years later, there were 149 NFPE and 100 KK schools in two unions.

STAFF

In Jamalpur the regional office is staffed by a regional manager, an accountant, and an office assistant. Two of the nationwide total of seventeen monitors are connected with the region, with one based in the regional office. There are six constituent areas, each led by an area manager who also has office staff. The area managers supervise twenty-two teams through team-in-charges, who run field offices and supervise one, two, or three teams each. Each team has four to six program officers, program assistants, or resource teachers (former BRAC teachers) who visit schools regularly. One area manager, seven team-in-charges, and twenty-two resource teachers are female.

Not surprisingly, the staff remains small in Thakurgaon. There were three team-in-charges, seven program officers and twenty-one program assistants, including four recently-arrived females. Three people in the Thakurgaon regional office had participated in the initial survey of the area as Rural Development Program staff.

There was a marked difference between the ethos in these two regions. While the team was treated with consideration in both districts, staff members in Jamalpur were extremely sensitive to much of what the research team said. This guardedness made the team wonder if they were concealing information. By contrast, there was a refreshing straightforwardness with the team's interactions with the staff in Thakurgaon.

OFFICES

Team offices are often in small side buildings on the grounds of a Rural Development Program office. (This became standard practice by 1998.) In Jamalpur proper, the NFPE team, area, and regional offices were all located in their own compound. Nearby, the

Rural Development Program has a separate office on the main road. There was also a large Ayesha Abed Foundation center, where clothing and block print textiles were manufactured, and a carpentry shop, where some women KK school graduates worked.

In Thakurgaon, the NFPE office is located in a cramped, rented house near the Rural Development Program office. Fifty kilometers to the south, the Pirganj team office was housed with the Rural Development Program in a new, small building. Though rented, many of the office buildings are identically designed, which suggests they were built by individuals with advances from, and leased for several years to, BRAC in the same manner that the schools have been constructed.

BULLETIN BOARDS

All team offices have bulletin boards on which current data about the regional, area, or team program are displayed. A typical office has charts on each school that detail such things as: the curriculum, staff, numbers of students, and Kishori libraries; topics for discussion at parents meetings (e.g., health, early marriage, gardening, the importance of education, the importance of attendance, parents' responsibilities, and care of educational

materials); the Gender Quality Action Learning program; aphorisms on how well-treated children grow up to be caring citizens; personnel regulations; and BRAC posters condemning violence against women, dowry abuse, and unfair divorce settlements.



Area manager and village organizer in front of a BRAC school in Jamalpur district.

THE VILLAGES

This study focused on three villages, one (A) in Jamalpur, where the NFPE program was old, and two (B and C) in Thakurgaon, where the program was new. Villages B and C were distinguished by the fact that village B had had a Rural Development Program and an NFPE school for eight months, while in village C a KK school had opened less than two months before the team's visit and there was no Rural Development Program. There were significant differences between the political, economic, and

social circumstances of the villages. Village A had long been settled, but villages B and C had been settled quite recently. Rapid population growth was a constant. In village A, men said that where 30 kilos of rice could once feed the entire village for one meal when they were young, now 120 kilos were required. In village B the team was told that forty years ago there had been only eight houses; there are now forty-five.

Social stratification is also universal. People in village A say there are four classes: rich, poor, medium-poor, and very poor. In this village, the woman who had founded the BRAC village organization and organized the school was domineering. Some people grumbled about her behavior and there was a report that she had installed the school's latrine in her own home. In village B the team was told that the community leaders wished to keep the majority illiterate and dependent. The most influential man had been appointed chair of the BRAC school committee, and the wealthiest man had a daughter enrolled in the school. This served to appease the two men so they would no longer "make disparaging comments or hassle the students or program initiators." Village C is comparatively unstable. Land ownership had shifted from the original settlers to a single Hindu merchant in a single generation. In 1947 the merchant exchanged property with a Muslim landowner in India, who later sold the land and went into business, though he still maintains ties to the village. The rich in village C are newly prosperous, and struggles over status are reflected in intense debate over Islam, morality, and the proper roles of men and women in society.

SCHOOL HISTORIES

In the 1940s, two young, educated men were brought to village A to teach a small number of boys in the area. The school later moved to a nearby village and eventually dispersed. In the 1960s, the first government primary school was opened about one kilometer south of the village. Years later, residents learned about BRAC when they were given food following a devastating flood. Soon the Rural Development Program and the first schools began in the region. In 1992, the leader of the village organization appealed to BRAC to authorize a school.

One mile from village B is its first primary school, which opened about 40 years ago. Later a secondary school, named Islamia, opened about one-half mile away. There are now two primary schools, a secondary school, a "minor" school, and the BRAC school, all a mile or less from village B.

Residents of nearby village C reported that the first school in their area was this “minor” school. It was attended by both Muslim and Hindu boys and (fewer) girls. They now have access to the same Islamia madrassah and the secondary school, which opened in 1971, as residents of village B. In the village there is the BRAC school and a new religious school that was constructed and operated with donations from a rich man who had left the village some years ago, and through continuing “compulsory donations” from residents.

Those few who completed their education many years ago have achieved prestigious positions as teachers or local government officials, which contributed to high expectations for all students. Many boys dropped out of school, however, because of physical punishment or the need to work on family farms. Villagers reported that until recently, poor parents were not encouraged to send their children to school, but that this is changing. Parents were worried about opportunities for the BRAC graduates to continue their education after the first three years.

POPULAR ATTITUDES

INTRODUCTION

In each community the team met with members of the school committee and with older men; held conversations with parents in conjunction with leading them through a few PLA exercises; and talked with school teachers, BRAC group leaders, and anyone who sought the team out. The team explored attitudes toward education, government schools, BRAC schools, girls' education, women's economic roles, and various dimensions of social change.

Bangladeshis perceive education to be intrinsically interrelated with economic and family issues. Few men spoke about education as an end or a goal in its own right. Instead, considerations of marriage and dowry for daughters, and job opportunities for all—but especially for sons—were paramount. Some older men, in Thakurgaon especially, dwelled on religio-moral issues pertaining to women's activity in society and the overall degradation of society resulting from liberalization. Women spoke of gaining a voice as a result of going to school, and of their desire to help their children learn, in addition to making similar points about economic and family issues.



Members of a parents' committee meet with a member of the research team.

ATTITUDES TOWARD EDUCATION

Education of a family member raises the status of the entire family. Where the BRAC school had just opened in village C, parents of those enrolled seemed elated by the respect they felt their families had gained. Those whose children had not been enrolled, in addition to the older unmarried girls and their parents,



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A government primary school dwarfs the typical 240 square foot, one-room BRAC school, which is usually a rented room in a building constructed of bamboo and mud walls with corrugated tin roofs. Students sit on woven mats on a packed mud floor.

were upset that there were not more places. In the nearby village B, where the BRAC school had been open for eight months and where the educated elite exert great influence over local affairs, people clamored for additional grades and secondary education within the village.

In villages B and C, where schooling has only recently become available to large numbers of people, education

is equated with assured, gainful employment and enhanced status. People expect that they will encounter the same opportunities as those few who were educated in the past. The failure of recent graduates to get good jobs is interpreted as a decline in the educational system rather than as a reflection of increased competition in a stagnant labor market.

In village A, where education has been more widely available for a while, people recognize the limits on mobility that one derives solely from an education. They claim that connections are ultimately much more important than is education for obtaining a job. Some even questioned the value of an education, stating that being educated but unable to find a job leads to frustration.

A corollary to the gain in prestige associated with going to school is the possibility that it may undermine the traditional social and economic structure of a village. In village B (where the BRAC school was new) parents stated that children refused to help around the house after they started school. In village A (where the BRAC school is in its fifth year), some expressed concern that a young man may refuse to return home to work on the land after he has obtained an education. Many recognize that the younger generation has much higher expectations than its parents, but this view did not concord with how adults said they envisioned the future—an expanded economy with no significant changes in village structure.

