

Education

Including the excluded

To reaffirm the commitment of Education for All, exclusive planning and implementation has to be transformed into inclusive planning and implementation. Inclusion should be viewed as a social policy, which not only aims at improving the relevance and quality of education but also aims at changing society into a just and tolerant environment, not looking down at differences, but celebrating these, writes Els Heijnen

EDUCATION for All (EFA) means education in the broadest sense of the word for all people irrespective of (dis)ability, gender, age, ethnicity, mother tongue, socio-economic background or other characteristics. The following article focuses on one EFA aspect: the education of children as part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Last January the EFA 2000 assessment for Asia and the Pacific took place in Bangkok. Government representatives, UN agencies, donors and NGOs met for four days to discuss the achievements and failures in education of the past decade. Governments had been asked to assess their country's progress, and report to the EFA Secretariat before the conference. During the conference, government delegations presented their findings, followed by questions and discussions.

The presentation of the Bangladesh country report was not very strong and provided merely statistics on achievements. The emphasis was on quantitative results, especially in increased enrolment and gender parity.

Though it is important to acknowledge achievements, barriers to effective EFA implementation have been plentiful and no critical analysis of the causes has been provided for such barriers to learning and development (e.g. low learning achievement, poor quality teaching, high repetition and drop-out rates, discrimination inside schools of poor students and girl students).

The report does not mention children with disabilities or other marginalised and excluded children as part of EFA (e.g. street children, refugee children, children born in brothels). The report does not offer any new vision or new policies and strategies to initiate a change for quality education, which is to become reality for all children. Lack of resources may be mentioned as a critical constraint, but this is hardly a valid excuse as other poor countries (e.g. Vietnam) have done much better than Bangladesh.

It may be just political will that makes the difference between the EFA success in East-Asia and the EFA failure in South-Asia.

Food for thought

It is universally recognised that the main objective of any education system in a democratic society is to provide quality education for all learners (which is more than just achievements) to enable children to reach their full potential. The responsibility of the education system to develop and sustain such learning is premised on the recognition that education is a fundamental right. Exercising this responsibility involves ensuring that the education system creates equality of opportunity for effective learning. Equality of opportunity is not the same as treating all children the same way in a learning environment.

Children in a classroom are not homogenous and should not be

treated as if they were. Indeed, the principle of justice requires that they be treated unequally, as all of them are unique human beings with individual strengths and weaknesses, and thus with different needs.

Barriers to learning and development

Barriers to learning and development can be located within the child, within the school, within the education system and within the broader social, economic and political context. These barriers manifest themselves in different ways and only become obvious when learning breakdown occurs, when children are "pushed out" of the system or when the excluded become visible.

The key to preventing barriers from occurring is setting quality standards and monitoring those in collaboration with all stakeholders (which includes children).

Effective learning is directly related to and dependent on the social and emotional well-being of the child. It is important to recognise that particular conditions may arise within the social, economic and political environment in which the child lives, which impact negatively on his/her social and emotional well-being, thus placing the child at risk of learning breakdown. Such factors either impact directly on the child or on his/her family or community (e.g. forceful slum eviction). In all cases the child's emotional and social well-being and development are threatened.

A child who is physically, emotionally or sexually abused is not only emotionally and physically damaged but it may also lead to the child being forced to miss school and eventually to 'drop-out' of the system. Problems in families and abuse may also cause children to leave home and live on the streets.

The nature of schools as learning centres and their ability to provide a conducive teaching and learning environment is also undermined when the surrounding environment is unsafe e.g. through high levels of violence (abduction, rape, acid throwing).

Attitudes

Negative attitudes and perceptions towards differences in society (class, gender, ability, socio-economic background) remain critical barriers to learning and development. For most part, such negative attitudes manifest themselves in the labelling of learners. Sometimes these labels are just negative associations between the learner and the system such as 'drop-outs', 'repeaters' or 'slow learners'. While it is important to recognise the impact such labelling has on a child's self-esteem, the most serious consequence of such labelling results when it is linked to school placement or exclusion.

It is critical to reflect on teachers' roles in creating or reducing barriers to learning as their attitudes and behaviour can either

enhance or impede a child's ability to learn effectively. Also factors such as the classroom's physical environment, the child's level of psychological comfort in the classroom, and the quality of interaction between the teacher and the child seriously affect whether and to what extent a child is able to learn and develop in a positive way.

