

Chapter 8

DEVELOPMENT AND THE UNIFORM SCHOOL



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Anne Ryan

Anne Ryan is a lecturer at the Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth since 1991. Before joining the department she worked in Australia for seven years, China for one year and Zambia for three years. She continues to engage in consultancy work in Africa and in Asia.

Introduction

Development is, in the Foucauldian sense, a particular discourse which does not reflect but actually constructs reality. In doing so, it closes off alternative ways of thinking and so constitutes a form of power (Kiely 1999: 31).

What do schools and McDonalds have in common? Both are powerful symbols of modernity... Each has a global profile... You will recognise them no matter where in the world you find them because they each follow a set format... Both are defined more by this formulaic sameness than by their geographic location... Should we be reassured by this sameness or alarmed? This chapter has nothing to say about hamburgers but raises serious concerns about the tendency to reproduce the same school design irrespective of the prevailing local conditions.

This chapter case studies the educational initiative of a large indigenous NGO in Bangladesh (BRAC¹) that breaks the mould by making the school fit the children rather than the children fit the school. The initiative is noteworthy in its own right but perhaps of most significance here is the lukewarm response it has generated among those whose business is development. The chapter argues that in line with the quotation above, the dominant discourse on education within the development arena is such that initiatives of this nature are not welcome because they do not fit the constructed reality embedded in an unquestioning allegiance to conventional schooling. By neglecting to harness the fundamental principles that inform this initiative the western donors and the government of Bangladesh are exercising their power to effectively silence an alternative way of approaching primary education. In global terms every silencing makes the McDonalds/school analogy more real.

¹ Bangladesh Rural Advancement Co-operative

The current reality worldwide

Formal education in the developing world is in crisis. Despite improvements there is ample evidence that the current level and quality of provision continues to exclude the least advantaged of the world's population either by denying them access to schooling or by offering them a wholly inadequate service. Although much is understood about the blatant and subtle ways educational systems exclude sectors of the population, the goal of primary education for all, set in 1990², continues to remain far from realised in either quantitative or qualitative terms. It is estimated that worldwide at least 130 million children of school-going age, two thirds of whom are girls, have never gone to school and an additional 150 million children who start primary school, drop out before they finish. Given that the link between educational qualifications and economic and social well-being is well established (Youngman, 2000) the failure to provide basic educational opportunities to these children has serious implications for the quality of their lives.

To date the response of development agencies and governments has focused almost exclusively on the cultural and economic barriers that mitigate against boys and girls attendance at school. In so doing the children and the circumstances in which they find themselves are defined as the main problem to be overcome. Fundamental shortcomings within the system that result in its failure to serve the needs of so many children, are largely ignored. There is an implicit assumption that the system is inherently appropriate for all. Furthermore this response implies that conventional schooling practices have the potential to combat inequality thus belying the overwhelming evidence that the dominant development model in education is grossly ineffective. The scale of investment in 'alternative models' signifies little or only grudging support for initiatives that have proven their capacity to tackle inequality.

The current reality in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh out of a population of 125 million, 56 million live below the national poverty line and of these 38 million live on less than a \$1 per day³ (UNDP, 2000: 170-227). A recent report puts literacy levels in Bangladesh at 41%, with pockets of significantly lower levels such as 19% in urban slums and 10% among the 45 ethnic minority groups (CAMPE, 2003). These daunting statistics are compounded by estimates of the number of children, varying from 6 million to just below 13 million (GoB, 2002: 25), who remain outside the formal system either because they never enter school or because they drop out.

² The 1990 UN *Education For All* summit declared education to be a fundamental human right and set a target of basic primary education for all by 2000.

³ Many local commentators deem these statistics to be overly conservative.

These statistics clearly indicate that there are substantial inadequacies in the current provision and that there is an urgent need for primary education that can reach those sectors of the population most likely to be illiterate and outside the school system.

All of the discourses on development accept that circumstances such as these that pertain in Bangladesh call for an integrated and multi-faceted response that incorporates:

- Shared responsibility between developed and developing countries;
- Developing country ownership, participation and civil society engagement;
- Coherence: aid must be linked to economic, financial and other measures in favour of the developing countries;
- Donor coordination;
- Political will and credibility (The Reality of Aid, 1998: 3).