ATTITUDES TOWARD GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Many derogatory comments were made about government schools. According to villagers, government schools are too far away, so parents cannot keep an eye on the children. (For the majority of women, whose mobility has always been very restricted, anything outside the village is felt to be beyond their control.) Related to the problem of distance is parents' worry that girls will be teased by young men, or worse, might initiate relationships with them. Fearsome stories about children being kidnapped and taken to forced labor camps or sold into prostitution circulate as well. (Though kidnapping does occur, the probability that any one child might be kidnapped from a rural area is very low.)

Villagers said the facilities at government schools were too limited in general, and many mentioned the paucity of furniture. Some children have to stand all day long and others, particularly BRAC graduates, are reportedly forced to sit on the floor.

Teaching quality was frequently disparaged. Some said that government school teachers are not as skilled as BRAC teachers. The team often heard that teachers' attendance is poor and that they fail to arrive on time or remain in class for the full period. Some said that the quality of teaching is poor, that discipline is lax, and that the children are allowed to play most of the day. Related to these complaints is the large class size. Teachers, the team was told, can neither control such large classes nor monitor the work of so many students.

COMMENTS ABOUT BRAC SCHOOLS

Since people incorrectly perceived that the research team was connected with BRAC, it is not surprising that the research team heard few negative comments about BRAC schools, other than that they are too small to accommodate all those who wish to attend. One former student candidly remarked that the BRAC schools are "not great." Repeatedly villagers asked the team to provide bigger schools and to expand them to five or more classes. Some in Thakurgaon District asserted that five years of BRAC school should be equivalent to ten years of government school. (This raised the question about the methods BRAC employs to persuade communities to start schools.) In village B, where a secondary school teacher lived, there was a great desire for a BRAC secondary school.

Parents strongly appreciate the fact that BRAC schools are within the villages because they can better keep an eye on their children. That BRAC schools are free to the poor is very important for many. Many said that without BRAC they would have been unable to educate their children at all.

Learning was consistently said to be better in BRAC schools. Many said that “the standards are high,” and “the quality [is] much better than government schools.” They praised the discipline in the schools, saying the children responded well or “liked” it. The only remark the team heard about physical punishment, which is supposedly not employed at all in BRAC schools, suggested that it is used occasionally in Thakurgaon District. Everywhere people mentioned that the children are attentive to their appearance and hygiene: they clean their nails, wash and comb their hair, brush their teeth, and care about their clothing (some even do their own laundry). The children stop quarreling so much, and their language improves.

Many remarked on the teaching. They said it is methodical, and that the teachers are punctual and stay the full time. They complimented the teachers’ ability to monitor students’ progress and were pleased that the teachers follow up on students, e.g., by going to their homes if they are absent.

ATTITUDES TOWARD GIRLS’ AND WOMEN’S ROLES IN BANGLADESHI SOCIETY

The status of women, the improvement of which is the primary focus of BRAC’s overall effort, is a highly contentious issue. Marked generational differences are clear, with younger men more open to women’s involvement in activities outside their homes. Village C was particularly conservative. Older men told of a meeting shortly after the 1947 partition of the subcontinent in which men from the immediate area vowed that henceforth women would remain in purdah (behind moral curtains). One argued that women should not go to school at all. Another considered it shocking that poor women who work in the fields sometimes arrange their own marriages. They condemned the fact that women now ride bicycles and motorcycles. One complained that women take up seats on buses that elderly men require. One was outraged when he went to a store to make a small purchase and the shopkeeper served a woman first. These men perceive that government is responsible for “making women so desperate” that they “let their hair down” and move around in public. Their litany of complaints accelerated rapidly to denunciation of contemporary national politics: since both major parties are led by women, they said, they vote for a regional party headed by a man. As one man stated, all the degradation in the world starts with the loosening of restrictions on women.

These remarks appear to emanate from the fear that an educated woman will not obey her husband; this was clearly articulated in village A. Men are bound to protect the honor

of their families; they worry that girls might bring their families disgrace if they elope or if they are not sufficiently protected.

Islam is a common idiom for discussion of women's roles. Men in village C stated that Shariat, Islamic religious law, prohibits women from moving around in public, while affirming that it also prohibits discrimination against women. Islam is both the source of arguments about the place of women, and an idiom for discourse about many social issues. Alternative interpretations of Islam mean that people imply different things when they use the vocabulary of religion. In village A one man outlined four commonly heard arguments about women and Islam in Bangladesh at the present time: a) people have to adjust to modernity; b) girls' education is not prohibited by Islam; c) despite some contradiction with Islam, female mobility is required for survival now; and d) if women are mobile they get involved in illicit relationships.

Women expressed confidence in both villages A and B that men in their families would allow them and their daughters-in-law to participate in an adult education course were one offered. They are also interested in credit programs and training in poultry raising. In village C, women said they used to be forced to leave school for early marriage. (The women were hoping that the research team might facilitate the creation of more opportunities for teenaged girls who were considered too old for the recently opened KK school.)

ATTITUDES TOWARD GIRLS' EDUCATION

Typically, the first benefit of girls' education cited by villagers pertains to their future roles managing the home economy: "they will be able to count, figure out how much is owed or due back when transacting business, calculate income and expenses, and avoid being cheated." One man mentioned that an educated woman can take care of her family if her husband dies.

The second benefit villagers cited pertains to arranging her marriage: many said it is easier to find a husband for an educated daughter. But, ultimately, it is dowry that is the most important consideration related to the decision about educating a girl. Most asserted that dowry is lower for an educated girl. Someone in village A said dowry would be higher for Hindu girls. Some in village B thought it would be higher for an educated girl. In fact, in this village only well-off girls were educated, and all had high dowries, but this was probably more due to the families' financial and social status rather than a conse-

quence of education. Another man remarked that a girl with an education could marry a less educated boy with no dowry at all, if either a better man or sufficient funds were not available. In village C, pressure for enrollment of slightly older girls than had been admitted to the new KK school undoubtedly reflected their families' hopes of arranging their marriages more easily. The program assistant explained that he had refused to admit these girls because he would be held responsible by BRAC if they dropped out prior to completing the full curriculum. In this religiously conservative village, that might well have happened.

Women obviously valued gaining a voice as a result of education: the ability to speak in front of others was a repeatedly mentioned benefit. Having greater say in the choice of her husband and more voice within his family after marriage were also specifically noted. Others spoke about the abstract benefits of schooling: a woman can learn a lot, and she can "have a life" (implying holding a job). Some said that she could help her parents if she is educated. Others said that with education they can help teach their own children in the future.

A few said that girls are better students than boys and that they are more interested in education. That girls receive government stipends for secondary school expenses was important to others. Men expected that their daughters might become teachers or family planning workers, or that they might raise poultry or learn handicrafts, including tailoring. Some women who mentioned that their daughters might become BRAC teachers appeared to hope that this would enable them to remain in their villages. In village A men agreed that it is easier to find a job for a woman with an SSC degree (tenth class) than for a man with the same education. On the other hand, a man in village C saw no point in sending girls for an SSC or further study because they will still have to bribe someone to secure a job, but what they really need, in his view, is a husband. Another added that without a bachelor's degree women can't get a job anyway.



BRAC parents' committee meeting in Thakurgaon district.

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YOUNG MEN

Young men are clearly problematic to villagers. Older men said they are bad, disinterested in education, undisciplined, lazy, and do not earn any money. They watch television and develop fantasies about women, which makes their teasing of girls worse and compels the men to punish them. Men feel a great responsibility to locate jobs for their



Young men making themselves useful by helping thresh rice.

sons, as they are compelled to provide dowries for their daughters. Some young men had created difficulties by refusing to accept opportunities their fathers arranged for them. Educated young men now marry because they cannot find work. But rather than returning to their villages to farm, they obtain household goods from their wives' dowries.

