Inclusive education at a BRAC school – perspectives from the children

Tahiya Mahbub

Tahiya Mahbub is a lecturer in English studies at North South University located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In this article, she presents some of the data on which her MPhil thesis, completed at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, was based. This research was carried out in Bangladesh, focusing on a primary school run by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) BRAC. Tahiya Mahbub adopted a case study approach in order to investigate this single-teacher, single-room school in Tongi, a suburb of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. The work she reports here explores children's understandings about the culture, policy and practice at their school. Tahiya Mahbub argues that this sort of inquiry is necessary to the development of inclusion. She advocates equality and togetherness not only for children in school, but also between children and adults in educational research and eventually in the bigger picture of society itself. Finally, she proposes, it is essential to listen to children's experiences of school, their suggestions for change and their ideas in order to lift children's low social status in Bangladesh.

Key words: **inclusion, pupil participation, primary schools, case study.**

Introduction

Leaders across the world have acknowledged the importance of education, especially basic education. Education is not only a person's right, but also a catalyst for human development and growth (Sen, 2003). Inclusive education, a philosophy which advocates ensuring that all children have access to appropriate, relevant, affordable and effective education within their community (Booth & Ainscow, 1998), has become a driving force in the education movement. Inclusive education is considered to be a process through which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of Education for All (EFA) can be achieved (Peters, 2003; Vislie, 2003). In countries across the globe, from the UK to Bangladesh, inclusion has become a topic of great interest to governments and policy-makers. In this article, I discuss a small selection of the evidence gathered from a small-scale research study that explored issues related to inclusive education in a Bangladeshi context. Focusing on a non-formal primary school operated by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), which is a non-governmental organisation (NGO), this study investigated children's understanding of the culture, policy and practice at their school, which is underpinned by an inclusive philosophy. Culture, policy and practice, the three important dimensions of a school, were identified from the *Index for Inclusion: developing learning and participation in schools*, or Index (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan & Shaw, 2000). I firmly re-assert Messiou's (2002) argument that, in order to make progress in the field of inclusion, which is closely related to children's well-being, we must ask the children about their school experiences.

Contextual issues

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is still among the 35 countries with an Education for All Development Index (EDI) value below 0.8 (UNESCO, 2005). Hence, in Bangladesh, achieving provision of quality education has still some distance to go. In this context, Bangladeshi literature has begun to address inclusion as a way forward in achieving the country's educational goals. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Ahuja and Ibrahim (2006), inclusive education is a novel idea in Bangladesh, the progress towards which is currently at a nascent stage. Underdeveloped government policies, mainstream society's attitudes towards the marginalised and a general lack of quality education are major barriers to the proper implementation of inclusion in Bangladesh (Ahuja & Ibrahim, 2006). As a result, NGOs like BRAC have stepped in to create educational opportunities for excluded children.

As the largest NGO in the world, BRAC operates over 32,000 primary and 20,168 pre-primary schools which provide education to over 1.5 million Bangladeshi children (BRAC, 2006). These one-roomed, single-teacher schools, sometimes referred to as 'schoolhouses', are rooms of approximately 336 square feet with bamboo or mud walls and a tin roof (Islam, 2000). Inside there are no benches or chairs and the children sit on the floor, which is covered with burlap. The schools are usually located within a one-kilometre radius of the students' homes and operate for four hours each day. Each BRAC schoolhouse holds within it approximately 30 students plus one teacher. The teachers cover the five-year primary school curriculum within four years (Donaldson, 2005). The children start together and finish together, spending all four years with the same teacher in the same schoolhouse. Although, traditionally, girls were given priority for enrolment at BRAC schools, in 2003 an Inclusive Education Unit (IEU) was established in BRAC's Education Programme (BEP). Since then, wider ranges of 'hard-to-reach children' are being targeted. As a result, from 2003 to the present, 57,645 ethnic children have been attending BRAC

schools, while 28,144 children with special needs are currently enrolled at BRAC schools (Dewan, personal communication, 10 October 2007; Bonowary, personal communication, 10 October 2007). BRAC addresses inclusive education in a relatively wide framework, defining it as:

> '. . . an approach which addresses the needs of all learners in ordinary classroom situations, including learners with special needs, indigenous children, children with disabilities, girl children and poor children.'
>
> (Charanji, 2005, p. 2)

Due to its innovative efforts, BRAC's schools are regarded as committed to inclusion (Ahuja, 2000). However, it is essential to explore the experiences and perceptions of students attending these schools.