Inflexible curriculum

One of the most serious barriers to learning and development can be found within the curriculum itself and relates primarily to the inflexible nature of the curriculum, which prevents it from meeting the diverse needs among children.

The nature of the curriculum at all phases of education involves a number of components, which are all important in facilitating or undermining effective learning. Key components of the curriculum include the style and tempo of teaching and learning, the relevance of what is taught, the way the classroom is managed and organised, as well as materials and equipment used in the learning and teaching process.

Many teachers in Bangladesh – often through insufficient and old-fashioned training – use teaching styles that do not meet the needs of most of their students. The pace and style of teaching seriously limits the initiative and involvement of learners. Discipline is coercive and does not promote children's intrinsic motivation for learning. Sad but true: many children are made afraid of a teacher's punishment and stop going to school because of that.

Teachers may assume that being a teacher is an end in itself and that they deserve respect for being a teacher. They tend to forget that respect is a mutual process and that respect has to be earned.

The curriculum may also lead to learning breakdown through the mechanisms that are used to assess learning outcomes. Most assessment processes used in schools in Bangladesh are inflexible and designed to only assess particular kinds of knowledge and aspects of learning, such as the amount of information that can be memorised rather than the child's understanding of the concepts involved. The seriousness of these barriers is most quite obvious in Bangladesh, where large numbers of children are forced to repeat grades. Children are mostly blamed for such learning failures while education systems and teaching methods are kept out of range.

Exclusion or inclusion

It is a myth that there are different categories of learners, such as children with 'ordinary needs' and children with 'special needs'. Education systems have clung to this myth against better judgement, and continue to use traditional undifferentiated, large-group instruction without taking into account that children in a classroom represent a diversity that is present in every community.

Schools in Bangladesh are not inclusive – not for children with disabilities, and neither for many other children excluded from EFA. Some NGOs have started initiatives to provide education for special groups, such as working children. However, it is debatable whether special (i.e. segregated) programmes are the answer. Most children excluded from mainstream schools do not need special education – they need more individualised education, and this also applies to most children with disabilities.

There is no special education – just EDUCATION and good teaching is good teaching for all children! Schools and classrooms need to change into more flexible, resourceful and humane systems that benefit all children, irrespective of (dis)abilities.

The assumption that there are special schools and learning centres needed for special groups of children not only serves to divide and exclude, but also fails to describe the nature of need, which is regarded as 'special'. Most importantly, this assumption provides no insight into what has caused children to be excluded or dropping-out. It also ignores those children who, at some time during their school life, need special support – which is estimated to be the case in 20 per cent of all children (Warnock Report, UK).

Many of the 'problems', which exclude children from EFA are the result of exclusive planning. It has resulted in a situation where children, who ironically have the greatest need of education, are thus the least likely to receive it!

Introducing inclusive education is not too difficult. Several countries in Asia (Lao PDR, Vietnam, China, Mongolia) have planned and implemented for a more inclusive approach successfully with small budgets and limited technical assistance. Meaningful learning is not the same for every child and we have to get rid of the idea that all children must learn the same things, during the same time, with the same results. All children can learn new things and all children should be valued for what they can add to the group and the learning process.

Schools should start to emphasise success and potential, rather than failures and shortcomings. To make this possible, a learning environment needs to be created where children are encouraged and enabled to reach their potential.

When children are not coming to school or do not learn, schools and teachers tend to blame children or their families. Teachers and schools do not normally reflect upon the teaching process or the school policies.

Most importantly, new policies need to be based on an analysis of those factors that made the education system inaccessible to groups of children and continue to lead to high levels of repetition, drop-out and low learning achievements.

Schools must take up their responsibility and provide quality teaching and learning for all children. When seeking explanations for lack of achievement, they should also be prepared to consider inadequacies in the learning conditions rather than in-



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adequacies in children!

What logically follows is a (re-) structure of the education system in such a way that it can accommodate a diversity of learner-needs and system-needs. I would like to argue that it is when the education system fails to provide for such diversity, that learning breakdown takes place and children are excluded or pushed-out.

Teachers should stop teaching an inflexible standard curriculum to (non-existing) "standard" children by merely lecturing from books. Teachers should start teaching CHILDREN. This requires a flexible approach that is child-centred, interactive and participatory.