Talk of young men led to commentary on the economic situation. Men were acutely aware of the relationship between rapid population growth and the severe land shortage. High yielding crop varieties have helped the landless in recent years because these crops require much more labor per unit of land; large landowners are unable to work all of their own land so they make more of it available to sharecroppers, who benefit by having some control over their production. Rice, sugar cane, and jute are the main crops. In the northwest people said that the land is so poor one needs an education in order to survive. Here, the paucity of nonagricultural jobs is a severe problem. Qualifying for work is no guarantee of obtaining a position; rather, connections or bribes are required. Government jobs with status and security are highly valued. Selling labor, trading in rice and tobacco, and working on tube wells were mentioned as major alternatives to farming for men.

BRAC SCHOOLS AND THEIR GRADUATES



BRAC school graduates work on a participatory learning activity for the research team.

SCHOOL VISITS

The uniformity of the BRAC classes in each community was striking. The buildings were virtually identical (though some were sturdier than others). The walls were decorated with children's drawings and mobiles hung from the poles beneath the roofs. Everything was impeccably neat—students' supplies were stacked in precisely the same way, with the books and the slate resting

on a cylindrical pencil case (made from a lighter fluid can). In one school, small pink circles on the burlap indicated where each student's bottle of water for cleaning the slate should stand. The children were excited, stood shyly to ask a few basic questions, and gladly sang a song or two, either in a loud, near-monotone or with one child standing at the front clapping. The research team watched the classes briefly but chose to use its time to talk with former students.

BRAC SCHOOL GRADUATES

Twenty-five of the thirty children that had been enrolled in the first cycle of the BRAC school in village A met with the team one morning. The team divided the group into two circles of twelve and thirteen children and asked them first to list and rank the courses they had had, and then to analyze why they liked and disliked their favorite and least favorite subjects, respectively. The team employed PLA tools, pie charts, and bubble graphs for these exercises.

The team asked the former students and other community members to make lists of their greatest hopes and frustrations in life. For this exercise, people worked alone. However, some people seemed distressed when asked to write lists, so the team suggested that one person could do the writing. It was obvious to the research team that quite a few people were uncomfortable with writing. They debated the spelling of words and, when necessary, strung a few short words together in an attempt to write a difficult, longer word that they did not know how to spell. This effect of learning by word recognition rather than by phonetics was very clear.

RANKING OF COURSES

Both groups of BRAC school graduates indicated that Bangla was their favorite course. Both enjoyed English as well. Their responses for math were highly divergent, but social studies/environment was widely disliked.

Group A	Weighted Ranking
Bangla	16
English	10
Social Studies/Environment	6
Math	4
Group B	
Bangla	13
Math	12
English	8
Stories	4
Social Studies/Environment	2

REASONS FOR LIKING OR DISLIKING COURSES

The features of the Bangla courses that former students mentioned again and again included ease of understanding and their appreciation of the stories (including humor), poems (including rhythm), rhymes, and pictures in the books. Others mentioned that Bangla is their mother tongue, that they had learned it first, that the teacher was very good, smiling, attentive, and best in this subject, that there were few questions and answers [to memorize], and that it is easy to write and to memorize.

In their comments about other courses, their inability to understand the material was almost the sole criterion for judgment. All comments about English and math related to the difficulties they had encountered. When asked to detail the difficulties, they had trouble articulating the reasons.

Why is math hard?

We do not have the brain (mind/skill).

I cannot do calculations.

Math is incomprehensible to me.

It is hard to do calculations.

I understand only a little.

Why is English difficult?

It is not easily comprehensible.

I cannot read easily.

it is difficult to read.

Words of English are hard to pronounce.

Though one student liked social studies best “because it deals with the immediate environment,” most strongly disliked it.

Why do you dislike social studies/environment?

The content is not good.

The content is so difficult.

The questions and answers are so big (to memorize or to understand).

The content and appearance of the book.

The appearance of the book.

Good to read.

“Why?” the team asked after they prepared this list of reasons. Answers were divided between the difficulty or unfamiliar presentation of the subject, or the unappealing book:

Questions are so big to memorize.

Spelling is tough.

Questions and answers are big and tough.

No pictures/poems/rhymes/story.

One student said that she liked the course because it was easy.

Program administrators in Dhaka were aware of problems and were in the process of introducing improved texts for math as well as for social studies/environment. The math books include work pages for students to practice at home or in class.

DREAMS AND EXPECTATIONS

Finally, to ascertain the influence of education on their lives, the team asked BRAC graduates to list their hopes, dreams, and frustrations. Most BRAC graduates aspired to studying at the high school or university level and getting a good job, especially a government job, or becoming an engineer or doctor and living in town or in Dhaka. Others hoped to go to the zoo with other children, visit a relative, or become a painter or an Englishman. For most the greatest frustrations were knowing that they cannot afford to study to the level they wish, expecting to fail their exams, and not being able to become what they hope to be.

The tendency to aspire to prestigious positions was increased among a small group of secondary school students the team spoke with in the village. The students wanted to become magistrates, doctors, nurses, government officers, musicians, and to live in Dhaka. Their frustrations focused on not being able to attain these goals. They referred to the poverty of the country and the fact that they will not be able to contribute to improving things because they will not be able to get the jobs they wish. A member of the team asked the students how prosperity could be achieved. Responses included unity among the villagers; good schools and even a college in the village; clubs at school and lots of books and literature to read; hospitals and offices in the village so the poor could get services; and infrastructure, including roads, communications, and electricity.

DISCUSSION

In general, the BRAC graduates were hesitant, perhaps due to a mixture of culturally appropriate respect, fear that they were being tested without knowing the subject matter or what the political constraints might be, and unfamiliarity and discomfort with being asked for opinions and analysis.

Where students understand the material, they like the subject; where they encounter difficulties, they dislike the courses. Hence, many students expressed a clear preference for their courses in Bangla. A significant cause of their difficulties arises from fact that they—and villagers, teachers, BRAC field staff, and most Bangladeshis—equate learning with rote memorization. Beyond the fundamentals of language and arithmetic, this approach stifles inquiry and impedes learning. The students also had difficulty formulating and expressing ideas of their own; it appeared that they have few opportunities for sharing their opinions.

TEACHERS

INTRODUCTION

In Jamalpur District, where BRAC has had programs for many years, the team observed classes, attended part of a teacher's day-long monthly refresher course, and met with the same group of teachers for three hours the following afternoon. The team also observed the introduction of new teaching materials at a meeting of all the area managers and team leaders who

would later introduce these to BRAC program officers, program assistants, resource teachers, and teachers. In Thakurgaon District, the team observed classes, briefly visited two teachers' meetings, and interviewed public school teachers in one village.



New teachers attending a monthly refresher course in Thakurgaon district.

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THE POSITION OF THE TEACHER

The teacher is the bottom link of a chain of command that expands exponentially from BRAC headquarters in Dhaka to thousands of villages. Under the zonal managers in Dhaka are regional managers (now quality managers), area managers, team-in-charges, and people who visit schools regularly: program officers, program assistants and resource teachers. This hierarchy—which parallels the organization of BRAC's Rural Development Program—enables those responsible for the program to ensure uniformity in the curriculum, introduce new textbooks or other materials, and promulgate new initiatives related to the conduct of classes. The hierarchical structure also facilitates crucial monitoring of many local activities in order to assure consistent quality of teaching throughout the country and fair distribution of materials. The size of the program and long-standing social pattern of using public positions for personal gain necessitate rigid discipline in

program administration to ensure attendance, punctuality, and the holding of regular committee meetings. But pedagogical advice and support are transmitted through the same hierarchy, and inevitably are interpreted as *rules to be obeyed*. Efforts to promote flexibility and more creative approaches to classroom learning may be communicated as orders. Time, support, and subtle reorientation of teachers, staff, and citizens is required to break away from the equating of memorization with learning in this hierarchical culture with its traditional patterns of leadership.