Direction of research

Taking into account the aforementioned topics and maintaining the notion that inclusive education is a rather complex issue, which is constantly 'on the move' (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), the following research question was explored in this study:

> *How do children in one BRAC primary school understand and experience the culture, policy and practice of their school, which is underpinned by an inclusive philosophy?*
>
> (p. 3)

In this study, as in the Index, 'culture' refers to building an accepting and collaborative community. Similarly, policies were about inclusiveness permeating all school plans. Practice was seen as a reflection of inclusive cultures and policies – or the tangible actions taking place within a school (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

These key principles, developed in the Index, have been affirmed as applicable in countries across the world, including southern nations. As Booth and Black-Hawkins (2005) explain:

> 'The development of the Index had been influenced, from the start, by a collaborative research project: "Developing sustainable inclusion policy and practice: India, South Africa, Brazil and England." This has come to be called "The Four Nations Project" in which a shared approach to inclusion has been developed which is applicable both to countries of the South and the North.'
>
> (p. 1)

Aspects of the Index could therefore be suitably adapted, contextualised and incorporated into a study conducted in the Bangladeshi context.

Methodology

This study was carried out over four weeks at a primary school located in Tongi, a suburb of Dhaka. The case school was chosen for its diverse student population from a random selection of nine BRAC schools. The student population at the Tongi School was mixed on several counts, including age range, gender, ability and student origin. Ages in the school ranged from eight to 15 years. There were 14 male and 19 female students, of whom three had disabilities. Furthermore, the majority of the children were from immigrant families who had migrated to Tongi from vastly different regions of Bangladesh, such as Sylhet in the north-east and Barisal in the south.

Due to the paucity of time and guided by the research question, which sought to delve into 'one school', this single school at Tongi served as the 'case' in this study. One important criticism of focusing on 'one school' or a single case is the 'poor basis for generalising' (Yin, 2003). However, as argued by Patton (2002) and later Yin (2003), the single case can be understood as an idiosyncratic manifestation of the phenomenon, where the interest is in analytical generalisations, not statistical ones. To best serve this purpose with such a diverse group of children, a multi-method case study approach was adopted, including the following methods of data collection:

- observations;
- special techniques;
- questionnaire;
- focus groups.

To conduct the observations, I entered the school as a participant-as-observer, spending the first few days interacting with the pupils through discussions and games. During observations 'a rather descriptive approach [was adopted] with the aim of developing a portrait and providing a narrative account of the events' (Singal, 2004, p. 113). Here, Spradley's (1980) nine dimensions of social situations were extremely useful. In addition, to understand the children's thoughts better and to develop a rapport with them, I decided to use two creative and child-friendly techniques. The first activity, adopted from Messiou (2002) and named 'message in a bottle', required the children to list topics they liked or disliked at school, which were then 'sealed and sent to another planet' (Messiou, 2002). When the 'message in a bottle' technique was adapted for this study, the only change made was that the messages were not described as being sent to 'another planet' but 'sent away' from BRAC teachers and officials. The second activity, inspired by a Swedish Save the Children project on child work in Bangladesh (Woodhead, 2001), required the children to draw what they liked or disliked at school and then discuss those with me. As suggested by Greig and Taylor (1999), drawings and activities can transform research into something meaningful for children and reveal their inner minds.