Parental recognition and involvement

The active involvement of parents and the broader community in the teaching and learning process is central to effective learning and development. Such involvement includes recognition for parents as the primary care givers of their children and, as such, that they are a central resource to the education system. More specifically, they are critical components for effective governance of schools and learning centres and for facilitating community ownership of these facilities.

Where parents are not given this recognition or where their participation is not facilitated and encouraged, effective learning is threatened.

A better educational future?

If the education system in Bangladesh is to improve and become more equal and effective, mechanisms must be structured into the system to break down existing barriers. Central to the development of such capacity is the ability to identify and understand the nature of the barriers, which cause learning breakdown and lead to exclusion or dropping-out.

Mechanisms to overcome barriers to learning and development start with inclusive planning for all children – it includes initiatives aimed at providing for children who have been excluded from the system by both government and non-government schools (e.g. children with disabilities); innovative practices for recognising and accommodating diversity; activities that advocate against discrimination and challenge attitudes (e.g. towards street children or children born in brothels); processes towards the active involvement of children, parents, educators and community members to deal with diverse needs; curriculum restructuring (and making children part of this process); organisation and development of teacher-friendly and child-friendly educational environments.

To reaffirm the commitment of EFA, exclusive planning and implementation has to be transformed into inclusive planning and implementation. Inclusion should be viewed as a social policy, which not only aims at improving the relevance and quality of education but also aims at changing society into a just and tolerant environment, not looking down at differences, but celebrating these.

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The way forward

By Shamsul Hoque

PRIME Ministers Sheikh Hasina and John Major discussed in Dhaka in 1997, among other important things, the issue of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Bangladesh. The standards of teaching and learning of English in the country have declined so miserably that it came up for discussion at such a high-level meeting.

The decline is evident at all levels of our education – primary, secondary and tertiary; but that at the secondary level (i.e. classes 6-12 including higher secondary section) is far-reaching, because it is easily snow-balled from this level to both primary and tertiary levels. The school/college leavers at the end of secondary level mostly become either primary school teachers or degree college or university students or just drop out. So good teaching at primary level and good learning at tertiary level mostly depend on the good teaching-learning at secondary level.

Bangladeshis, especially the youth, need to acquire and use new knowledge and skills for adapting to a fast-moving, competitive new world. And it is English that can best help them meet this need. But the English they are now learning (textbook contents through rote learning) mostly for examination requirements fails to serve this purpose. So, a new English is needed for communicative purposes; for use in real-life situations, such as pursuing higher studies, especially in science and technology, carrying out modern business and communications both at national and international levels and finding and doing specialised jobs at home and abroad.

native than their predecessors. But the syllabuses and the textbooks written accordingly for up to Class 10 could not be properly used because of a shift in the status of English on the curriculum. English was relegated to a foreign language status (before it was a second language). In other words, the medium of instructions and the language of the office became Bangla.

Also, the teachers were not properly trained in teaching methodology needed in the changed circumstances. As a result, the introduction of the national curriculum, syllabuses and the new textbooks could not make any tangible effect on the teaching-learning strategy so as to improve the situation. After about two decades the Ministry of Education (MOE) through NCTB undertook a curriculum renewal and modification programme to revise, adapt and revamp the existing curriculum in order to make it more responsive to the present-day needs of our life. Accordingly NCTB revised secondary curriculum, 1993-95 and began to produce new textbooks from 1996.

The urge for change continued among the ELT specialists, educationists and the policy-makers of the country. The result was an ELT project – Operation of Secondary School Teachers for Teaching English in Bangladesh (OSSTEB) – jointly set up in 1990 by the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) and the Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom. OSSTEB aimed to improve communicative English mainly through designing a teacher training course for the secondary school English teachers and producing textbooks and teacher's guides for classes 6-8. But after the four-year life of the project its impact was still minimal. Here are the three main reasons why OSSTEB could not make desired changes:

a. The training manuals OSSTEB produced hardly brought about any change in teachers' classroom behaviour because of their attitudes to-

wards training. They regarded training as a once-for-a-lifetime event, mainly required for their pay-rise, promotion, etc on the job. And there is no system to observe and monitor their classroom activities.

b. The training is inadequate, as it is a small component (only 50 hours) in the B.Ed course. And as the course was introduced only in the 10 Teacher Training Colleges (ITC) of the country, it could train in the four-year life of the project only about 2000 teachers. (There are about 40,000 English teachers at the secondary level.)

c. OSSTEB did not aim to develop a system in teacher training and materials development that could be sustainable. Hence as the project ended in June 1994, everything except the *English for Today* (EFT) textbooks for classes 6, 7 & 8 and the Training Manual also ended.