TEACHERS' MONTHLY REFRESHER COURSE

The team attended part of a regular teachers' monthly refresher training meeting near Jamalpur, the area where BRAC has long sponsored programs. Thirteen teachers were present as well as the team-in-charge. They performed a classroom rehearsal for the research team. Most sat in a "U" around three walls of the room, playing the role of students, while one stood at the front acting as the teacher. In a shrill voice she repeatedly called out the sound of a letter she had written on the board, each time echoed by the "students." Then she wrote a second letter and called that out several times. Then she called out the first letter followed by the second letter. Then she called out the two letters and made a short word with them. The students chorused after each utterance. Next, she randomly chose a few students to stand and repeat the two letters and the word. Then she made a short sentence with the word and had the class repeat it a few times in unison before she again asked some individuals to stand one after another either to repeat the sentence or make a new one. Occasionally she corrected a student and forced her to remain standing until she repeated the teacher's version correctly.

Though they were clearly proud of their performance, the exercise was tedious. The teachers had rehearsed the routine to perfection; there seemed to be no challenge left in it for them. All were teaching the second year of the three-year curriculum; for the majority this was their third cycle of school, so this was approximately their eighty-fifth monthly refresher meeting. A smaller number of teachers had attended more than fifty such rehearsals. Instead of repeating this routine endlessly, the teachers might have moved on to some new material. They might have practiced systematic discussion of problems they encounter in the classroom or community, and strategies they have used to deal with them. They might have studied elementary science together or practiced English using taped classes or written stories for each other. They could have been learning and developing discussion skills.

MEETING WITH TEACHERS

The team asked to meet with the teachers outside of the refresher meeting to learn about their reasons for becoming teachers; to document changes in the program in the past few years and learn how teachers viewed these; and to assess their satisfaction with the program and their hopes for its improvement.

REASONS FOR BECOMING A BRAC TEACHER

The team elicited from the women a list of the reasons for their becoming BRAC teachers. Team members said the result was a close copy of the list used for discussion among new teachers during their training and orientation programs, so the team initiated an exercise to prompt the teachers to reflect on their lives around the time they decided to join BRAC. The team drew a line on the floor to represent the time between 1971 and 1997, and asked the women to indicate major events in their lives along this line. Getting married, giving birth, completing the tenth class certificate, and starting to teach were typical major events in their lives. It was difficult for the teachers to grasp the linear representation of time, so the work took a long time. By the time a few women had taken a turn, each had made a list of events in her life and discussed the dates with her neighbors. The team returned to the list on the blackboard, and asked the teachers to think about their own lives by referring to their time lines and to add more reasons to the list of reasons for becoming teachers. Only one, financial need, was appended. Then the teachers were asked to vote for the most and next most important reasons for her own decision. To save time, teachers voted by a show of hands. Since they were unfamiliar with this procedure, the counting had to be repeated many times.

The research team had overestimated the general skill level of the teachers; they may not even have been able to read the (Bangla) writing on the blackboard. They appeared fearful of expressing opinions that diverged from expectations (which were not clear in this case). Their reticence might have reflected a “test mentality” in which there is only one right answer to every question. They may well have been reluctant to admit financial need in front of non-family members. They seemed worried about making a misstatement, as if they thought BRAC headquarters was checking on them; perhaps they had been asked not to reveal some things to the research team.

The results showed that the teachers gave priority to social concerns, followed by financial requirements, intellectual interest, and prestige.

Ranking of Reasons for Becoming a Teacher

Reason	Weighted Total
To disseminate learning to others	8
To earn money	5
I am educated but have no job	2
I want to practice my own education	2
To increase the literacy rate	2
To develop the community by teaching	2
To be independent	2
Scarcity/economic hardship	2
For respect (status)	1

CHANGES IN THE BRAC PROGRAM

Information about changes in the program over the past few years was difficult to elicit. It was necessary to go through each course in each year, discuss the book title, and ask if it had ever been changed or revised. All the teachers had difficulty remembering the names of the books they had used, and third cycle and second cycle teachers had to compare their recollections to determine whether changes occurred before or after 1993.

TEACHER SATISFACTION

The team next moved on to issues of satisfaction and hoped-for improvements, repeating the ranking exercise focusing on job satisfaction, but without struggling to make sure each woman voted only once for her top and second choices.

Ranking of Reasons for Job Satisfaction

Reason	Weighted Ranking
Gets respect from both parents and children	9
Opportunity to wear sari everyday	8
Teach children	8
Can sing or dance in school (not at home)	2
Opportunity to go outside (mobility)	2
Can buy own sari blouses (independence)	1
Husbands used to nag or complain	0

Respect had been low on their list of expectations, but was a highly valued reward. Dressing up every day and teaching themselves were most gratifying. Other fulfillments related to their sense of personal independence.



Second and third cycle teachers (in their fifth and eighth years of teaching) meet with the team-in-charge at the team office.

GROUP CONVERSATION

The team abandoned efforts to structure the remaining time around planned exercises since teachers remained reticent and distrustful. Instead, the team led a loosely structured “group conversation,” still primarily in question and answer format. The teachers projected enthusiasm about working, though they reported difficulties setting up parents’ committees because parents had not previously been recognized as

important for their children’s education. Some parents had worried that BRAC would use the meetings to try to convert them to Christianity. (Many NGOs in Bangladesh have church affiliations.) After the first few meetings, however, teachers said their doubts had abated. They also had difficulty establishing a pattern of regular attendance by children; some said that they still have to go door to door to collect children.

The team asked the teachers for recommendations for organizations interested in duplicating BRAC schools in another world region such as Africa. They mentioned that training is very important, that parents’ meetings are needed, and that logistical support is necessary. But they also said that information about teaching should be well disseminated before the search for teachers begins, suggesting that they had not felt well prepared for the realities of their jobs. Another alluded to the difficulties teachers encounter working with communities: she said that having experience is an important aid to help a teacher sort out the truth from falsehood. (Public figures are subject to pressure to side with one or another group in hotly contested public decisions in Bangladesh.)

After the question and answer period, a chaotic “conversation” ensued in which it seemed that at least three people were always speaking at once. It became obvious that the teachers had never learned to have a discussion of the sort recommended in their training manuals, in which people take turns presenting and rebutting ideas. Some of the topics included BRAC’s personnel policies, problems of competition for students between



Fathers of BRAC students sit in a circle at a monthly parents' committee meeting.

schools, religious and family opposition to women working, training programs, and related BRAC policies.

One teacher remarked on the pressure put on them to fulfill their responsibilities. She said, “You have to die before you fail to go to school; even if a family member dies you must be punctual or find a substitute.” After this complaint was uttered, other teachers silenced the speaker. Taking responsibility in a job is a new concept in Bangladesh; given the realities of flooding, the hot climate, and the difficulty of finding trusted help at home if someone is sick, it requires a special level of commitment and discipline. One teacher claimed that even in the main office there is no medical leave policy.

(The teachers apparently aspire to the leniency and security, to say nothing of the salary, of civil

service jobs like those of their more qualified counterparts in the public schools.)

The teachers mentioned that parents complain that there is no wheat distributed by BRAC schools, which causes them to transfer their students to primary schools. (This was a reference to a recently initiated USAID–Government of Bangladesh program.) They cited this transfer problem as a reason to make BRAC schools into full cycle primary schools. One teacher cited the attitude of conservative Muslims. In 1993 one parent had taken all of his children out of BRAC schools because of the singing and dancing, though later he reenrolled them.

The research team asked teachers if they had encountered religious opposition when they were deciding to become teachers. They referred primarily to family issues. One reported that her father-in-law had agreed to permit her to go for the fourteen day training session provided that she maintain purdah. Her mother-in-law had retorted, “Once she’s out of the house, she’ll never return.” Another told of a cotrainee being forcibly removed from a training center by her husband. He had been working away from home when she had

decided to accept the opportunity to become a teacher, and he was irate about her insubordination if not about the decision itself.