Many of the features described above are evident in the BRAC approach. As an indigenous agency BRAC is a totally Bangladeshi initiative. Apart from its education programme BRAC provides a range of community development and health programmes all of which target poor girls and women and are concerned with strengthening the economic, social and political position of women in society through poverty reduction and social empowerment. BRAC's programmes are supported by a group of donors who coordinate their inputs through a donor liaison office⁴. The one feature from the above list that is in question is the political will on the part of donors and government to build on and emulate the BRAC approach, particularly its work in the field of education.

The BRAC Education Programme (BEP)

Since its inception in 1985 BRAC's Education Programme (BEP) has grown rapidly. It now has a network of 34,000 primary schools in rural and urban areas.

"BRAC's education programme has attracted attention because of its capacity to reach relatively large numbers of children (in excess of two million have benefited), maintain an even standard of provision across the country in a variety of settings, and perhaps most significantly it is noted for its capacity to enrol and retain a high proportion of girls" (Ryan and Taylor, 1999: 17).

⁴ In 1993 the present donor consortium was formed. The members are the Aga Khan Foundation, CIDA (Canada), DFID (Britain), the European Commission, the Royal Netherlands Embassy (RNE), NOVIB, and UNICEF.

The programme acknowledges the direct relationship between economic and power inequalities in society and the differing capacity of sectors of the population to attend school and attain qualifications. In particular it is concerned with how these constraints impact on women and girls. Within the BEP the emphasis is on meeting the academic and personal development needs of girls while accommodating the cultural, religious, economic and social realities of their lives. For instance in acknowledgement of the constraints that impede girls' mobility, the school is brought to the girls. Before the school is opened there is an intense period of community consultation. During that time a relationship is established with the parents. Their commitment is seen as a key factor to ensure the school is firmly embedded in the locality. There are no purpose built schools. A room is rented close to where the girls live. The class of approximately thirty children stays together with the same teacher for four years. By dispensing with fixed and costly infrastructure the school can move to a new location at the end of a cycle. As is the case for poor children across the developing world, BRAC school goers have to work in the home, in the fields, in factories or as petty traders. To accommodate their busy out-of-school schedule, the BEP school day and holidays are agreed between parents and teacher.

Teachers are recruited locally and given a two week pre-service training course. For the rest of their teaching career they attend one day a month in-service training. Dispensing with lengthy pre-service teacher training makes it possible to recruit large numbers of women teachers who might otherwise not be able to spend one or two years away from home in a teacher training college. Recruiting women is important in a setting where most of the children are girls. The continuous and regular in-service teacher training has many advantages. It makes it possible to implement improvements quickly without extensive lead-in preparation periods, it provides opportunities to reinforce desired classroom approaches, and creates a forum whereby the teachers can develop collegial professional relationships. An unanticipated impact of the programme has been the positive impacts on the lives of the teachers. As teachers these women are afforded a high status in the community and as wage earners they command greater respect within their homes. Many of these women are now going on to gain formal academic qualifications through open learning courses. Although the women who become teachers have all completed at least grade 9 and are therefore rarely from the poorest echelons of society their work and their studies provide powerful role models for women and girls in communities where women are not usually prominent in the public sphere.

A key feature of the BEP is the emphasis on establishing a respectful relationship⁵ between teacher and child and between teacher and parent. These relationships are seen to be of paramount importance to build the child's self-confidence, and to enable the emergence of a sense of mutual ownership, responsibility and accountability on the part of the teacher, children and parents. This in turn leads to high retention rates within the school⁶ and a capacity on the part of the school to respond to changing circumstances within a specific family or within the community. For instance in times of emergency due to flood or food scarcity the resources of the school, however meagre, have been redeployed to meet the basic need of survival. Because the school is firmly embedded in the community it is also protected from those who might oppose this degree of participation in the public sphere on the part of the school girls and women teachers.

The education provided has clear economic and social purposes. Girls who are literate and numerate have opportunities for employment. As wage earners they contribute to the family income and are less likely to be married off at a very young age. When they do marry, their status within their in-laws' household is greatly enhanced by their potential earning capacity. Girls who attend BEP schools also have opportunities to progress to secondary school and/or participate in other BRAC community development programmes. It could be argued that these benefits apply to those who attend formal primary school also. The major difference is that the BEP school specifically targets girls from poor families who would otherwise not go to school at all and who are the most vulnerable to abuse and early marriage.