However, after building a relationship with the children, it became essential to gather information on issues directly pertinent to the research question. In this context, a questionnaire was considered suitable because 'respondents [would] provide answers [to fit] into a range of options offered by the researcher [me]' (Denscombe, 2003). The questionnaire, which was developed from the Index, directly

Figure 1: Questionnaire statements

QUESTIONNAIRE: WHAT I THINK ABOUT MY SCHOOL

My name is (optional):

My age is:

I am a girl / I am a boy

My religion is:

The name of my village is:

	I agree	I agree to some extent	I disagree
1. When I first came to this school, I felt warmly welcomed and helped.			
2. When I first came, there was information available for me and my parents about how the school works, the schedules and the timings.			
11. I have to walk a long distance to come to school.			
12. Any student who lives near the school can come here.			
19. When I have homework, I usually understand what I am supposed to do.			
20. I take ownership and responsibility for my own work.			

asked the children to reflect on issues pertaining to my research question, such as their peer relations, classroom organisation and teacher expectations. In Figure 1, examples of the questionnaire statements have been included.

Thirty of the 33 students present in the school on 12 April 2006 completed this questionnaire. Statement numbers 1 and 2 belong to the culture dimension, while 11 and 12 belong to policy and 19 and 20 belong to practice. The questionnaire contained a total of 22 questions: nine for culture, five for policy and eight for practice.

After being translated and piloted, the questionnaire was administered in a group setting at the school with facilitation from the teacher. Since this was a qualitative case study, it was imperative to gain in-depth information on the issues raised in the questionnaire; hence focus group sessions followed, addressing the questionnaire topics in greater depth. Hennessy and Heary (2005) explain that focus groups have several advantages over other methods, especially when working with children. Focus groups acknowledge the participants as experts because in this context the role of the adult is to facilitate the discussion rather than to lead it. In addition, they create safe peer environments and replicate small-group settings. For this inquiry, I held two focus groups with five children in each group. The children were purposively sampled, based on my previous observations in the school. Diversity of age, ability, origin and classroom role were vital in the focus group sampling procedure.

While conducting research using these methods, it was essential to consider issues of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was maintained in this study mainly by cross-checking data and by conducting member checks. For example, in the focus groups, I asked the children to elaborate on the themes already addressed in the questionnaire. They were also requested to explain their feelings towards their classmates, which was something I could not 'observe'. I was also aware that sometimes the resulting data may have become skewed due to the children's assumption that I was directly related to BRAC, because they are not used to being asked for opinions and analysis (Sweetser, 1999), or because they had misinterpreted certain questions. Hence, to put the children's comments into sharper perspective, questions were re-asked and then crosschecked through informal conversations with teachers, parents and BRAC officials.

In this study, I also grappled with several ethical issues. The nature of a single-case study does not allow anonymity of the school and I did not want any harm to be caused to the children because of their views. The identities of the children have therefore been masked using pseudonyms. To address power relations, which inevitably exist between an adult researcher and a child participant, I spent time visiting some of the pupils' homes, had informal conversations with them outside of school and always explained that there were no right or wrong answers to my questions.

Data analysis and findings

In analysing the physical data that resulted from this study, both deductive and inductive processes were used

(Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993). Yin (2003) suggests that one major analytical strategy for case studies is to rely on theoretical propositions. He goes on to explain that the theoretical proposition is that which initially led to the case study, which is reflected in the research questions and has shaped the plan for data collection. In this case study, the theoretical propositions underpinning the Index guided my work from the formation of the research question to the data analysis. Using deductive coding, the data were divided into dimensions taken from the Index.

However, keeping in mind that this was a qualitative study, where my goal was to 'get inside the social situation', inductive analysis was also used (Cohen & Manion, 1994). In addition to the deductive analysis which was a central requirement of using the Index as a framework, sub-categories for each dimension were derived from the data collected in the field. These sub-categories were closely related to the sections and indicators in the Index, but had particular relevance for the data collected in this study. There were three sub-categories for each category.

Creating inclusive cultures

Culture is the shared philosophy that underpins the existing processes of any school. As defined by Booth and Ainscow (2002), creating an inclusive culture entails establishing a 'secure, accepting, collaborating and stimulating community'. It is about having shared values, clear goals and instructional leadership (Stoll, 1991, in Rouse & Florian, 1996). Culture entails ensuring the highest possible achievement for pupils; it guides decisions about policies and practice in the school, and translates developments towards inclusion as a continuous process (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

In order to understand children's perspectives on culture, it was important to enquire about their belongingness at school; for example, did they feel respected and valued as occupants of a role? Were there high expectations for all of them? In response to such questions and working concurrently with the Index framework and the data, three themes emerged: belongingness, respect and expectations.