Conversation then turned to the training itself. With the exception of one teacher who had been trained in a mud hut rather than in one of the fancy new Training and Resources Centers (TARCs), they were enthusiastic. They mentioned “learning so much” and “being away from the pressure of household chores.” (For BRAC staff who attend a series of training programs, these help build long-lasting networks of friends within the organization, an important but frequently overlooked facet of NGO life in Bangladesh.)

Next the teachers debated BRAC policies concerning children at TARCs. They believed it was possible, though discouraged, to bring a child of less than one year to a training session. The mother would have to bring an attendant to watch the child and pay all costs. Some argued that a child would distract them from the work; others said that worrying about the child they left behind would make it impossible to learn.

Someone brought up the fact that one teacher brings her five-year-old with her to school; the other teachers were critical of this. The conversation then moved to maternity leave policy. While BRAC promotes a two-children-is-enough policy, it has recently augmented its maternity leave policy to enhance retention of female employees. To the old policy of paid leave for one week prior to and two months following delivery, it has added the option of nine months unpaid leave with a guarantee of retaining seniority upon returning to work.

NEW TEACHERS

In Thakurgaon District, the team met briefly with two groups of new teachers at their monthly refresher courses. The ethos of these groups contrasted markedly with that of the teachers in Jamalpur District. Their exuberance was infectious and they lacked any trepidation about sharing their feelings about their jobs with the team. They had no prior knowledge of the visit; thus the research team did not attempt to conduct exercises with them. Overall, it appeared that the vitality of the program in a new area is much greater than where the program has run for several years.

The new teachers dismissed the difference between the KK and NFPE curricula as insignificant. They mentioned that older children learn slowly at first because they have developed habits that do not include school discipline, but as soon as they improve these

habits they learn faster than the younger children. The issue of early marriage also arose. Would the teachers attempt to find another student if someone left school to get married? They indicated that they would try to convince the parents to delay the marriage, but did not seem confident of their ability to succeed in this new responsibility connected with their BRAC employment.

REGIONAL MEETING AND THE CHANDEENA LEARNING IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

The Chandeeena Learning Improvement Project, or CLIP, is a broad effort to introduce more effective, child-centered learning into BRAC schools. Named for the town where it is being developed, it is expected to help children learn faster and hence facilitate extension of the BRAC program through fifth grade in some schools starting in 1998. The team witnessed the introduction of some of the learning tools at a regional meeting in Jamalpur. All six area managers were present as well as almost all of the team-in-charges from throughout the region.

SOME CLIP TOOLS INTRODUCED

The regional manager passed out three of the new learning tools, mentioning that they were among the first innovations CLIP would introduce. First was a set of three circles of paper sewn together in the center with buttons on top and bottom. The largest circle had a series of pictures of animals, everyday objects and tools; the middle circle had letters of the alphabet; the smallest circle had words on it. The regional manager explained that the way to use the tool is to ask students to find first the letter with which the word for a given object started and then to locate the full word and to align all three by rotating the papers with respect to each other. No questions were raised when he asked if everyone understood. Hoping to catalyze discussion, a member of the team suggested that the circles could be used in a different way, e.g., by starting with the letter, thinking of things spelled with it, identifying one thing on the large circle and finally locating the complete word for that object. The regional manager translated the suggestion, but did not ask the others to suggest additional variations and went on to speak about the second tool.

The second tool consisted of a an index-sized card with four slits in it through which two long strips of paper were threaded. Large letters were written on the strips so that by holding the card with one hand and pulling one strip at a time with the other, two letters could be brought to the top of the card. The regional manager instructed everyone to form groups and instructed them to take turns pulling each strip until they had chosen

two letters which they would then write on their slates before passing the card to the next person. When it was clear what they were supposed to do, he said they were going to have a race. They would choose and write letters and pass the card continually until he called time. The group that passed the tool the largest number of times would be the winner. After a few minutes he called time and asked each group for a tally of the number of times an individual had written two letters. So, he concluded, this is how you use this tool, and asked if everyone had understood before moving on. Again, the possibility of alternatives was not raised.

The third tool was a coordinated set of flannel board, chart, and many small cards with either common objects such as animals or letters of the alphabet on them. He fumbled with the cards in a box before putting a letter on the board and saying its name loudly. All present repeated the letter. Then he put up a picture of an animal next to the letter and said its name. All repeated the name of the animal. He pointed to the letter as he said its name and then to the animal as he repeated its name. He hurriedly repeated the steps with another letter and another picture. He had to call for the trainees to pay attention a couple of times rather than discuss the first two tools that were still being passed around. Finally, he introduced a chart that had numerous squares on it. In each square there was a letter printed in the upper left corner, a picture in the center, and one or more words across the bottom. These corresponded with the pictures and letters that were used with the flannel board. He demonstrated how to use the cards and flannel board with reference to the chart in conjunction with the well-learned classroom routine. He suggested at least a couple strategies for linking the cards and the chart and made a few remarks about how to show the next level of staff (program officers, program assistants, and teachers) how to use these tools.

This demonstration was sufficient to introduce the tools to people familiar with established classroom patterns, but failed to address how they could help students learn, what changes in classroom organization might be needed, or the broader goals of the CLIP program. No substantive remarks or reactions were solicited from the trainees. No suggestions were offered for helping the teachers think creatively together when the trainees in the room later taught them how to use the tools. Though time constraints were significant in the pace of this session, a significant opportunity to think about learning and how to promote it, as opposed to preparing to disseminate a new set of regulations to be followed, was lost.

Many opportunities had been lost in this exercise: an opportunity to revise the approach to learning within the NFPE program and alter the authoritarian quality of relationships between supervisors, teachers, and students with reference to the content of education; an opportunity to distinguish the discipline required for keeping the program functioning from the creativity required to promote learning; and an opportunity to disseminate and practice discussion skills first among staff and later in classes. The structure of the presentation had worked against the central purpose of the CLIP program.

BRAC expects that CLIP will result in a thorough reconceptualization of learning. Where BRAC personnel have long advocated child-centered learning, staff admit that they do not really know what this means, a similar situation may exist concerning the aspirations for this program. Sound as these materials are for teaching reading by phonetics, if they are introduced in this authoritarian manner with no effort to allow thinking, discussion, and creative experimentation by those who are responsible for actually employing the methods to help children learn, it may have relatively limited effect.

PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS

In Village B the team interviewed two public school teachers. The secondary school teacher had many supportive things to say about BRAC as well as some observations about changes in both education and local society. The primary school teacher shared the highly negative appraisal of BRAC that is reportedly shared by many teachers. The secondary school teacher was very positive about education. He said its major benefit is that it permits people to speak with others, which he thinks is especially important for boys, presumably because men in Bangladesh conduct public affairs. He believes the quality of education is decreasing, because where two of the five boys from the village who went to school forty years ago had succeeded in getting good jobs (including himself and his uncle who is also a teacher), none of the many children who have graduated recently “show much promise,” measured in terms of obtaining employment. He disregards changing opportunity structures and economic circumstances in making this judgment. He also pointed out that there is no local control over government schools, explaining that the Union Council chairman has no power to supervise government workers in the area, because the state does not want to delegate authority to anyone. He implied that this loss of local control is significant in the deterioration in standards.

The primary school teacher is also a strong supporter of the BRAC education program, and repeatedly stated his wish that BRAC would set up a secondary school in the village.

(He had contributed half of the cost of building a BRAC primary school, in part to secure the teaching position for his wife.) He rejected an argument that is commonly raised against BRAC schools, which is that it is difficult to find places for BRAC graduates in the government school system. Instead, he said that the fourth and fifth classes are much smaller than first and second classes so there is room for BRAC graduates to join them. Somewhat incongruously, he also cautioned that, rather than pressuring the government to improve and expand their school, people increasingly rely on NGO schools. Since everyone pays taxes to the government, they have a legitimate claim on the state, he said, but while BRAC has money now, it may not in the future, so it is not a permanent solution. Together, his strong support of BRAC and his criticism of reliance on NGOs reflected both a dedication to improving and expanding education and an interest in future opportunity (and protection) for his family's position in relation to education.