Initiatives such as the BEP that target the most marginalised sectors of society are often in turn marginalised by being perceived as providing a service that is inferior. Their success in reaching those whom the conventional systems fail to serve is interpreted as possible only because they lower standards. Whether the learners are children or adults, this is a response encountered by educators who work with disadvantaged groups worldwide. Mainstream providers display a marked reluctance to accept that the problem of educational exclusion is a function of the system and not a reflection on the capacity of these individuals to learn. Combating this perception forces the providers of inclusive educational opportunities such as the BEP to expend energy proving that their initiatives are of equal worth to mainstream services. Whatever the perception of the mainstream education providers, the potential users of the BEP have strongly endorsed the programme. This is evidenced in the fact that the level of demand is such that rigorous selection procedures have to be enforced to ensure that priority is given to the most disadvantaged. It would appear that rather than being perceived as inferior, this initiative is seen by parents as a more attractive and cost effective option than formal primary school.

⁵ As part of this respectful relationship corporal punishment is not used in the BEP schools.

⁶ Over 90% of the children who enrol in BRAC schools stay for the full cycle.

Responses to the BEP

To date, donors worldwide have indicated a strong preference for a conventional western model of schooling. The overwhelming bulk of donor investment in education is in support of traditional primary schools. This is also the case in Bangladesh. National governments, in heavily aid-dependent countries such as Bangladesh, are unlikely to opt for new ways of providing basic education unless such a shift is initiated and supported by donor agencies.

The dominant discourses on primary education focus on ways to shore up formal educational systems that may be barely operational particularly in the most disadvantaged communities in developing countries. The preferred solution appears to be to persist with conventional delivery systems while decrying bureaucratic ineptitude, corruption and poor infrastructure as the reasons for their near collapse. High levels of drop out are attributed to a lack of motivation on the part of parents and the poor quality of the education available. Poor quality is in turn attributed to overcrowding and the poor performance of teachers. Teacher incompetence is blamed on inadequate training, lack of support, unavailability of resources and lack of incentive. The latter is mainly due to teaching salaries not being paid regularly if at all, which takes us back to bureaucratic ineptitude. All of these problems are evident in Bangladesh. Interventions to break this vicious circle have generated elaborate national education plans across the developing countries and resulted in some positive outcomes but they have made little impact on the lives of the poorest especially those living in remote rural areas or urban slums.

By contrast the BEP has demonstrated a capacity to maintain even standards across its 34,000 schools, to supervise classroom interaction, offer continuous and regular in-service training, deliver supplies on time to even the most remote schools, recruit and retain women teachers and achieve relatively high levels of literacy and numeracy. These accomplishments are all the more astonishing considering the BEP's target population. Many of the girls come from families with little if any experience of education and with a strong preference for investing any resources they might have in boys schooling. Despite its many achievements the BEP is primarily valued as a temporary gap-filling solution to be used until 'real primary schools' can be provided endorsing the global trend to favour traditional primary schooling. Invariably the conventional model of schooling is used as both a standard against which the BEP is measured and as a lens through which it is understood. The ways in which it differs from universally accepted educational approaches is generally construed as deviation from a universal schooling 'norm'.

Although there is talk of the need for co-operation between the formal and non formal provision there is little evidence to suggest that the BEP or its like is perceived as a viable and innovative complementary format or that its proven record in promoting relatively high quality, cost effective, community-based schooling for a notoriously hard to reach sector of the world's population, namely poor girls, is recognised or valued within Bangladesh. This is ironic given that BRAC has engaged in South-South cooperation for a number of years providing advice and training to countries such as Sierra Leone, Sudan, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, and most recently, Afghanistan – all of whom want to adapt the BRAC model to their respective contexts.

To date, the Government of Bangladesh has tended to view the role of all the NGOs including BRAC as “sub-contractors” rather than “partners” (Kassam et al, 2003: 59). The National Plan of Action expresses the intention to “develop a system of ensuring involvement, participation, coordination and sharing of responsibility between the government, NGOs and others in planning, managing and funding of NFE (non-formal education) programmes” (GoB, 2002: 116). However, the government has not taken any decisive action to achieve this goal.

