

FOCUS

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY

Understanding Quality Education

by Shamse and Mahmood Hasan

In the past few years there has been thematic shift in the education slogan; it is no longer Universal Primary Education, or Compulsory Primary Education, or Education for All but quality Basic Education for All. This shift in favour of quality probably has its roots in the activities of Gano Sahajja Sangstha (GSS), an NGO, which started its primary education programme in the mid-eighties. It succeeded in adapting the best of child centred active learning pedagogy. This article helps understand what quality education is about.

Area of Uncertainty: The primary education scene is characterised by a mainstream vernacular based system carried over from the colonial days, a mushroom growth of the religious system of education in the past two decades (from pre-primary to higher education levels), and a rapidly emerging array of English medium and pre-cadet 5-year primary schools in the metropolitan cities; and most recently the non-formal primary education programme (NFPE) pioneered by the NGOs designed to provide a safety net for the 8-14 year old drop-out and non-school going children in the rural areas.

At the primary level, the number game is hazardous. The controversy is between those who claim that Bangladesh already has one school in every village and therefore does not need any more schools, and those who believe that thousands of villages are still without a school and therefore the government, in line with its election commitment, must arrange to have these schools built. The fact that there are some 30,000 non-formal education (NFPE) centres each with a life of three years run (in one rented room at the village level) primarily by NGOs, or that there are some 17,000 Ebtedaiy Madrasa which claim to follow mainstream NCTB curriculum along with religious education — does not make the arithmetic of whether there are or aren't enough schools in Bangladesh any easier. While it is accepted that total number of children in the primary age group (6-10) may have stabilised if not decreased in the recent years, until we have more information from those who claim that Bangladesh has enough schools, on whether their information is based on 1:30 or 1:60 teacher/learner ratio, it would be premature to make any definitive claim on the issue.

Government policy on the future of NGO schools remains unclear. Two NGOs, GSS and Swarnirvar actually build and run proper schools. GSS has been adapting the best of child centred active learning pedagogy in the past nine years and now runs over 450 schools (three-room: steel/brick and some bamboo) and are building another 300 hundred (brick and steel) this year following government guideline on distribution of schools. Until the government has decided on the future of these schools or for that matter on the status of the NFPE centres, donors will continue to raise questions on the sustainability of NGO schools.

Clearly, the government has much to decide especially on basic education and the earlier it does the more time it will have not only to monitor but to see for itself the impact of its decisions.

The recent national workshop on Universal Primary Education which focused on four key areas: (a) vision, goals and strategies; (b) quality;

(c) management; and (d) financing of UPE will no doubt help the government's decision making.

One could be a little arrogant and suggest that it could be due to a lack of conceptual understanding of literacy and learning and how learning takes place; or the lack of understanding of quality education, its indicators and the ability to measure quality, and/or the ability to translate quality indicators into result yielding programmes. Clearly, there is an element of truth in the last suggestion.

What is Quality Education?

Learning is instinct. The scope of what is possible in terms of making learning attractive is not clearly grasped and therefore not adequately explored especially in this part of the world. The problem started when literacy was taken literally and was thought to be synonymous with learning.

Quality education involves the creation of an environment which allows exploration of

that literacy is a phase in the process of human learning and was not an end in itself, was not clearly appreciated and therefore was not put into practice. Therefore, the focus was on acquisition of literacy (putting together some of the alphabets) and not on acquisition of learning skills. The pedagogy, therefore remained static and was never really transformed into a child centred active learning environment which allowed the child as well as the teacher to learn from one another as active members of the classroom. When people are put into an environment of continued activities, they not only learn from one person (the teacher) but also from one another; and not only what they hear (as in the lecture

gession).

Or, it could be because of the inability or the lack of opportunity on the part of those who had the conceptual understanding to influence the decision making processes, or the lack of interest and commitment on the part of those with the necessary understanding to put in the time and the effort towards influencing the decision making processes;

Or, it is because of the failure of the supervisory and the support structure which failed to ensure that — (a) the designed skills were in fact acquired by the trainee teachers at the end of the long training period; (b) that the teachers were able to use those skills in implementing a result yielding pedagogy; (c) that regular assessment of both the learner and the teacher was carried out; and (d) that systematic monitoring of progress was undertaken to ensure that weaknesses were corrected and that the objectives of Universal Primary Education and almost a decade later, the Compulsory Primary Education Programme, were realised.

Beliefs and Assumptions: Such beliefs and assumptions have in fact led to perpetuation of our traditional practices. The belief that success in literacy depends on how quickly children can learn the alphabets (in Bangla, English or Arabic); the numbers (1-100); the nursery rhymes; that recognition of the Arabic alphabets and ability to read the Quran is more meaningful than learning Bangla; that if you 'spare the rod, you spoil the child'; the belief that to be the first boy/girl in the class is the ultimate ambition in a parent's and therefore child's life; that a good teacher will always give home work; that every child needs a house-tutor to do well in exams at any level; the belief that there are 'good teachers' and that the success of the child mainly depends on how good the teacher is and so on.

The cultural problem has also been compounded by some of our assumptions. The assumption that children fail to attend school and/or drop-out because of poverty. Thus, it is concluded that problems of enrollment, absenteeism and drop-out are all due to poverty.

It has been assumed that enrollment, retention and completion automatically lead to sustainable literacy; the assumption that children cannot cope with more than one book when they are very young and that books are a burden; that 'foreign' methodologies are not appropriate for Bangladesh especially for the provincial towns and villages; that if the traditional method of teaching was so bad, it could not have produced so many brilliant intellectuals!

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