With every utterance, the primary school teacher implied that government primary school teachers are furious about BRAC schools. He complained that "all the children in the BRAC school are government school students." "There are no dropouts among them," he added, because "BRAC has simply grabbed them." "They don't even use government books," he exclaimed, reiterating a common criticism. He nonetheless claimed to refuse to speak against the BRAC schools on grounds that his nephew's wife is the teacher.

The primary school teacher appears to feel that his position and influence have been undermined first by government directly and then by NGOs with government sanction. He mentioned that prior to 1972, when Sheikh Mujib ur Rahman nationalized primary schools, there had been much community control over schools. (By community he clearly meant the elite and teachers.) He explained that government workers in general now oppose passing responsibility off to NGOs, citing the fact that the doctors were furious when government began allowing NGOs to work in the health sector. Altogether he described a two-stage process of loss of status and power by teachers: first the government centralized authority over education; then NGOs intervened within communities. In 1993, he reported, government school teachers had demonstrated in Rajshahi, the biggest city in the northwest of Bangladesh, against the BRAC schools.²

DISCUSSION

BRAC promotes child-centered pedagogy, instructs teachers to employ discussion in classes, and has taken steps to broaden the idea of learning to include singing and performing simple traditional dances, but rote learning still dominates BRAC schools. To

address this problem, a clear distinction should be drawn between an approach to classroom teaching that promotes learning through creativity and problem solving on one hand, and the structural regulations about attendance, punctuality etc., without which the program could not function, on the other. Supervisory personnel must learn how to simultaneously encourage and guide teachers in matters of pedagogy, and insist upon adherence to basic structural rules. Both the teachers and their supervisors must be led to understand the methods and rewards of new modalities of learning and teaching.

Case studies (preferably conducted by teachers themselves) of situations related to schools, children's lives, or community dynamics, along with suggested discussion topics for which it is made clear that there are no simple or absolute answers could be introduced.³ These could be used in teachers' monthly refresher courses and in training sessions for supervisors. Techniques for leading discussions could be introduced at the same time as individuals learn to take turns expressing their views in a nonconfrontational, constructive manner. These techniques could be incorporated into the training of new teachers and other staff as well. Teachers and staff need to be encouraged and rewarded for taking risks in their own learning. They also need to feel comfortable with discussion as a process for discovering and building new ideas as well as with the notion that there might be more than one correct answer to, or mode for tackling, a question, before they can create an environment where children can also learn openly. This approach is markedly distinct from ordering people to be creative, which promotes cognitive and emotional dissonance and inhibits risk taking.

VILLAGE COMMITTEES

INTRODUCTION

BRAC requires community members, at least the parents of prospective students, to agree about their desire for a school and to help decide where it will be located, who the teacher will be, and when the classes will meet. Parents are required to attend monthly meetings in which issues related to the school and their children's performance are discussed. BRAC also requires that a smaller school committee be established to take more direct responsibility for the school and its activities.



A team-in-charge explains a participatory learning activity ranking exercise to a parents' committee.

How much of what types of participation by community members actually occurs? What effect does this participation have on the school and the community? How it is viewed by villagers? Is BRAC, in other words, by working as an NGO and sponsoring participatory programming, promoting new forms of civil society and fostering social capital? To obtain answers to these questions, the team held group discussions with the smaller school committee and led PLA exercises with the larger group of parents in each village. While many of the committee members' remarks are summarized above in the discussion of popular attitudes, others pertaining to the role of committees are presented here.

In working with village committees the research team sought two types of information: parents' views about the school program in general, and their feelings about participating in committees and their effect of the committees on the community.

PARENTS' COMMITTEES: PLA EXERCISES

In each of the three communities, the team met with the parents' committee and asked members to reflect and vote on two questions. The first was what improvements they would like to see in the BRAC school program. The second was what consequences (or benefits) they feel have arisen from it. To gauge community priorities and preferences the team asked committee members to vote on the issues they raised using pie charts, a basic PLA tool. The team also requested a map of the community, including a rough census of children attending and not attending school.

VILLAGE MAPPING

It was always a well-educated young man who did the drawing, advised by a few men of similar age. After one or two false starts, they determined the proper scale and mapped the village by scratching on the ground. When they said they had completed the task, the team asked that they list the boys and girls in each home and indicate how many of each were in school. In one village the women, who knew much more about the numbers of children in each household, watched but did not offer information, stating that the task was men's work. The young men did not ask the women, though they stood a only few feet away. They men reported a disproportionately large ratio of boys to girls. In another village, sex ratios of school aged children were appropriate when older men and women were not observing the work of the young men.

Village A is on a dike, stretched out in a long line on raised land between the fields with a mosque at the end farthest from the road. The map showed 47 structures, not the 170 households mentioned early in conversation. It also reported a disproportionate ratio of sixty-four boys to thirty-nine girls. Apparently, the young men either did not know about many of the young women, or they were respectfully omitting those of marriageable age.

Village B has three sections stretched end to end. The first has 45 households, the second 45, and third only 15, for a total of 105. In the first section, 115 children were enumerated with 82 of school age, including 42 girls and 40 boys. Thirty-three are in the BRAC school; only twelve were not enrolled in any school at all. Villagers had stated that 30 percent of children are not enrolled in school.

Village C is divided into one major and several smaller clusters. There were twenty-four households (most including more than one nuclear family), with a total of eighty girls and eighty-three boys, including very young as well as school-age children. Twelve boys

and seventeen girls were studying in the BRAC school. Seventeen boys and twelve girls were studying in primary and secondary government schools. Some others, including older girls, were studying at the village madrassah.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE PROGRAM

In each community parents listed improvements they would like to see in the schools. After reading the list aloud and asking for additional items, the team drew a large circle on the ground and divided it into sections, one for each item on the list. Objects were used to label each suggestion, e.g., a water bottle was a tube well and shoes were a better road. Each parent on the committee took turns placing two seeds in the segment corresponding to the suggestion he or she considered most important, and one seed in the segment for the second most important item. The team urged committee members to choose on the basis of what they thought rather than the urgings of onlookers.

Village A	
Item	Weighted Ranking
Uniforms (clothing)	30
Tube Well	26
Additional Teacher	24
Better road	24
Extend to SSC (tenth class)	13
Latrine	7
Electric Fan*	2
* Electricity was soon to be extended to the village.	
Village B	
Item	Weighted Ranking
Free high school	46
School Dress	17
Tube Well	5
Sanitation	2
Wheat subsidy*	0
*distributed in some public schools	
Village C	
Item	Weighted Ranking
Clothing	20
Rural Development Programs (loans)	17
Food for all children	15
School Bell	8

Voting in village C, where there was no Rural Development Program and the school was new, produced the least politicized results. Given the dispersal of homes, a school bell seemed an eminently reasonable suggestion. The results in village B, where domination by a few appears to have politicized social life, reflected pressure from one or two activists. In village A, some fathers tried to influence others to vote for uniforms (or simply clothing), but many of the women appeared to vote independently.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE NFPE PROGRAM

For eliciting and ranking the parents' views about the consequences (or benefits) of having the BRAC school in the village, the team followed the same procedure. Voting was less instrumental because the topic was inherently not conducive to the interpretation that the team was planning to donate items to the community.