OSSTEB finished, but the need for communicative English continued to be felt with greater urgency than ever. Following the two Prime Ministers' meeting, ELTIP, another GOB-DFID partnership project, came into being later in the same year.

ELTIP is a project with a difference, which is clearly evident in its long-term goals and activities. ELTIP sets out to improve the teaching and learning of English, particularly at secondary and higher secondary levels, with a clear agenda to develop language skills in the target groups, i.e. school/college leavers, with special attention to female students. The students at this level either drop out and take up a vocation or go for higher studies. As they have to study English as a required subject, ELTIP commits itself to helping them acquire such competencies in using English as would make them skilled workforce and informed educated younger generation. Only then they will be able to compete with their counterparts in other countries in the world labour market and do something useful also within the country. Thus the youth, both male and female, can contribute largely to alleviating poverty. In this way the ELTIP

goals are linked with bridging the existing gender gap and at the same time improving the quality of life. Perhaps it is this broad, ultimate goal of ELTIP that had convinced DFID to assist this ELT project as one of their priority activities in Bangladesh.

ELTIP has learnt lessons from its predecessor (OSSTEB) and set out to concentrate on three main areas:

a. Producing suitable learning materials, i.e. textbooks, teacher's guides, etc.

b. Training teachers to help them to effectively teach the materials

c. Reforming both school/college and public examinations.

Working on all these areas simultaneously is the key to success. Because, developing just one area, say textbooks, without training the teachers to handle them does not produce any desirable effect (as OSSTEB could not). Again, producing materials and training teachers without reforming the examinations are equally ineffective – as examinations, especially public examinations (SSC and HSC), have a tremendous wash-back effect on the teaching-learning strategies. Hence ELTIP activities in all the three areas are being co-ordinated and integrated by an efficient team of both local and expatriate ELT specialists.

ELTIP's local team consists of a Project Director, about 30 specialists and five National Consultants. All the local staff have training at home and/or abroad. On the expatriate side, a Team Leader and six other experts work long-term on the project. Also there are 4/5 short-term expatriate consultants on the team.

Projects come and projects go. Their outputs are shelved as they expire. The net assets a project leaves behind are usually the items of hardware, i.e. vehicles, equipment, etc. that go to relevant permanent organisations/offices where they are usually used for purposes other than those they were procured for. This happened with OSSTEB, too (though it did not have any vehicles), except, as already said, for its training and learning materials which,

though well-written were mostly misused by the teachers untrained or inadequately trained.

Learning from experience of different projects at home and abroad, ELTIP has decided to develop and establish a system in ELTIP so that its activities continue even beyond its life. But this system is unlikely to work as a separate entity after ELTIP ends – it should be integrated with the GOB curriculum. And only then will it work through the GOB system. Once this integration takes place, though ELTIP as a project will cease to exist, its activities will continue.

To gain this synergy in order to ensure sustainability in its activities, ELTIP strategy and activities will be looked into a little more closely.

In Bangladesh textbooks are traditionally believed to be what constitute the 'subject' called English on the curriculum. And these books are written by two procedures – either by commissioning the writers or by putting them out to tender. As there is an acute shortage of ELT materials writers in the country, none of the procedures can produce suitable communicative textbooks. Once these books are produced under the existing procedures, the scope for their further improvement through experimentation, innovation and research is absent, until the next time when another revision is necessitated either under another donor-funded project or by the government's own initiative – but in either case the same procedures are just repeated.

ELTIP takes materials production as a process, rather than a product activity. So, it has initiated a process of writing, trialling and piloting of materials by a group of professionals recently trained in the UK. ELTIP does not stop there. It is trying to design a writer's course and integrate it with some already-existing course of a university or offer it as a new course at other institutions. It may be mentioned here that no such course as ELTIP is planning for the potential writers exists in Bangladesh and once it starts, hopefully there will be no shortage of professional ma-

terials writers in the country. As a result, materials writing will be part of ELT activities – not just an ad hoc, one-off event in the curriculum as it is now.