Belongingness

Osterman (2000) explains that belongingness has to do with being accepted, included or welcomed into a community. The stronger the sense of belonging, the more young people feel cared for, supported and secure in the school environment (Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan, 1996). The findings of this study suggested that most children at the Tongi School felt welcomed and secure at school. Eight of the ten focus group members reported feeling wanted. One child commented:

> *'When I first came to this school, everyone came. They* [the other children] *played with me and did not fight with me. Apa* [older sister; can be used to refer to teacher] *taught me. They want me here because if I don't come to school even one day,* Apa *worries. Everyone wants me here and I will come every day.'*
>
> (Shamaila, 10)

During the focus group discussions, children interpreted 'feeling wanted' in relation to others' approaches and behaviours. This idea, namely that children feel a sense of belonging or can conceptualise joining in as part of a group, depending on other children's perceived attitudes towards them, has been affirmed in the literature (Jones, 2005). For example, one child with a disability reported feeling wanted because: *'The first day I came, I sat with everyone . . . nobody said anything bad to me'* (Meetali, 15).

Frequently pitied and bullied through name-calling, Meetali felt valued when her peers did not comment negatively on her disability. Although the majority of the responses were positive, some children did express disagreement. One child with a disability reported being teased on the first day at school when a peer said: *'. . . look she is weird.'* Furthermore, even after being in the school for three years, one of the younger female children, aged 12, reported being hit, taunted and told: *'You cannot even study.'*

Respect

A sense of respect shared by peers, pupils and teachers, as well as that existing between parents and teachers, is pertinent for building an inclusive culture (Booth et al., 2000). Respect entails admiration and acknowledgement of others' feelings and interests (Hill, 2000); therefore, respect is at the core of the philosophy of inclusion, which advocates that 'all children can learn' and that 'diversity must be embraced' (Stubbs, 2002). Only after differences are respected can attitudinal barriers be overcome.

At the Tongi School, most children felt that their teacher respected them. During the focus group, one child said:

> *'If I learn a poem, then I come to school and tell* Apa *that I have learnt a poem and I want to teach my peers, then* Apa *tells me that also write the poem in my diary and then* Apa *can also learn the poem. I feel happy.'*
>
> (Shamaila, 10)

Problems of respect, however, existed between the children, especially between the designated team leaders and children who are the 'non-leaders'. At the Tongi School, the student population is divided into five teams, each with a female team leader, chosen by the teacher and field officer during orientation. These five children are deemed academically 'stronger' and 'brighter' and they remain team leaders throughout the four years of primary school. As the permanent leaders, some of these children were observed as bossy and irritating towards their peers. This was further confirmed in a child's comment:

> *'The team leaders speak more in school and they try to control us when we are naughty. But nobody listens to the team leaders in the small groups; the other students*

slap them or hit them with the ruler. If the team leader gives a job, the other students hit the team leader.'

(Rongon, 12)

This shows that there were feelings of resentment between team leaders and other members of the school. Perhaps the leaders being labelled as 'brighter' or 'smarter' displeased the other children.

Expectations

Inclusive education is about believing that all children can learn at their own individual pace. By enrolling children of different ages, from different backgrounds and of different abilities, BRAC is showing commitment to this philosophy; therefore the majority of the children at the Tongi School, regardless of their differences, aspire to learn. In the 'message in a bottle' activity, when the children were asked to list three things they liked at school, 35 entries were made on reading, writing and studying, while another five entries were about coming to and being at school. Similarly, in the drawing activities, 18 children drew objects that help them learn better, including the blackboard, books, the colourful wall charts, the stools and even the schoolhouse.

When the children were asked if the teacher held equal expectations of them, they reported positively: 29 out of 30 agreed with both statements: 'In my school I am encouraged to try my best' and 'The teacher treats us all the same in the lessons and offers us the same amount of help.' When asked to clarify their responses, the children said that when they ask questions, the teacher addresses those specific questions.