Village A	
Item	Weighted Ranking
Children Enrolled and attend school	30
Children from poor families can attend school	19
Number of literate persons increased	9
Children can prepare oral rehydration fluid	8
Children more punctual	5
Children well-mannered	2
Children More serious about studies	2
Children try to be more clean	2
Children's language/vocabulary improved	1
No costs to parents for child to attend school	1
Children clean the house	0
Village B	
Item	Weighted Ranking
Increased literacy rate	42
Teach own children*	19
Income	15
Teach other children	10
Women's status*	9
Plantation	7
Read signs, etc.*	3
Financial support of parents	0
* women's recommendations	

Village C	
Item	Weighted Ranking
Respect	28
Dowry lower	11
Motivation to educate	8
Able to get jobs	3
Literacy rate improved	1
Solve problems/less quarreling	0

In village C, it was obvious that the opportunity to attend school has a profound effect on the perceived status of many families within this community. In village B women brought out the importance of their status after marriage and their desire to assist their children with school work. The list of benefits accrued in village A, where there has been a school for five years and a Rural Development Program for longer, seemed to echo typical BRAC themes.



A BRAC library. BRAC supplies 1,000 volumes, bookcases, furniture, and a librarian's salary to groups that can raise capital and provide a building for at least 15 years.

ATTITUDES ABOUT PARTICIPATION, AND THE ROLE OF COMMITTEE MEMBERS

There was universal enthusiasm about participating in the parent and school committees. People were proud to be involved in the effort to initiate and maintain schools in their villages. Some stated that they were “volunteering for the community and for the children”; this idea might well have originated with BRAC. All

reported that their main responsibilities were checking on student and teacher attendance and punctuality, and also on the quality of teaching. Some said they are supposed to ask the children what they learned each day; one mentioned that they are supposed to ask if the children were beaten and, if so, for what. If children are not in school on time, committee members are supposed to hurry them; if, however, a child is sick, they take interest in his or her rapid recovery and resumption of classes.

MONTHLY MEETINGS

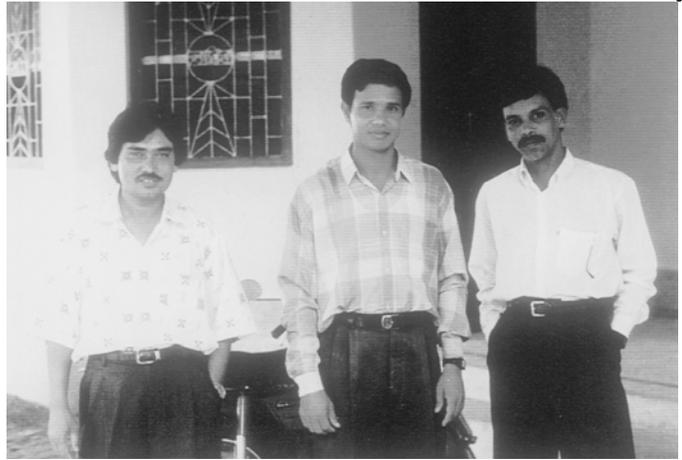
The monthly meetings cover the importance of regular attendance, the students' progress, ways of helping them with homework and personal hygiene, and any problems that have arisen. For example, at their next meeting in village B, parents were to review a recent incident in which a rock was thrown at the school one night; apparently since the carpenter who built it was sleeping inside, no further trouble occurred. The singing and dancing that are part of the BRAC curriculum are commonly discussed when the program is new, and some village members are upset about them. The program assistant asks for feedback on whether they think a teacher is good or not, and if they believe she has any problems that could benefit from outside assistance. These meetings may also cover such topics as the proper treatment of women in society, delayed marriage and childbearing, sanitation, safe food preparation, child nutrition, and oral rehydration therapy.

THE INFLUENCE OF LOCAL POLITICS

Village politics inevitably affect BRAC schools. For example, in the teacher selection process, BRAC policy states that the community recommends one of a few candidates to be the teacher and BRAC makes the final selection after reviewing their proposal. The reality is often less clear cut. In one case, for example, the man who was constructing the school requested extra funds from various community members. Finally, one man offered to donate the needed money on condition that his wife could become the teacher. This story was shared without any hint that the narrator knew this might contradict BRAC policy. In another village, it had taken over a year to obtain all the necessary agreements among residents to open the school. Officially, this was because there was no acceptable candidate to become teacher, but some said that there were other women who were qualified. A few locations for the school—belonging to relatively poor families—had been rejected, and a site in the center of the village, owned by one of the richest families, was selected. The woman chosen to become teacher was also a member of this family. (A well educated woman from a nearby city, she had not been living in the village a year earlier. It appeared that she may have been enticed to join her husband in the village as a consequence of her father-in-law's arrangement of this job for her.) Kaniz Fatema, director of the NFPE program, is aware that situations like this arise when schools are being opened. She advises field staff to avoid approving schools where all the income will accrue to one influential family. Nevertheless, the local staff are under pressure to open and manage significant numbers of new and ongoing schools. They must make complex

judgments about whom to deal with, how to negotiate with those who are actively pushing to found a school, and how much to allow those individuals to be influenced by community power brokers.

Membership on the parent committee requires having a child selected to attend the BRAC school. This, of course, is also an area for negotiation within a community. For example, the daughter of the wealthiest man in village B was attending the BRAC school. This was probably a compromise to blunt his opposition to the program.



A BRAC area manager and two staff members in Thakurgaon district.

School committee membership includes two mothers and two fathers, the teacher, and two influential villagers, ideally with special interest in education. Again, public decisions are not made in a void; they reflect a mixture of existing interests. In village B the most influential member of the village was named head of the school committee, a position that muted his opposition to the program, as well as opposition from others of his class, all of whom were said to desire to keep the poor uneducated. In village A, avowed criteria for membership in the school committee included both proximity to and distance from the school. Some said that those far away could check on the attendance of students whose homes were at some distance from the school, so it was an advantage to be from disparate sections of the village. Others stressed the importance of living near the school to be able to attend meetings easily. Since those living near the school were also relatives of the leader of the BRAC village organization, who had pushed hard to establish the school, the team suspected that physical distance was being used as a proxy for kinship distance and hence loyalty to the BRAC community leader. The school committee had reportedly been elected recently for a five-year term. This group would therefore have considerable influence over the selection of the cohort of students for the next three-year session of the school.

VILLAGERS' VIEWS OF COMMITTEES

The team asked committee members what they would recommend to organizations wishing to establish schools like the BRAC model in other countries. Committee member always strongly affirmed the importance of the committee structure along with locating the school in the village and choosing a teacher from among local women.

The team also asked whether committee members thought that, after their own experience, they could form other committees to address other village needs. Their responses were consistent: they all enthusiastically asserted their ability and willingness to form other committees in the future. The limitations on their ability to do this were revealed after some probing. A woman explained that once before they had attempted to form a committee, but there had been no unity among the people, they had not listened to one another, and the effort failed. “Without a strong leader who can support them, someone to make the rules, a strong administrator, an educated outsider to set the boundaries, people are not comfortable and are unable to work together,” she said.

DISCUSSION: BRAC AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

This expressed requirement for external authority to forge unity within a village raises questions about the nature and extent of participation and related social change in BRAC community programming. Though BRAC has organized and supported community-based committees for several years, it appears that the empowerment of most individuals within these organizations has been fairly superficial. Given the highly contentious nature of community politics, perhaps the experience of sustained group membership by many of the poor, previously disenfranchised members of society—a highly laudable accomplishment at minimum—is enough. But might BRAC be doing more in this regard?

Hierarchical, authoritarian relationships appear to be absorbed into or replicated within the BRAC structure to a greater degree than many recognize. This was especially evident in Thakurgaon District, where compromise with political structures seemed necessary to initiate the school program. In Jamalpur District, though somewhat disguised by regional differences and the length of time the BRAC program had been in the area, power was still structured monopolistically. Here a distinct BRAC organization was well established and led by a domineering woman who boasted about her descent from important community members.