ELTIP is going to change the existing examinations by developing language tests which will measure students' ability to use language skills for communicative purposes – not to memorise textbook contents for regurgitation in the examinations. When these new tests are introduced at the SSC and HSC levels, their wash-back will permeate through the whole teaching-learning strategy. As a result, the breakneck efforts now being made by the students to do good in the examinations will be directed towards acquiring and using language skills. This will be a big shift in students' language learning techniques from rote learning to communicative activities. Consequently, the present 'spoon-feeding' methods followed by the private tutors will have to be replaced (if, of course, they wish to carry on with their flourishing business) by skills learning activities. Hence, the bad news for them is that they have to part with their old bundles of 'notes' and 'answers' to probable 'questions' they have been using for ages. Instead, they will need training in communicative language teaching methodologies to stay in business. Also, spurious standard bazaar notebooks, guide-books, etc. guaranteeing high marks in the examinations will have to be replaced by carefully written workbooks, language practice books, etc.

The good news for the authorities is that they won't have to take such emergency measures to control cheating in the examinations as forming hundreds of 'Vigilance Teams' and deploying police and paramilitary forces. This is because outside supply of content-based answers will not do any good to the examinees. What they will need is their own competence in understanding and writing English themselves. So doing good in the examinations will be related to doing good in the classroom activities, thereby making learning English and using English closer than what it is

now. ELTIP training offers teachers more than job benefits. Working on the principle of 'self-select, self-support and self-train' – ELTIP:

- makes the teachers feel and realise the need for improving their own teaching skills as well as their own language skills;

- trains teachers for 2/3 weeks followed by a long activation period when they practise the new teaching skills at their own and/or neighbouring schools/colleges in close co-operation with other teachers and head-teachers;

- shows teachers how to develop a co-operative approach to teaching (almost a taboo to many teachers) through share-teaching, observing one another's classes, setting questions jointly, organising workshops, exhibitions among themselves – all these helping them grow professionally;

- makes teachers confident and efficient in communicative language teaching. As a result, they will enjoy teaching – a factor that will be no less motivating than the financial incentives they can think about at the moment;

- encourages female teachers to have training;

- introduces an effective observation and monitoring system (absent presently).

Thus ELTIP training is not an all-cure single shot. It starts at the training centre, but it continues at the trainees' own workplaces, in their own classrooms or their colleagues' classrooms. ELTIP with its personnel alone cannot effect any real change. It is only when all its stakeholders – students, parents, communities, government organisations/agencies, MOE and other relevant ministries – are willing to bring about a change in ELT, an effective ELT system can develop, and a sustainable change will take place. But the change will not happen overnight – no, not even during the life of ELTIP. So, ELTIP's main task is to involve its stakeholders as much as possible in evolving a workable, affordable, feasible and effective

ELT system based on materials, methods and examinations, so that the system will continue to work even after ELTIP expires.

However, ELTIP's success depends largely on certain conditions.

- GOB must commit itself to introducing a reformed examination system and a new approach to teacher training emphasising quality of training – not only the quantity of the teachers to be trained.

- English teachers should be officially designated as English Teachers in a school and must specialise in teaching English only.

- To become an English teacher he/she must successfully complete an ELT course (at least a 4-week intensive course plus four weeks' teaching practice in his/her own school or in a neighbouring school).

- Formulation of a national ELT policy with clear guidelines facilitating classroom activities testing.

- Establishment of a central organisation, such as National English Language Centre (NELC) to co-ordinate and supervise ELT activities at various levels to monitor progress and to carry out research in ELT in Bangladesh.

- ELTIP as a project will finish in 2001 (or if extended 2002). But the ELT activities ELTIP has initiated, developed and carried out through a system must continue. If we want to learn English for our benefits. Now how effectively this system can be integrated with our education system is a crucial question that must be answered immediately. All the stakeholders, especially parents, students, communities and teachers, are now willing (a good number of them are enthusiastic) to bring about this change. The time is now propitious for it. It is now GOB to decide whether they will seize this opportunity and integrate the ELTIP system with the GOB system, or whether they will let ELTIP remain as a name with a dozen or so reports only to be shelved and forgotten or read by none except by a few ELT researchers.

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