As pointed out by Imam and Khan (1998), Bangladeshi children are socialised in such a way that they do not question or dispute principles presented in a textbook or by a higher authority. This impression was reinforced during my observations of lessons, which were mostly teacher-driven. Children were not expected to initiate discussion or debate and they refrained from asking questions during the lessons. When I discussed alternatives to this practice, the class teacher stated that this happened mostly due to a shortage of time in relation to the requirements of the syllabus.

Producing inclusive policies

Policy is often understood as 'a plan or course of action . . . intended to influence and determine decisions, actions and other matters' (World Bank, 2006). According to Booth and Ainscow (2002), this dimension therefore 'makes sure that inclusion permeates all school plans'. Having inclusive policies means ensuring that staff and students have opportunities to participate from the moment they join the school, that the school is accessible and physically conducive to learning and that bullying (or teasing) is minimised (Stoll, 1991, in Rouse & Florian, 1996; Booth & Ainscow, 2002). In coding the data, three themes were identified in relation to policy: settlement, accessibility and teasing.

Settlement

Settlement, or how the new members are oriented at a school, is an important aspect of inclusive policy (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). It prepares members to understand and become part of the ongoing process of inclusion. At BRAC schools, all new students undergo an extensive orientation session.

During the focus groups, all students relived their experiences of the initial month-long student orientation, during which ice-breakers, extra-curricular activities and behavioural lessons were emphasised. One student said: *'When I first came to this school, I did feel welcomed – they played with me'* (KumKum, 10).

'When we first came to school, one day, Meeraz made a doll and then I learnt that from seeing it and then I can learn it myself and then Meeraz also helped me and taught me. I like Meeraz.'

(Shubho, 10)

It is interesting to mention, herein, that most children remembered their acclimatisation in the school in relation to their newfound peer relationships. They mostly mentioned how their friends helped them settle in, with only one of the students stating: *'. . . when I first came to this school, Apa taught me how to sew a book together.'* Although 28 out of 30 pupils agreed with the questionnaire statement 'When I first came to this school, there was information available for me and my parents', when asked to elaborate on this, the majority of the children overlooked the 'information part' and went straight into discussing what their peers had done to help them settle in. As mentioned above and as noted by Jones (2005), children often interpret assimilation in relation to the actions of their peers.

Accessibility

The children extensively addressed issues around their school's accessibility. As previously mentioned, BRAC schools are located within a one-kilometre radius of most of the students' homes, which was also true of the Tongi School. However, there were some children who lived far away, as shown in responses to the questionnaire where 14 out of 30 children agreed with the statement, 'I have to walk a long distance to come to school.' Most of the children in the focus group, when asked, 'How long does it take?', stated that it was a 20-minute walk. Although there were some disagreements in arriving at this estimate of time, what is important to note is that, according to one of the students, Shubho, the 20-minute walk from his home to the school equated to a great distance. In his mind, school was far away and it was an effort for him to go there every day. Furthermore, the child with a severe physical disability, who lives five minutes away from the school, perceived it as: '*being far away*'. She said that until BRAC had provided her with a wheelchair, it had been very difficult for her family members to carry her to school. Children's perception of time varied according to their understanding of what was most convenient for them but, nevertheless, this does reflect the discrepancy of understanding between an adult's mind and a child's mind (Messiou, 2002).

School timing was also a much-debated topic. The Tongi School usually operated from 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm. However, during my research, the class teacher was on leave and classes were being held by a substitute from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm. Although Haiplik (2002) had reported that BRAC set school hours with the aim of being convenient for the children, this was apparently not the case at this school. When the children were questioned about timing, the majority said they did not prefer the afternoon because it is '*hot*', or they '*felt sleepy*'. They prefer the morning, when '*they are fresh*' and the weather is '*cooler*'. One of the older male pupils, however, said that he does not mind the afternoon, because: *'Apa can come from college and then teach us'* (Shummit, 13).

This statement does not correlate with the BRAC philosophy of convenience for children (Islam, 2000). It seemed that at the Tongi School, at least at the time of my research, school hours depended on the convenience of the teachers, not the students.