Both donors and government use language that indicates a desire to merge the formal and non-formal “systems” into a “unified” system (Kassam et al, 2003: 59). However, merging the two systems generally implies subsuming the BEP within a monolithic conventional model. Kassam et al (2003) point out that what would be more useful is to develop a partnership between NGO providers and government so that the formal and non-formal approaches could together provide a cohesive sector-wide response operating within a set of common standards covering the provision of primary education, while preserving a diversity of service providers and delivery modes.

Part of the difficulty in promoting this kind of approach appears to be the use of the term non formal to describe the BEP initiative. Kassam et al (2003) argued that this terminology, introduced in the mid 1970's in order to describe the wide range of more flexible educational activities undertaken outside the government's education system, has in the intervening thirty years become misleading. Non formal was never intended to imply difference in terms of quality. However, there now appears to be a widespread assumption that non-formal is synonymous with:

- informal;
- ad-hoc;

- unorganised;
- unstructured;
- inferior or second class (Kassam et al, 2003: 60).

Such words obscure the facts that BRAC schools follow a curriculum that is in keeping with that of the government primary schools, uses text books that reflect the basic competencies set by government, has trained teachers, a timetable, attendance registers, monitoring and supervision, parents' meetings, and school management committees. It is ironical to note that many of these features are lacking in the formal primary education system. The differences between the BRAC system and the formal system hinges on the inherent flexibility and responsiveness of the BRAC schools and the direct involvement of parents in the management of the schools. Consultants' reports have constantly referred to these differences as the key to the success of the BEP initiative. Kassam et al (2003) argued that the term non formal should be dropped so that decision-makers in government and among the donor agencies can more readily recognise and value these schools for what they are – providers of primary education. It may also be appropriate to erase the term from the education lexicon globally so that other initiatives similar to the BEP can also be afforded due consideration as valid responses to otherwise intractable problems of exclusion.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that what is essential to the BEP is not simply the form the BRAC school takes but the integrated responsiveness to problems of exclusion that these schools embody. Every detail of what has to happen to make the school function and be relevant has been carefully articulated so that the model can be replicated with the minimum of re-invention while retaining the flexibility needed to respond to local conditions. The apparently hierarchical nature of the agency and the formulaic patterns evident in the teacher training and classroom instruction conceal the intrinsic creativity that gives the BEP a capacity for constant renewal in response to a continually changing economic and political environment.

The tendency for donors to favour measuring quantifiable and tangible outputs when assessing development projects means that scant, if any, knowledge of the processes of innovation and experimentation ever surfaces. In the case of the BEP the emphasis on outputs places an onus on BRAC to catalogue its achievements and to justify them as

'objectively rational' within a conventional schooling ethos. This effectively silences the aspirations, concerns or grounded knowledge of BRAC staff. They are rarely called on to facilitate a meaningful understanding of the operational dynamic that would allow for an appreciation of the essential components that make the BEP successful and that protect it from the widespread inertia so visible in other educational endeavours in Bangladesh. Knowledge of this nature would be beneficial to educational providers and the target communities across Bangladesh and elsewhere.

The lack of cohesion between donors, BRAC and the government is openly acknowledged by all three. Nevertheless disunity among these stakeholders continues to be seen as an unfortunate circumstance that must be endured, smoothed over or overcome rather than as a core feature and a possible site for innovation. Kassam et al (2003) urged the donors to play a nudging and dialoguing role with the government to facilitate a government/NGO partnership. For the donors to reposition themselves as brokers of a collaborative and respectful relationship between BRAC and the government calls for a reassessment on their part of what is important. It is undoubtedly difficult for donors to re-focus their priorities or to move away from quantitative measurement. Donors are constrained by the need to comply with the reporting requirements of their home government who in turn are responsive to their electoral constituencies. In these circumstances it is not easy to give voice to the local Bangladeshi constituencies being served by BRAC. While conflicts of interest of this nature go to the heart of debates on the ethical shortcomings of development, external political constraints appear to be less significant in this instance than the marginal status afforded alternative approaches to schooling within the consciousness of the development community.

NGOs such as BRAC provide a glimpse of what is possible when alternative ways of thinking emerge. The lacklustre response to the BEP also provides a sharp reminder of how difficult it is for ideas that are outside mainstream thinking to gain acceptance. The inflexible ubiquitous school model that dominates the global educational landscape has failed to serve 130 million children worldwide. Unless alternative models are encouraged there is little hope that these children will be able to avail of their right to education.

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