Is civil society, defined as networks of association based on trust and reinforced through norms of behavior,⁴ truly being fostered by the world's largest NGO? BRAC is undoubtedly legitimizing access to education for girls and the poor, creating some employment opportunities for women, promoting better treatment of women in society, and institutionalizing such norms as community and parental responsibility for education and general accountability and punctuality. Furthermore, BRAC is creating many local associations and a nationwide network of individuals who share experience working in BRAC and who are committed to the articulated values and goals of the organization. But there has been relatively little change in the quality of relationships being created as a result of BRAC's work in rural Bangladesh; instead asymmetrical, patron–client patterns are being recreated among wider social groups. People are not learning the conflict management skills that will help them successfully initiate and oversee group activities for their shared benefit in the future. Rather, they appear to be simply depending on an outside patron, BRAC, to substitute for a locally powerful figure.

In addition to the formation of new social groups, the sustainability of BRAC initiatives could be enhanced by efforts to promote greater internalization of new norms and establishment of more open communication within the social groups. Only in the highly participatory gender awareness program that BRAC developed for staff (in response to difficulties women were having within the organization), is BRAC encouraging new forms of interpersonal communication. Individuals are encouraged to risk sharing their views on gender roles so they can work through difficulties based on enhanced mutual understanding. People are being urged to transgress traditional limitations on expression and establish new, more open, trust-based modalities of addressing shared concerns.

Where BRAC programs are new and conservative social ideas are overtly contended, establishing the schools (or village organizations and the related economic development programs) is clearly the first priority. But where BRAC has long been established, there is room for promoting local initiative and supporting communities to follow through with their own activities. Parent and school committees might be given permission to make certain improvements in the school building, such as purchasing a bell, building a latrine, or arranging access to safe water, provided all families are assured equal opportunity to benefit. BRAC staff (possibly specialists in participatory methodologies) could assist by facilitating open discussion, equitable decision making, accountable action, and practice with new forms of local leadership including dispute management.

CONCLUSION



Hot sun and high humidity characterize Bangladesh shortly before the monsoon season. Two months before this photo was taken, hand-pumped tube wells ran dry.

SUMMARY

The research team found, not surprisingly, that political pressures within communities require field staff to make some compromises with publicized BRAC regulations about enrollments, selection of a site for the school, choice of the teacher, and committee memberships. They nonetheless do succeed in opening new schools and creating opportunities for large numbers of

poor students, especially girls, to begin their education. This may be, in the end, BRAC's most important achievement.

BRAC'S INTENDED AND UNINTENDED EFFECTS

The strict discipline and rigid lines of authority found throughout BRAC and the NFPE program—indeed throughout Bangladeshi society—can be discomfiting to western sensibilities. This characteristic of BRAC's program functions as a two-edged sword. On the positive side, BRAC has succeeded in setting basic standards for its schools, including the number, age, and sex of students; the size, shape, and decorations of classrooms; the teacher and students arriving and leaving at the right time; and the holding of regular meetings of the parent and school committees. BRAC has also made it the responsibility of teachers, parents, school committee members, and program assistants and officers to keep track of one another in adhering to these fundamental requirements. Without assurance that these standards are met, the program would not have succeeded in Bangladesh, where few people understand the importance of sending their children to school regularly. Yet BRAC appears to carry the discipline beyond the structure of the

program to the content of the curriculum, which may stifle creativity, freedom to experiment, and openness to learning through inquiry.

TEACHERS

Teachers are at first excited to have the opportunity to work. When they first start, however, they may be hassled by those who perceive that they are breaking moral barriers by working outside their homes. Many have difficulty organizing parents' committees, though these work well after some time. Some also have difficulty making sure all children attend regularly. They enjoy the teaching, the respect they eventually earn, and their sense of independence. After one or two three-year contracts, however, they begin worrying about prospects for continuing employment.

STUDENTS

Students find much of the course work difficult other than Bangla, in part because the BRAC methodology equates learning with memorization. Moreover, for the children, much of the material is completely new. While they use Bangla in daily life, they and their mostly illiterate parents have never encountered math, social science/environment, or English prior to its introduction in the class. Furthermore, schools traditionally have the reputation of being extremely difficult and unpleasant—and physical punishment is regarded by many as necessary—so few perceive a problem when children, particularly those from lower ranking families, do poorly. BRAC may have made significant strides by banning the bamboo cane and introducing the idea that happy children learn far better

than fearful ones, but until children are helped to feel that they can master new subjects, their openness to learning will not be complete.



Mothers of BRAC students, a BRAC team-in-charge, children, and curious onlookers watch a participatory learning activity conducted by members of the research team.

PARENTS

Parents are pleased with the fact that BRAC schools are in the village where they can supervise their children, pleased with the discipline of the schools, and impressed with the attention their chil-

dren pay to cleanliness and hygiene and the improvement in their language use and behavior. Parents are proud of their participation in school committees and their newly recognized role in supporting children's education. They identify positively with their roles as committee members, but thus far work only with close supervision and motivation from local BRAC staff. Their ability to sustain the school or initiate new activities without supervision from external authority is very limited. This suggests that even in this highly successful program, BRAC as an NGO is not as successful in promoting the evolution of social capital within the communities in which it works, at least in initial stages of promoting the expansion of primary education.

THE CURRICULUM

Though BRAC claims to employ child-centered learning, this is as yet little employed. To address this problem, BRAC is developing and disseminating CLIP, which aims to improve learning by increasing the amount of small group work in classrooms and introducing phonetics and a series of tools to facilitate teaching them. However, unless new methods for introducing these to field staff and teachers are developed and implemented, confusion between the authority of staff for program monitoring and their responsibility for pedagogical support will continue to undermine the effective implementation of this program.

TEACHER TRAINING ISSUES

Blame should not be thrown upon the teachers for BRAC's pedagogical shortcomings. Teachers' backgrounds are limited. Their training is short and rigid. Supervision focuses exclusively on conformity to rules. Teachers may have heard that child-centered learning is good, but they have never been exposed to anything other than the say and repeat mode of rote teaching. They have introduced "opening talk" in which students are encouraged to stand and practice speaking to the rest of the group, and various small group activities. Yet teachers have not even learned how to hold discussions with one another—so how can they be expected to employ it as a pedagogical method or teach it to others?

For new, partially-trained teachers, the rigidly prescribed classroom style is undoubtedly very helpful initially: they are given clear instructions on how to proceed from the beginning, and support in adjusting to their role in the classroom and the community. But for those who have been in the program for some years, the method and its supporting structure are stale. Some teachers appear no longer to be growing with the job, but

instead are beginning to struggle against its limitations. This struggle may lead to a new era in BRAC's development, as exemplified by its current efforts to introduce more effective, child-centered learning into its schools.

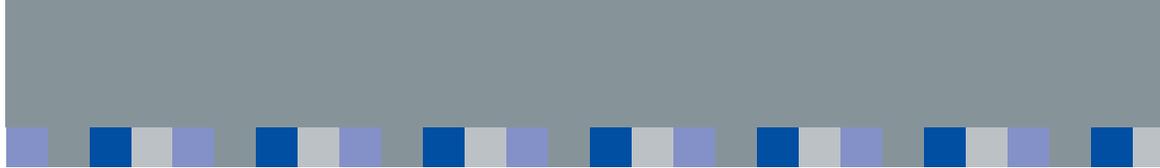
NOTES

¹For details see Martha Alter Chen, *A Quiet Revolution*.

² In describing the difficulties of this period, BRAC refers to opposition by conservative Muslims and the burning of as many as fifty schools in different parts of the country. Opponents sometimes allege that BRAC itself set fire to some buildings in order to rouse active support.

³ Case studies are similarly employed in the Gender Awareness Program.

⁴ James Coleman's definition of social capital: networks of association characterized by trust and reinforced by norms of behavior, quoted in Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, p. 167.



For further information, please contact

ABEL Clearinghouse for Basic Education
Academy for Educational Development
1825 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20009-1202

Tel: 202-884-8288

F: 202-884-8100