Teasing

As pointed out by Crozier and Dimmock (1999), name-calling and the assignment of unkind nicknames are prevalent and hurtful features of school life. At the Tongi School, observations and discussions with the children proved that teasing was a part of their school experience.

During the focus groups, seven to ten children reported incidents of teasing. When some of these children were asked what those were, they reported words like '*weird*', '*donkey*' and '*show-off*'. Throughout my observations, I also noticed that pupils frequently laughed at a child with a speech disability when the child tried to speak. According to the children, the main reason for teasing was related to someone's inability to grasp study topics and materials. In reaction to being called names, students responded with feelings of sadness or anger. They used phrases like: '*I feel terrible*', '*I feel like crying*' or '*I will get back at you*'. However, in order to resolve these hurtful issues, the children always felt comfortable in turning to their teacher. In their responses to the questionnaire, all 30 children agreed with the statement, 'I can always turn to my teacher if I am called unkind names.'

Evolving inclusive practices

According to Booth and Ainscow (2002), practice is about the actual teaching–learning methods followed in the classroom and the extent to which lessons are made responsive to student diversity. BRAC schools are known to have implemented learner-centred teaching methods and flexibility in the curriculum (Stubbs, 2002). To consider the values established under the policy of BRAC schools, children's experiences of day-to-day practices were explored. To investigate this, children were asked about opportunities for participation, peer help and discussion. Themes such as lesson responsiveness, peer help and resource mobilisation emerged.

Lesson responsiveness

According to Fullan (1991), schools often find it difficult to cope with change, particularly when it requires modification of classroom practice. BRAC schools, however, are well known for their unique classroom practices, especially in comparison to formal schools in Bangladesh. Muito (2005) explains that restructuring traditional seating arrangements inside the classroom so that the teacher is not the centre of power is an effective way of creating more child-friendly classrooms. Therefore, as mentioned in BRAC literature, in BRAC schools, children sit in an inverted 'U' shaped formation, boy-girl-boy-girl, with a weaker pupil placed next to a stronger pupil. In order to break down 'authority' in the school, everyone sits together on the floor, sometimes including the teacher.

In addition to seating arrangements, lesson designs addressing issues of peer collaboration, creative thinking and classroom discussions are vital for school practice. Although most of the children claimed that they learnt much at school and were able to participate, it was interesting to note that they equated learning to 'memorisation'. For them, memorisation seemed to be the process of learning. One child commented:

> *'If I cannot understand something, then Apa tells me to learn it over and over again . . . I must memorise the page I am on before moving onto the next.'*
>
> (Shamaila, 10)

Another comment was:

> *'Apa gives me an extra two hours to memorise the materials and then present those to her.'*
>
> (Shelu, 8)

As mentioned in the literature, during BRAC training sessions, the teachers are taught that comprehension is key, not memorisation (Haiplik, 2002). However, as mentioned by Donaldson (2005), who visited several BRAC schools, including the Tongi School, the actual process of instruction is still very teacher-centred. As he reports and I can verify, during the lessons the teacher reads and instructs directly from the guide and the students give choral responses. The problem lies in the belief that memorisation is the process of learning because the teachers, such as those at the Tongi School, have themselves 'learnt' through rote memorisation; thus they seldom expect more from their pupils. In later conversations, however, I discovered that the teacher felt dissatisfied with her current teaching methods and planned to discuss some alternative strategies at future training sessions.

Peer help

Osterman (2000) argues that when students experience acceptance and undergo supportive interaction, they are more likely to be helpful to others. In their responses to the questionnaire, 29 to 30 children reported knowing that they have support from their peers and teacher(s) and during the focus group discussions, the team leaders mentioned feeling responsible for helping their peers. One said:

'My peers help me. KumKum helps me with maths. She draws it for me on the slate, she says "this is a triangle and it has three sides."'

(Jyoita, 10)

Another child said:

'I am the team leader – which I am very responsible about. When Apa teaches us a lot of stuff and my friends cannot learn those, I can re-teach them.'

(KumKum, 10)

Since the children enjoyed working with their peers, most of the focus group members claimed a preference for working in small groups. As one put it:

'If we sit in the big group and we are learning English and from one side the class is saying A, B, C, but I cannot follow along from the other side and I say D, it's not very good. It is better if we sit in small groups, it's much easier, we can stop and ask for help from our team leader. Our team leader we can follow closely.'

(Shubho, 10)

Other reasons for preferring small groups included the absence of distracting '*mini conversations*' and '*whispering*'. However, at the same time, one young female pupil said she disliked small groups due to 'peer pressure':

'In the small groups when I don't say anything, everyone says "Why don't you say anything?" or "Why don't you know?"; "You cannot do it, but we can." Everyone tells me to study and so I don't like it.'

(Shelu, 8)

While personality factors may play an important role in children's preferences for smaller or larger groups, it is interesting that most of the respondents in this study seemed to be concerned about their fellow pupils' progress in the school.

Resource mobilisation

According to Stubbs (2002), lack of funds and materials is a major impediment to the implementation of inclusive education. Booth and Ainscow (2002) also highlight the fact that in order to maintain inclusion, resource distribution in the classroom must be equal and fair. All three authors advocate using local resources by drawing upon materials and expertise from the community. In terms of resource mobilisation, BRAC has done exceptional work and one of the most striking features of BRAC schools is the use of local resources. Many of the 'likes' identified in the 'message in a bottle' activity were resource-related. The children appreciated the blackboard, being able to display their work and having the opportunity to decorate their school with gathered materials. They all appreciated having their own educational materials, which are distributed to them equally at the beginning of every school year. Nevertheless, at the time of my research, there was one pupil in the classroom who reported not having any books because they had been given to another student. This, according to the pupil, was causing major barriers to learning because lessons could not be followed.

Conclusion

As the findings have suggested, school is a personalised experience for each child, regardless of ability or disability, age or gender. Many of the common themes that emerged include positive aspects of the children's experience at the Tongi School, such as feelings of belongingness, good use of local resources and high aspirations for learning. However, some of the gaps identified include several children's need for more personalised attention and greater respect between peers. Children of varying abilities, ages and backgrounds have made an entry into the school (which is a big step), but there is still a huge amount of work required on the part of BRAC and the school teacher to engage students more effectively and create a safer peer environment. Although it would be naive to claim that BRAC can tailor the Tongi School to satisfy the needs of every child, these common themes bring to the forefront issues to which BRAC may become more sensitive. Furthermore, after this study, BRAC may consider increasing the involvement of child participants in BEP research, so that practices within BRAC schools can clearly reflect the direct needs of pupils.

Bangladesh still has far to go in the implementation and practice of inclusive education due to its lack of 'a holistic [approach] and principled commitment towards [the child]' (Ahuja & Ibrahim, 2006, p. 13). A direct implication of work such as this is that it emphasises the need to deviate from this prevailing norm and encourages the involvement of children in the policy-making process. The Government of Bangladesh should invest resources in breaking down the barriers to inclusion and consider conducting consultation on how to involve children in the processes of educational research. Furthermore, future research projects in Bangladesh could focus on the issues of children's experiences of inclusive education in transition, exploring how meanings of inclusion change for pupils from primary through secondary school. Studies could also involve other key players in this field, such as teachers, parents, social workers and educational researchers. In order to take just this particular work even further, a study could compare the views of children versus those of teachers on culture, policy and practice at a number of BRAC schools.

Inclusive education is simply about children having a fair chance to attend school, learn and make progress in their lives. Research is a vehicle for governments and policy-makers to understand this idea and implement it so that schools openly welcome children, regardless of their differences. On this note, I would like to quote Jyoita, aged ten, who, very simply and without understanding its importance, said to me one day: *'Ami chai shobai shikhte pare'*, which means, 'I want that everyone can learn.' Now it is up to leaders and policy-makers to enable what this child and many like her wish for – a fair chance at education.

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Address for correspondence:
Tahiya Mahbub
House 37, Road 9, Sector 4
Uttara Model Town
Dhaka-1230
Bangladesh
Email: t.mahbub.05@cantab.net

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